

MINIÉD

Graduation 2017

Design

Academy

Eindhoven



IN THE FACE

OF

BUREAUCRACY

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Sometimes it is crucial to not internalise what is going on around you, but to stay at a distance in order to not get dragged into or even crushed by the free-floating powers that surround us. Undeniably, we live in a lapse of time that turns 'sometimes' more and more into 'most of the time'. Thirty years of neoliberalism, free-market forces and privatization have taken their toll, as power no longer has a moral ground and individual success has become the norm causing a relentless pressure to achieve and compete.¹ The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes the paradox of our era pointedly: 'Never have we been so free. Never have we felt so powerless.' We are undoubtedly freer than before, if free means that we can openly criticize religion, practice a laissez faire ethics towards sex and join any political crusade we want. But what does this mean? Things no longer seem to have any significance. We live in a culture of indifference. And although it is a time of hyper individualism, the individual gets into a scrape. Again, a striking paradox.

Our presumed freedom is bound to one dominant condition: we must be successful—that is, 'make' something of ourselves. There are plentiful examples. An educated individual who prefers parenting over his career will be criticized as will the professional who turns down a promotion in order to invest in the development of his creative qualities. A young person who wants to become a designer is told by her parents that she should start off by getting a master's degree in economics—a designer, what is she thinking?

Alternative strategy

Taking a different position, stepping out of the limited neoliberal frame of a successful life does not necessarily mean that one should not be involved or engaged. It is a choice for an alternative strategy; to be aware, to connect, but at the same time to keep oneself at a distance, to set boundaries. Using sensitivity, imagination and reflection in an attempt to put the pieces together and make sense out of a fragmented, market driven reality that is desperately in need of authority founded on knowledge, insights, wisdom and righteousness to base a probable truth on.

Such a life attitude causes friction between two opposite sensations. It seems reasonable to refuse to be graded and judged by a system one doesn't acknowledge. Still, the pressure to adapt, the feeling of guilt and shame about the assumption to fall short, to not meet the requirements of our neo-liberal society, even when this is a chosen strategy, is often overpowering. This is all too human.

It takes self-compassion to be able to find one's own way and to be able to create.

¹ Paul Verhaeghe analyzes this poignantly in his latest book, *Says Who? the struggle for authority in a market-based society*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne / London 2017.

The wolf underneath

This is a time frame in which everything non-economic, everything with no direct measurable result is under pressure. Including arts and design education. And this is not just about money.

The economy is gradually climbing out of the pit of global crisis. Neo-liberalists take a breath of relief assuming everything can go back to 'normal'. Organisations become 'blue' again, and I don't mean melancholic, but blue as in embracing processes, systems and efficiency as leading principles. Bureaucracy has updated its apparel, but the same old wolf still howls from underneath his new trendy coat. Creativity has to be violated in order to become a management tool, everything it actually stands for has to go back to the margin as volatile substance.

The malaise of modernity

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes in *The malaise of Modernity*² a feeling of loss and decline we experience in Western societies despite our prosperity and the fact that our civilization is 'progressing'. He distinguishes three themes and possible motives he indicates as maladies of the modernity.

The first is individualism; the loss of religion and community sense together with the rise of neoliberalism caused a loss of meaning on the whole, which the individual compensated by primarily focussing on his or her own life. The down side of individualism, Taylor states, is the concentration on the self, which causes less involvement and compassion and thus a decreased sense of meaning.

This is connected to the second theme which is the primacy of instrumental reason. By this Taylor means that success is measured by efficiency and not by human experience or ethical deliberations. Everything is instrumental, even human lives. This economic approach of life is also expressed by the use of technology as the solution for everything.

Individualism and the primacy of instrumental reason lead to the third theme, which is a politics that results in bureaucracy. We seem to be free, but in the end our lives are a constant battle against bureaucracy. At long last this means loss of freedom. For individuals and organisations.

Taylor criticises the liberal interpretation of the notion of 'self', he—amongst others, often named *communitarists*—emphasizes the importance of shared social contracts and institutions for the development of individual sources of meaning and identity formation. A more realistic notion of the self is based on life choices that derive their significance

2 Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, Concord, Ontario: Arsenal, 1991. Republished as *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

from their interaction and dialogue with a community and / or significant others. Without this context and background life choices are random and replaceable, making choosing as such meaningless and thus leading to nihilism.

It is precisely this nihilism that, by enhancing a reduction of values, opens the way to a neo-liberalistic life attitude in which life and living beings are reduced to instrumental entities, stripped of every dignity, poetics and humanity. But, confidence and expectance should never be at stake. There are counter forces; grass root initiatives, actions by resourceful civilians, and bottom up movements. The need for creative strategies is present as never before. And technology can play a supporting role.

Free space

The choice for another life attitude is a road full of pit falls and resistance, but nevertheless highly necessary if we want to stay true to a vision on mankind that puts human dignity and the integrity of everything living at the centre of its being. A vision we put at the heart of design and design education.

We want Design Academy Eindhoven to be a free space, a place where imagination, sensitivity and reflection can prosper. A school in which everyone—students, teachers and staff alike—has the possibility to choose and define his or her own life attitude and direction, without having to turn to individualism and the pursuit of success in its neoliberal definition. A place that supports identity formation and the development of individual sources of meaning as well as the growth of self-compassion, compassion and resilience. And a place that leaves room for the unbiased development of our international creative community as a micro-society; open-minded, empathic, committed, and with this impeccable, often amazing sense of quality that is so characteristic for this institute and its members. This pursuit of quality is our definition of success.

In these processes interaction and dialogue, within and outside our community, are crucial. The connection to the world, near and far, outside the academy is essential, not only for a healthy climate within our community, but also to exchange ideas and to be of meaning for others.

It will be our obligation and challenge the coming period to develop creative strategies in the face of bureaucracy in order to maintain and share this free space unreservedly. To make the changes and improvements we see as valuable, so that we and others can prosper. We need joined forces to find new directions and connections, to relate in new ways to the world around us and continue to design meaning.