

# Thinking Art.School.Differences from the Present: Transformative Potentials in Learning and Teaching

I am very thankful to be here and to have the opportunity to talk about *Art.School.Differences* in front of this audience and in this space. Thank you for having invited me. I actually have slightly adjusted the title and introduced the “Learning” into the transformative potentials, because, indeed, to question teaching on issues of heterogeneity, difference and institutional responsibility is maybe much more about learning.

Today, I would like to briefly introduce to the main findings of *Art.School.Differences* and thereby explain what institutional normativity implies. It will also be about an inquiry into why it is so challenging for Higher Art Education to implement diversity in the sense of heterogeneity and inclusive structures. I deliberately talk about diversity to problematize the tendency of mainstreaming it as purely representational blinding out the power relations inherent.

*Art.School.Differences* was a research on the Swiss field of Higher Art Education. Three art schools participated: The Haute Ecole d’Art et de Design Genève HEAD, the Haute Ecole de Musique Genève-Neuchâtel HEM and the Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK – ZHdK being the Leading House. The duration of the project was three years. It was achieved end of 2016 – which means this is quite a while ago. The research – that had been designed by Carmen Mörsch, Catrin Seefranz and Philippe Saner, and co-led by Philippe Saner and myself with a team – nevertheless is subject to a still increasing interest on a national as well as an international level. Recently, I have also noted that it is labelled as a grounding reference at various occasions in Switzerland, Germany and Austria – of which I am quite proud.

An observation by British artist Grayson Perry he made in 2010 actually very poignantly summarizes the motivating and conditioning framework that led to the research study of *Art.School.Differences*. He states:

*“Artistic talent is hard to spot in young people but you can be damn sure that, two parents, a white skin, nice middle class manners and four A-levels are not very reliable indicators.”*

The research’s inquiry was on current practices of the admissions’ procedure and the selection of candidates at the entry to the school. «Why are certain societal groups over- or underrepresented among students in Swiss Art Schools? Why are some missing?». Indeed, the preliminary study had showed that certain groups of our society were not present in the art schools. We, thus, questioned the dynamics of inequality within institutional structures to understand their maintenance, perpetuation, and continued re-instatement. We thereby also were very much interested to propose transformative interventions into these dynamics.

Now I would like to mention some of our analysis and a few findings. It will not be very extensive. Much more is to be found in our final report. The main goal of the admissions’ process is the assessment of artistic aptitude. However, the combination of openness of criteria – an openness that is fundamental for the juries as it allows for an assessment of very different artistic practices and perspectives. – So, it became clear that this openness in combination with a thorough selection process opens up various fields of tension that result in a simultaneity of contradictory arguments. A selection is necessary due to restricted study places but it also is an important factor in the international ranking of an art school: The more students apply for a study place, the better the ranking. The process is – from the outset – doubly exclusive.

Getting back to the admissions' jury: Our qualitative and quantitative analysis showed that the jury members were very open and interested to diversify their choice of candidates. Eventually, however, the candidates chosen resembled quite strongly to the ones already in the institution. Despite being recognized by the jury for their artistic performance, older persons, for instance, are rejected. Young people who have a certain cultural education and who are competitive were preferred, arguing that their life plan was more compatible with the curriculum. Over the process, it became clear that successful applicants include a normative physical appearance and fitness as well as required psychic health including flexibility and long working hours. This reveals ability to be at stake. Moreover, social competencies or reputable networks are highly valued – sometimes more than artistic practice. Financial means to be able to pay for preliminary courses, multiple applications and full-time studies oftentimes were a silent requirement.

Besides some observed outright rejections of candidates marked as “Other”, we, on different occasions, encountered a great desire for the *Other*, more precisely an interest in being creatively inspired by someone exotically *Other*. Among jury members, this interest often was articulated as a great opportunity to enrich the status quo of the institution. Such an “Othering” marked as desire is hierarchized and enforces power relations. Moreover, it entails a denial of the *Other* and means to invigorate existing racist and sexist differentiations.

Another key observation is the increase in internationalization of the field of the art school. This is visible in the rising numbers of international students simultaneous with the massive decrease of students having migration experiences. Our statistical analysis of the exclusion of domestic migrants with origins from less privileged countries highlights that social class is the most important determinant. Within the admissions' process of assessment, the initial sincere openness for *Others* eventually is replaced by choosing candidates deemed most likely to reflect and reproduce the “values of the institution.”

Members and leadership of the art universities often relegate the responsibility for that observed social closure to the educational institutions earlier in the students' careers and blame the ones excluded, to not even apply or seek admission. We found that among the students who do apply, the ones are chosen that fit into the mould or that are deemed to be successful on the market. This leads to a reinstatement of the norm and an image of the “ideal student” that eventually (re-)produces existing inclusions and exclusions. This reverberates with the fact that some students do not even consider applying because they feel this space is not welcoming to them. We furthermore assessed that this specific working of an instatement of the norm with the effect of exclusion through inclusion is structurally anchored and not restricted to the admissions process, but on the contrary, goes on throughout the years of study.

I would like to share a quote by Pierre Bourdieu. It describes a central problematic:

*“The function which Plato attributes to the water of forgetfulness falls, in our societies, on the University which in its impartiality, through pretending to recognise students as equal in rights and duties, divided only by inequalities of gifts and merits, in fact confers on individuals degrees judged according to their cultural heritage and therefore according to their social status.” (1993: 235)*

Art schools, thus, are found to be centred within a Eurocentric perspective, have classist appreciation in verifying the habitus, are an elite field and diversity insensitive. Eventually, those chosen to be part of the institution resemble most the ones already in the institution. In the process, we see classism primordially at

work unfolding in its intersectional relationship with racism, ableism and sexism. We identified such a constant re-instatement of the norm through the institution as “institutional normativity”.<sup>1</sup>

Institutional normativity means that institutions reproduce and reinstate the norm, albeit predominantly in an implicit and unreflected way. · Institutional structures constantly re-instate a privileged group of students and faculty. · Institutional normativity is an *active* process and is continuously reproduced. · These forms of knowledge often deploy themselves in ignorance and thus secure existing power relations in the field. · This means that institutional normativity is a structurally and institutionally facilitated ignorance of processes of exclusion through inclusion.

We have to understand here, that institutional normativity also is at work if an art school propagates diversity and inclusion but simultaneously denies obstacles and barriers for an equal access. We have witnessed such denials by members of the schools and especially by the schools leaderships already during the ongoing research. However, I only later realized in what way precisely this attitude was part of the institutional normativity and thus maintaining a status quo of in- and exclusions.

Our observation that international students are not supported enough in their daily struggle – Because yes, our analysis showed that despite international students having privileged backgrounds, they very often live in precarious conditions, have problems with permits and are excluded on the basis of language skills from relevant information regarding their studies. – So, the mentioning of those observations as well as the problematizing of a missing representation of students with a migrant background, arguing that we found this was eventually re-enforcing classism, obviously was not how the international art school would have liked to see itself. Instead of engaging critically with our proposed fields of action to achieve some change, they assessed our findings to be false, commenting that jury members would have never said such and such a thing. In statements, they faulted our methods and underlined that – on the contrary – at their school there wasn't any of such an exclusion of certain students, the ZHdK adding, they didn't find any evidence as they had redone a check themselves.

With this, I have explained the problem of institutional normativity and why diversity and inclusion in the sense of heterogeneity represent a challenge. I have done this so extensively to clarify that we all here face a complex situation on multiple levels that we will have to consider at today's occasion, when we talk about heterogeneity, difference and social responsibility in learning and teaching at the ZHdK. I think that there is a huge potential in doing so!

Looking at learning and teaching from the perspective of *Art.School.Differences*, I think that we necessarily have to rely in more experience and knowledge from marginalized people. I do not think it makes sense to introduce a quota for students – something we had considered – but rather include *other* faculty and supervisors. Thus, people who do not represent the predominant norm within the institution. Thereby, it is not only about representation. Although representation is quite important because visibility also has a strong effect. However, as long as *other* knowledge and *other* experiences do not comprise a central part, the current institutional normativity will not be altered.

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on research led by Sara Ahmed et al. where they identify “institutional whiteness” at place, meaning that institutional structures privilege white people at all levels (2006).

Regarding students: I think it is very important to rethink recruitment and the curricula to accommodate people with more diverse needs. However, we have to be careful not relying too much on the idea, that the students will arrange for change to happen. Taking diversity and the implication of heterogeneity seriously in education is a big task that has to be institutionally financed and developed.

In that sense I am very glad that next week there will be a public discussion here at the ZHdK with the title: «Inclusive studying at ZHdK». I have been waiting for such a podium to take place since we achieved our research! So this is really wonderful.

However, reading further on the event, I understand that inclusion here focusses people with special mental needs and thus is narrowed down. This is regrettable. From the experiences around *Art.School.Differences* it would have been quite important to structure such a podium with such a title on an intersectional basis and to include speakers from various marginalized backgrounds. Just as the slogan says: «not about us without us». To place experiences from people with special needs as a basis and starting point – as done here by the organisers – seems particularly fruitful to me as it reveals very important insights on norms and assumptions. Thinking of current debates and discourses in the public and also the ones having been led internally here at the ZHdK that question an established naturalness of whiteness, I however fear that the title of the podium might stir wrong expectations. I am interested to know about the discussions that will take place and look forward to build on them to achieve more inclusiveness within curricula for the students but also among faculty and other university staff.

Ending, I would like to point out what *Art.School.Differences* has taught me – and us: To be able to address questions around inclusion and heterogeneity, it is necessary to address deeply anchored and ZHdK-specific structures within the administration and teaching. This is our institutional responsibility. Central to this endeavor is to introduce *other* expertise and to make them part of the structure. This, for instance, could entail to re-signify excellence and quality.

To address and change structures is a big challenge because, at the outset, art schools function as a guarantee of exclusivity. This is also due to the international ranking that – especially for marginalized and *othered* students – is an important capital. However – and this is very important – the art school also is an educational institution with a public mandate – both these identifying characteristics being contradictory. Nevertheless, such a contradictory field of tension also has potential. I think, 1. the institution has to find ways to allow for diversity and inclusion despite its exclusive structures and 2. we have to foster an understanding of art and the arts which contains diversity and heterogeneity as a part of the disciplinary self-conception.

Thank you so much for your attention!

## Bibliography

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