Art.School.Differences. Researching Inequalities and Normativities in the field of Higher Art Education

Exclusion through inclusion

Sophie Vögele[1]

Two parents, white skin, middle class manners and high scores in school transcripts – according to British artist Grayson Perry – are not reliable indicators for artistic talent but to date nevertheless seem to be the predominant assessment criteria for admission to higher art education (Perry 2010). This observation very poignantly summarizes the motivating and conditioning framework that led to our research study of Art.School.Differences (2014–2016).[2] The research's inquiry was on current practices of the admissions' procedure and the selection of candidates at the entry to the school. We questioned the dynamics of inequality within institutional structures to understand their maintenance, perpetuation, and continued re-instatement and to, thus, be able to propose transformative interventions into these. We focussed subjectivities produced by institutional discourses that suggest the existence of an "ideal student", as well as exclusionary processes of specific social groups, and finally students' strategies to deal with the requirements they encounter. A further interest centred the adequacy of selection-practices in reference to current dynamics between local and global structures pertinent to the field of the arts. This way, we intended to examine the implications of the so-called internationalization of Swiss art schools and explore their risk of "provincializing".

Who is included? Who is excluded?

The main gaol of the admissions' process is the assessment of artistic aptitude. However, the combination of openness of criteria and of a thorough selection process – due to restricted study places – opens up various fields of tension that result in a simultaneity of contradictory arguments. Our qualitative as well as quantitative analysis showed artistic skills to be in tension with age, physical requirements, and social competencies. Despite being recognized by the jury for their artistic performance, older persons for instance are rejected because they are considered not fitting into the curricula of the art school that demand young, culturally educated and competitive people. Over the process, it became clear that this includes 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.

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 is articulated as a great opportunity to enrich the status quo of the institution – which exemplifies how the *Other*, from a Western perspective, is coined as everything that lies outside of the familiar (Said 2003, 43). Such an *Othering* marked as desire is hierarchized and enforces power relations: 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 massif decrease of students that are members of the groups in Switzerland traditionally considered having migration experiences. This missing is violently obscured by the schools' proclamation of their internationality, thereby enforcing an understanding of internationality as being represented by candidates from affluent states with transnational biographies. Our statistical analysis of the exclusion of domestic migrants with origins from less privileged countries highlights that social class is the most important determinant. Overall, we found that specific ethnicities, sexualities, and certain kinds of bodies are constitutive for an appropriate class adherence that is necessary for admission into higher art education: middle-upper class, white Swissness or a cosmopolitan internationality with a privileged background. In regard to international students it is important to highlight that, despite their privileged backgrounds, many faced severe difficulties caused by institutional administrative processes and by the way of teaching and learning that remains strictly tailored for a normative student familiar with local languages, culture, and needs. Coming from less privileged backgrounds in this environment makes studying and staying in the institution almost impossible for affected students.

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". Students 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. 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. On the contrary, it goes on throughout the years of study. 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. We identified this constant re-instatement of the norm through the institution as an "institutional normativity"[3] which results in processes of normalization and *Othering* – that sometimes are violent.

---

[3] 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).

Institutional normativity

In the institutional normativity of Swiss art schools, classism is primordially at work and unfolds in its intersectional relationship with racism, ableism and sexism. Institutions reproduce and reinstate this norm, albeit predominantly in an implicit and unreflected way. It is a process that deploys itself in ignorance and thus secures existing power relations in the field. However, institutional normativity is an active process. For instance, members and leadership of the art universities relegate the responsibility for the observed social closure to the educational institutions earlier in the students' careers and blame the ones excluded, to not even apply or seek admission. Institutional normativity is continuously (re)produced by designing institutional structures and processes to secure privileges and deploy the tendency to reinstate a privileged group of students and faculty. This results in an institutional normativity, which continually works to dissimulate itself and its contradictions. Thereby, inclusion is a process of normalization that camouflages exclusion.

Equal reciprocal exchange?

Art universities' policies around admissions and internationalization do not necessarily have to focus exclusively on excellence. Instead, by redefining quality, policies should be thought and conceptualized, enabling reciprocal exchange and access to shared social goods such as art and higher education as a fundamental human right. An equal reciprocal exchange that achieves diversity and thus can address institutional normativity must be aware of historical and colonial power relations that structure our thinking. For an equal exchange with shared engagement, there is the need to establish a recognition based on respect and equal power of decision-making by everyone. The perspective employed must be multiple and aware of hegemonies and processes of institutionalized discrimination within our society, including the structurally and institutionally facilitated ignorance of privilege that continuously allows for disregarding exclusion. Within the admissions process to art schools, the hiring of faculty, and international projects, there is the need for particular conditions of recognition that allow groups and individuals to experience themselves with self-confidence, self-respect, and self-assessment. Neglecting that results in perspectives and decisions that ignore the interest of those in marginalized positions. However, if taken seriously and promulgated by the leading decision-makers of the educational institutions, structures can become more inclusive.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara, Shona Hunter, Sevgi Kilic, Elaine Swan, and Lewis Turner. 2006. "Race, Diversity and Leadership in the Learning and Skills Sector [Final Report]." Lancaster.

Perry, Grayson. 2010. "Preface." In Don't Put Us in Your Boxes. Widening Participation in Arts and Design Higher Education. Learning from the First Four Years of the National Arts Learning Network, edited by National Arts Learning Network. online: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/naln_dont_put_us_in_your_boxes_widening_participation.pdf.

Said, Edward W. 2003. Orientalism. London: Penguin Books.