Goodbye Jeroen

5-7-2024

# In a nutshell

It says a lot about your work and its impact on the Willem de Kooning Academy, Jeroen, that we are holding this event in English, with a line-up of speakers from different national backgrounds, and people working in both teaching and research departments. None of this existed when you started here in 1985 as a cultural history teacher. And everyone who has worked here for a longer period of time knows that you, as Deputy Director since 1990 and Dean since 2011, have been the executive driving force behind the educational and curricular reforms at WdKA.

This includes the introduction of the Bachelor/Master structure, the creation of the Piet Zwart Institute in 2001, founding the school's research programs in 2002, the radical curricular reform and internationalization of the Bachelors in 2012 – all the way to the plans to merge WdKA with Codarts to form a new university of the arts. The school has evolved from an initially very small, very local, very white, very male, all-Dutch arts and crafts trade school to an international art school.

That was your work in a nutshell, because you designed the framework for these changes. There have been growing pains and now setbacks: problems of matching high ambitions with limited resources.

# Educational vision

I see three signatures in these developments:

1. your origin as a teacher;
2. progressive-liberal politics;
3. drawing the big picture.

All of your executive work, I think, was driven by your origins as a teacher and your vision of education. You believed that *every* young person who was passionate about art and design should have the opportunity to study it. But that the school should not create a bubble, but educate its students as agents in society.

This ultimately led you to the conclusion that the school had to leave behind the traditional art and design disciplines. This was a radical path that I and others found interesting and exciting to follow. It motivated those of us who came from the Piet Zwart Institute and the research program to work in and for the Bachelor's programs.

This challenge may be comparable to the many art school digital media programs that were founded in the 1990s and often discontinued after the dotcom crisis in the early 2000s. In both cases, time may have been too early for these new programs, and their value may not have been understood until ten to twenty years later.

We are still dealing with the problem that the visual arts and design disciplines we currently offer are legacies of the creative industries of the 20th century; industries that for a large part no longer exist. I believe that as WdKA we should not fall back into a comfort zone, and continue to deal with the issue of radically rethinking our curriculum.

# Liberalism

In terms of politics and management culture, I think Jeroen's tenure as dean has a lot of parallels to the transition from Trump to Biden. Your main move was to open up the school. Literally in its architecture: WdKA's main entrance had been locked and secured prior to your tenure. You had the classroom walls taken down, turning the school into a co-working space. In some ways, you ran the school like an Internet startup.

I hope I am not misreading you, but I always saw a direct correspondence between your politics and Karl Popper's liberal philosophy of the open society; a society that emulates scientific experimentation in a competition of ideas, and is opposed to idealistic designs of the perfect society. This meant that we always had your support when our curricula, research and experiments concerned openness and opening, not only of the school, but of art practice as such.

As a progressive person, you wanted provocative thinking in the academy. So it was painful for me to see conflicts with faculty escalate in recent years, which I personally also saw as a generational mentality clash between your demonstrative optimism and a younger generation of faculty who, socialized with writers like Sara Ahmed and Mark Fisher, wanted recognition of their discomfort.

# The big picture

I mean it as a compliment when I say that you were first and foremost an educational reformer, not a manager. I don't think it was fair to you that Hogeschool Rotterdam decided in 2013 to discontinue the function of the adjunct managing director and to put this burden on you as well. [If we still had had such a managing director, we probably wouldn't have had the administrative difficulties of the past few years. I say this, by the way, not only as my own opinion, but as something we collectively concluded in a conversation among senior WdKA teachers.]

Your way of working was to develop visions and draw the big picture together with teachers and researchers, and to leave the details and implementation to the teacher teams, giving them a great deal of autonomy in the process, and I am personally thankful for that.

This led to experimental developments that illustrate your liberalism. Originally, you had outlined Autonomous, Social and Commercial as study orientations linked to specific future sources of income for our art and design graduates, namely (a) in the arts and cultural system, (b) in the social and educational system, or (c) through industrial jobs. But by linking these orientations to the research programs, these apparent answers became questions, and researchers, teachers, and students reinterpreted the three practices. You agreed with this, and even embraced it, as long as you saw this as an opening up, not a narrowing, of perspectives; and when it didn’t mean to give up the larger picture of art practice that is practically, not just symbolically, relevant in society. Indeed, Popperian liberalism and openness to experimentation and falsification.

I hope, Jeroen, it's okay if I tease you a bit in my final words. In 2012, when Jasper Tuytel, chairman of Hogeschool Rotterdam, retired, someone said to him in a public farewell speech: “Jasper, you were a terrible micromanager”. Jeroen, you were a terrible macro manager!