

## Development interview Bachelor of Art and Design Gerrit Rietveld Academie November 2, 2021

On 2 November 2021, this development interview took place with two members of the panel from the accreditation in February 2020 (René Kloosterman and Wendelien van Oldenborgh) and the director and head teachers of the programme. The subject of *Engaged Autonomy* was chosen for the development interview in consultation with the headteachers.

The starting point for the conversation is what the panel wrote in their report about *Engaged Autonomy*:

*'The committee values the academy's vision on Engaged Autonomy. Based on the discussions held during the site visit, the committee notes that the vision is still being implemented and is not yet shared by all stakeholders involved. Especially students seemed not yet completely familiar with the concept. The committee supposes that the notion of Engaged Autonomy bears a risk of keeping an old dichotomy (engagement opposing*

### *Engaged Autonomy*

*The term engaged autonomy was coined by Charles Esche and refers to an artistic position in which there is an antagonistic tension between ideology and active participation in the social debate (How to Grow Possibility: The Potential Roles of Academies, 2007)*

*autonomy) intact. As a result, the committee finds that the concept is still quite abstract and can be interpreted in different ways by different stakeholders.'*

During the development interview the panel indicates that their remarks about *Engaged Autonomy* should not be interpreted as recommendations but more as a question. The Rietveld puts forward the term very strongly,

but in talks with students the panel noticed many of them were not acquainted with it. This made the panel wonder how this term is made known to students, but this doesn't mean that it's not implemented in the programme already. There is a logic for the academy to use the term *Engaged Autonomy*: Artists do still have a very individual practice with their art standing by itself. At the same time, they relate more to others nowadays; to social, environmental or contextual issues and questions.

In preparation of this interview, the panel critically read the Institutional Plan 'Undefined - Unsolicited - Unsettling' in relation to the term *Engaged Autonomy*. The panel was pleased with the descriptions in the institutional plan, in which a comparison was made between the current situation and say 20 years ago. The change being described is that students are no longer only working on themselves but relate much more to the outside world. That is a good starting point in the conversation about *Engaged Autonomy*: It's no longer about autonomy in itself but autonomy relating to the world. Autonomy in its own right is not supported anymore. It's not a mission but an acknowledgement of how things already are, that's why Charles Esche introduced the term *Engaged Autonomy*. The words 'critical' and 'free' are used a lot in the institutional plan. The panel wonders what do those terms mean in this context? What is critical thinking and what does the academy offer the students to think critically? What is the ground for using the terms critical and free thinking? The same goes for engagement. The attitude that is being supported is the attitude of looking at context. What in the programme offers that possibility? And how do you address issues like racism and possible power distortions for example?

A number of head teachers indicate how they interpret the term *Engaged Autonomy* and what developments are taking place within education in relation to this theme. We try to achieve that students learn to look past conventions. Freedom is always about boundaries and stretching them. The premises is that freedom has always been restricted, either morally, or by governments or institutions etc. The first thing that students notice when entering the academy is that freedom is limited. Freedom involves critical thinking in dealing with materials, the discipline and the social context of their work. At the academy engagement comes in when students instrumentalise this awareness and push the borders of freedom through making and thinking.

The panel thinks it's interesting to mention conventions. There's also the convention of modernity that has particular limits to how others are seen. It has excluded other thoughts and other worlds of knowledge. It is an important question for institutions: how do we deal with our own past of freedom of conventions? The modernist line of thought on autonomy is problematic. The idea that an individual is locked off from

everything else, is something that is being questioned highly right now, but maybe everybody is already questioning that over here at the Rietveld.

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## *Unsettling*

*Unsettling Rietveld/Sandberg is an intra-curricular initiative that is working actively between and beyond the structures and discourses of the academy to unsettle the Rietveld and Sandberg from the roots up and making the context of the academy more inclusive to other voices, minds and bodies. Unsettling initiates and supports a wide range of activities like an outreach programme that aims for a more inclusive local influx of students, potential candidates that the academy was less able to reach before. Part of the Framework for Action is the reassessment of the appointment policy that ensures that diversity and inclusivity are not only represented in the student body but also in staff and teachers.*

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The Rietveld has chosen for an active approach towards the topic of inclusiveness. A number of head teachers give examples of how this is implemented.

Within the departments' theory programmes and the Studium Generale, more attention is paid to colonial history. For example: within the jewellery department, the theory class also has an important role in dealing with the colonial history of the discipline and last year Studium Generale was focused on colour in all its variety.

The academy offers extra education for teachers. This contributes to the awareness of certain topics and helps to address these issues with students. Students often have more experience with these topics than teachers and

staff. The dialogue between teachers from different departments also stimulates the awareness of diversity issues and is very fruitful for both teachers and students.

Several departments, like VAV - moving image, organise gatherings with teachers and students to talk about these topics. Both students and teachers feel vulnerable. The aim is to find nuance and balance in these conversations. It's quite a struggle for both students and teachers to feel allowed to make mistakes.

The panel recalls that, during the visitation, Unsettling had a very strong presence and the panel is happy to hear it's still very active.

The panel concludes with the fact that a definition of the concept *Engaged Autonomy* is inconclusive. But maybe the term shouldn't be too clear because the difficulty with making things concrete is that this is limiting at the same time. There are questions that shouldn't be answered. 'Undefined' is a term used in the institutional plan. In this plan there are a lot of directions and clues on what it could be. As soon as you make this term a convention, it should be questioned again. If you define it too much it could become a marketing slogan. The panel believes this is something Rietveld wouldn't want, although trying to define the term would maybe help the students to reflect on it. It's much more about keeping the term alive. You can use it over and over again and start to believe in it, but that's not enough. The main purpose should be to use the term for a meaningful and ongoing dialogue between teachers and students.

The panel is curious where this topic stands during the next visitation in 2026.