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ROLE PLAY & EDUCATION





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ROLE PLAY EDUCATION
Letters From The
Field Lab.

Published in
conjunction with
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Letters From The Field Lab

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from Scratch.
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To Whom It May Concern



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ROLE PLAY & EDUCATION



After the first trimester, when the second began, we were informed by email to bring three analog tools, clothes for five days, an air bed/tent, something to cover our eyes and our passports: no digital devices were allowed, not even cell phones. And there was no other information about this workshop besides the mentor we had never met.

I remember I tried to figure out what this workshop was for and I only came to one conclusion.

That Lucas wanted us to experience what it was like to be a caged chicken.

Being exploited by humanity in exchange for food and drink, because that's all we were provided with. The living environment was terrible. How bad was it? I was anxious, confused, and extremely uncomfortable both physically and mentally. On the morning of the first day we gathered at the White Lady building and were asked to hand over our passports and wear whatever we had brought to cover our eyes.

We were then taken to an unknown place while blindfolded.

It felt like some sort of scam by traffickers coordinated by this unknown man [Lucas Maassen]: we could likely have been sold.

After about two hours of driving I fell asleep. We finally arrived in an area with no connection to the outside. It wasn't in the city, just somewhere in the middle of nowhere with the odd car passing by. Nobody stopped though.

It was a forest with few trees and there was an old abandoned church-like building standing there.

We were told that this where we will stay for 5 days.



Day One:

We looked around the building, there was a ground floor with three divided spaces and one floor upstairs with limited space. The building seemed as if no one was taking care of it, it was full of dirt and dust. Furthermore, there was no basic domestic system, no electricity and light, no water and toilet, no heater and gas.

Unfortunately we came in winter and the average temperature was around 0-5 degrees. Some people pitched their tents inside the building to keep warmer while sleeping at night.

We first realised there was no toilet which was a big problem considering almost 20 people would be living there together.

We started to build a toilet.



We found a spot outside the church and started digging. It was a simple structure from wooded branches and covered with black plastic to make a more 'private' space.

It took ten people more than three hours to build.

And after one day the structure was blown away by the wind meaning we could only pee and poo randomly outside...Even though it was tough we still tried to design and produce something. Lucas was with us when discussing, but gave limited information on what the workshop was for. We were so confused and tired...I was thinking 'is this part of a game?'.

Day Three:

Everything had become so unbearable.

A few students became ill, some felt super stressed, myself included. But some of the French students seemed to really enjoy this crazy workshop. We didn't know what we were suffering for and why it should be like this.

We wrote words and phrases in all caps on big pieces of paper like 'WHY?' and 'WHAT EDUCATION IS THIS?'

We then paraded outside of the building to no one, only we saw it. When Lucas arrived he just listened while we explained why we were mad and what we were thinking. I forget what his reply was but I do remember how calm he was while we all stood there. For me, suffering like this for something I might not agree with, or not feel a connection to, is ridiculous. So at that moment, we were suffering for meaninglessness, and meaninglessness is a pain in the neck. But it also made me think, why do we need a purpose so much? Education as Gambling.

The way the Social Design department put students under a stressful and extreme situation to trigger something worked out. Somehow for me, it was like a high-risk investment, like gambling, because sometimes it did work and some students got very valuable and unique results.

But there was so much suffering for EVERYONE. So I'm doubtful if it's suitable for the majority.

I would see myself as one of the lucky winners of the system. What I learnt was not what Lucas expected, I think. I learnt that there is an enormous gap between my classmates and me, in almost every aspect.



I freed myself from the frame of the designer.

I realised that if you give me an assignment without any direction or motivation it will make me panic.

For me, design is about problem solving and achieving goals because I was educated as an industrial designer.

An approach where we were taught to value qualities like 'function' and 'ability'.

But DAE encouraged students to find a unique way and develop their own style. This method is like being an artist. The Academy values 'uniqueness' and 'personal perspective' so much. Somehow it is another frame for me – another limitation. But at least I am aware of it now and that's the biggest difference.

Before I studied at DAE I didn't know that education can also mean limitation.

This experience totally affected my career because I found my very own personal mythology to make projects. It encouraged me to reflect on my inner and personal experiences and find the social meaning from it.



I was very confused. The whole class was very confused, even before the actual workshop happened. We had been hearing stories of the previous year, its intensity and the toll on every participant.

Lucas Maassen promoted 'Le Malade Imaginaire', initially named The Limits of the Body.

Only an email from him listing the place and time and asking us to bring 'stuff you think you need for a 3 night / 4 day stay in the countryside' helped unfold the suspense. When the day and place arrived, we were met with an array of objects and materials and asked to organise ourselves into small groups to collectively create physical disabilities for one another. The goal of this was to produce and execute one of Molière's plays.

This last workshop was, by far, the most uncomfortable for me at the time.

The initial thought of the majority was to mess with the other, but that intention quickly vanished when one realised you would be the next target.

We ended up negotiating with each other which disabilities were in line with our openness to masochism.

One classmate had a pair of glasses covered with tape but with two cylindrical tubes facing different directions so she couldn't focus. This quickly brought on a massive headache and proved to be unbearable.

Before coming to the Netherlands, my background was pretty much situated on trying to solve existing problems in creative ways.



I would do that using tools and thinking processes I learned from my experience in the United States during my bachelors, combined with my necessity-driven Brazilian way of fixing things with limited resources.

I was never asked to create a problem for myself, live and deal with it, and in parallel produce an artistic outcome related to this very problem.

I came to the Netherlands with what I now understand as a colonised mentality – a set of ethos that was more related to an European context rather than an original idea of what it means to be Brazilian. I unconsciously sought validation and pursued excellence in every opportunity I could. However, I had no idea what excellence meant during Lucas's workshop.

I had a truck tire tied to my waist by an orange rope and I had to carry that load everywhere: in the morning walks-which I oscillated from loving to loathing-to showering and our drama chores. And mine was on the mild side of the self-inflicted disability spectrum. Some people blinded themselves. Some lived those days tied to one or more colleagues. Looking back, I guess I was a bit afraid to go too far at that point and 'fail'.

I questioned the workshop during the whole time I was experiencing it. My impression was that people were taking the piss and they just wanted to see how we would react.

I couldn't understand at the time how the whole thing was even remotely related to 'design'.

At night, after dinner, we would have a beer with Lucas and his two coordinators and laugh about the events of the day. When I searched for my sleeping bag, I would question myself if I wasn't experiencing some sort of Stockholm syndrome.

It took me a while to process this workshop in particular. I'm still at it to be honest. The other workshops were easier to relate to and to digest.

I appreciate how these learning experiments were proposed to us at the beginning of our masters.

They definitely threw us into unexpected realms. And as my current research is focused on creative education, I catch myself re-signifying a lot of the aspects brought up by these workshops. I'm starting to understand that some experiences have different layers, directions and stages of meaning, and consequently of understanding. This understanding is an internal process.

And failure is a strong component of a relevant learning path.

Another important part is also letting things be.

Embracing what is there.

We can try to deceive others into believing in a made up image. We can put on our own play, create our own 'maladies,' but we will only be able to learn something when we face ourselves; when we deal with it. The very moment we are experiencing something can be transformative or not. Too much self-awareness can be a buzzkill sometimes. Another important part is also letting things be. Embracing what is there. That moment it is not limited to that segment of time. You can revisit it, you can play that again within you. I would like to borrow a segment from a speech I heard from Charles Watson, an art educator in Brazil:

I remember an interview between art critic David Sylvester and the American painter Philip Guston. I had this on an audio cassette while at college and often listened to it at night in the dark of my room. At a given moment in the interview, Sylvester asks Guston something like "but how do you know the difference between when you are really at the edge of your capabilities as an artist or just coasting?"

Guston replies something to the effect,

"It's up to us to know the difference between when we're just fucking and when we're making love."

In other words, you can deceive someone else from time to time and perhaps that's forgivable, but the real problems start when you start to deceive yourself--When it comes to blame, it's easier to look out than to look in. Guston is talking about a kind of personal ethics. In other words, it's not just charity that begins at home.



"Le Malade Imaginaire" helped me heal, weirdly and strangely, somehow. It created an uncomfortable and dislodging scenario that I had to face.

It helped me question what came after, on both sides of the glass walls of the Academy.

It helped question the value of metacognition. However, I don't want to advocate this as a great learning alternative by itself. It does deserve its place on a larger plan of changing things up a bit though.

Promoting change is often strangely undermined and overstated at the same time. I'm now open to understand and embrace education as being awkward nonlinear, serendipitous, anti-fragile, compass-free, open to struggling and

as a fearful approach to crippling situations.



We walked in relative quiet, like a line of kindergarteners, along muddy roads bordering large fields.

'Hallo!' called bewildered farmers.

Groggy or sore from sleeping on a concrete floor, we'd risen at 7am to be led on this morning meditation surrounded by fellow students.

The day before, on arriving at a far-flung scout house, we'd had 10 minutes to write down all the numbers in our phones, or any that we could scrounge up online before our tech was confiscated and our bikes were locked.

Our objective, Lucas said, was to create an exhibition in the city by the end of the week. The catch: we could not physically see or assemble any part of the exhibition, and we had to coordinate everything remotely from this site with only 200 euros and a bag of pay-per-credit burner phones.

The first day I joined the impromptu call center team. The cold was biting, dappled sunlight on the clearing where we'd put our picnic tables, working as our papers were periodically swept away by the wind and had to be retrieved.

The scout house itself was an ugly explosion of primary colors

walls outfitted with strange prehistoric totem-hawks, decorated deer skulls, a placard from the Wu Tang Clan, Christmas hats, and whatever other flotsam had built up over the years.

Sleeping in one freezing room, someone caught a cold and it tily-padded from person to person until, at a certain point, most of us were sick.

An exhibition design team formed, as well as a car-design team as it became apparent we'd center our pop-up exhibition around manufacturing.

The days passed, milky tea by my side, sneezing constantly, bundled in scarfs, bottles of beer littering the bright yellow tables as 6 or 7 people paced around absently on their burner phone. On the opening day of the exhibition, we were permitted to visit and view the performance.

A graphic designer had made a shitty, 5-minute line drawing of 16 airplanes, printing it for us as our exhibition poster.

Makers had followed our hastily telephoned instructions to create custom "parts" for the car to be built. Two curators had been recruited to direct the assembly of made objects submitted, which had been arranged on command in a keyed grid.

The curator read the first directive for the performance and via the help of attendants, large bike wheels, a brass hoop with the head of a broom attached, a pillow the size of several human bodies,

and a suitcase full of bread and maggots, among other items, were removed from the grid and began moving solemnly down a fireman line to the build space...

Did we learn anything?

It depends on what it means to learn.

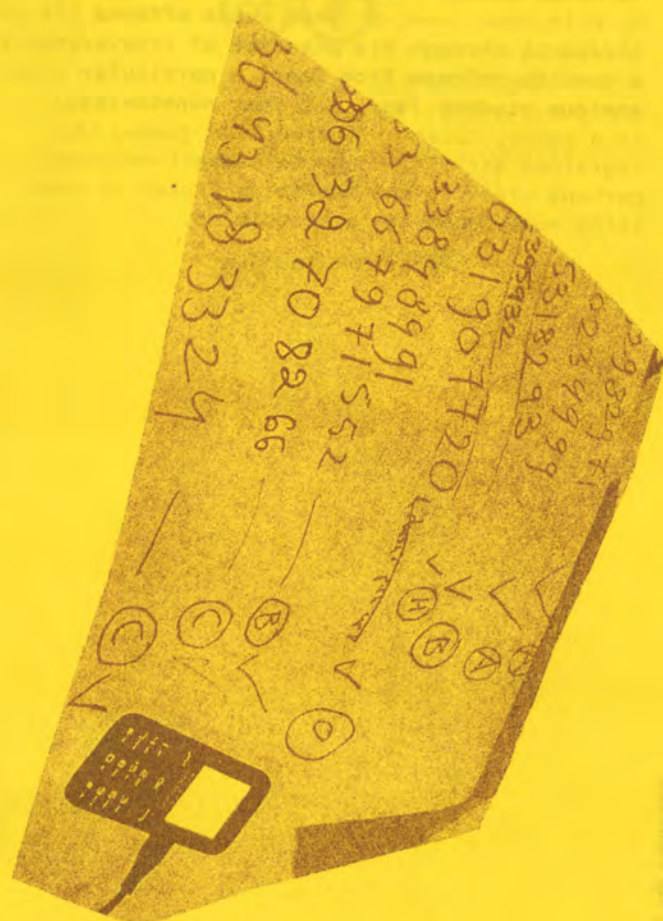
There is learning as acquiring substance from an external context, and learning as rediscovering or re-centering on the fundamentals, the kind of learning we are told is more necessary the older and more boring we get. As an introductory workshop signifying the synthesis of a single social design class from many disparate parts, it was marked by stereotypical pictures you could expect from a new group in the process of bonding. Charades. Eating homemade lunch at picnic tables. Sitting around a campfire.

But it also included aimless walks to, among other locales, a nearby garden and a strange Mongolian-style yurt. Wandering through the forest to find large sticks or loose bark to work into the design just because. And people sitting on the floor in loose pairs or trios in downtime, staring at a wall.

Despite the stated educational objectives of the workshop to "learn by doing,"

these unpoliced in-between moments stand out in memory, in part because their apparent void of meaning becomes a meaning of its own Of space given.

And maybe certain unfoldings in the background.



The design academy can sometimes be a place of over-studied posturing,

with new initiates absorbing phrases from workshops and repeating them soberly to each other like a child testing the limits of a new word. As a student, it's hard to stay uninvolved with this part of the culture, nor should it really be avoided in an environment where one should be trying out as many different forms of self as possible in order to grow.

But this monoculture can also become oppressive.

In that sense, there is strength in the absurdity introduced to us

by Lucas — not dissimilar to currents of Dadaism, Theatre of the Absurd, or other subversions arising in relation to stifling forces. This workshop gave us access to a rush of our own energy that might have otherwise been tamped down, and it embodied an attitude we could keep on hand for the duration of the masters.

The workshop gave us access to different personas in that it gave us an easy excuse to be vulnerable towards the outside world. As we were operating from a position of constraint or handicap, we embodied an exercise of acknowledging our own limitations while also acknowledging our own ability despite these limitations.

That's vulnerability in a nutshell.

It also gave us an excuse to be irrelevant.

To Lucas's credit, it's very hard to have a workshop like this without having its meaning consumed by an "everything is meaningless" post-modern brand of ironic apathy.

It needs enough earnest optimism to toe the line. In this case, part of what Lucas offered his participants through his practice of irreverence was a genuine release from fear, a particular kind of anxious student fear, but fear nonetheless.

In a sense, Lucas's intervention jammed the ingrained striving-to-prove-oneself response, perhaps clearing the way for a flicker of something more authentic to bubble up.

***Knowledge production
is also based on relationality.***

In our workshop, our artificial constraint became a metaphor for our limitations in the real world where we also rely on others in dependencies we cannot always predict. Beyond requiring us to be resourceful, the forced collaboration of building the car required us to connect to many in service of the outcome.

Our extreme lack of resources is part of what recruited them to help. The entertainment value of our ridiculous predicament factored in too. Thus, constraint and comicality become tools for connection to reflect on as designers in the long term.

Also in the long term, the priming from Lucas for irreverence has its own implications for a career in art and design. There is humour but also a certain subversiveness in mobilising 60-70 people around a pop-up exhibition featuring the live assembly of trash into an incomprehensible work of 'design'.

Putting it in a standard exhibition format,

we implicitly understand that a lot of what we're doing and what the art/design system will teach us to value is bullshit,

and we're further inoculated against becoming slaves to bullshit rules.



The Unusual and the Invisible Values.

Items to sleep outside;
an instrument;
no electronic devices;
no money;

This is what we were asked to bring four days before our workshop started in the Social Design Program at the Academy. It felt exciting and triggered the mind, and thoughts arose for what purpose we would need these items and why we received this information in such a short time in advance.

9 o'clock;

November 2017;

5°C;

Eindhoven Stadhuisplein;

and we have no idea what we are going to do in the next five days. This is how we met on that foggy and freezing but partly sunny morning. We had to form groups in order to create little music-bands. The topic was we had to survive on the street without a home and earn 'money'—which in this context also meant goods of worth, like food—in exchange for performing as a band.

While attending the workshop the connection between work and outcome was made clear and visible: no music, no money, no food.

We had this unusual situation and had no home, we were homeless in our 'own' city.

It felt extremely uncomfortable to find a role in the group which was based on musical. We also had to consider other details such as accommodation, organising, and collaborating with other 'bands'.

It came to the point that music wasn't the only way of making a personal contribution to the band. In my case I brought a trumpet which required skills I discovered I no longer had; so I could not contribute musically. I didn't fit in the group at all and my self-confidence declined rapidly.

So I had to make the decision either to improve and practice my trumpet skills or find other ways to contribute in order to define my role and value.

This moment made it clear to me that most skills are valued which can in turn make one feel proud or respected. This forced epiphany made me realise that there's a way besides the usual taught one. And that patterns of approach must differ in order to fulfil the responsibility of the designer. These personal patterns are based on a 'cocktail of skills' which are hyper-individual, valuable and explosive for each person and their targets. By understanding and mixing this cocktail I can define and tailor my role to a specific environment, culture, or context.

Contrasting to a specific context forces me to fit in and orient my skills appropriately. I therefore have the chance to contribute something sensitive in service of a specific goal, other citizens, and myself. I mainly learnt to analyse how failure influenced my psychological wellbeing. This made me develop a sense of how important failing is, but also how important success is in order to live a mentally healthy life.

The historian Yuval Noah Harari says: 'The highest aim of humanist life is to fully develop your knowledge through a wide variety of intellectual, emotional and physical experiences.' I see this workshop as an elementary additional part of design education and education in general. Harari's calculation

'Knowledge = Experiences x Sensitivity'

explains the value of this is not the 'visible' gathering of skills. That's why it's hard to see and understand what I really learnt. It's not an impressive drawing where I can see an instant result which looks mostly pleasant.

It's just part of a future way of working and dealing.

It can manifest unpredictably in projects which are also driven by particular experiences which I gathered while living and being in some unusual situations. Experiences and Sensitivity can generate knowledge that lets us understand a problem more precisely while the range of experiences is getting bigger; meaning a wider address for new issues.

This is how to translate Experiences and Sensitivity into a design project such as public mobility systems, furniture for human interaction, or an installation which focuses on the interaction of social classes through the medium of empty bottles.

This invisible knowledge is especially needed in the field of design which doesn't differentiate from the main cannon; which is to provide affordable, mass produced industrial objects for humans.

The aim of this experience driven knowledge is to rethink the structures of behaviour, people and environments.

Success in this condition is understood as a personal contribution towards a group which completed an objective.

By embracing the gathering of 'invisible' knowledge, through actions, making and experiencing, I forgot to focus on the 'visible' academic aspects of knowledge; like improving my skills in writing or computer based visualisation. These 'visual' and tangible skills were kept in the background. In order to respect the importance of this knowledge I found it worthy to engage with the thoughts and collected data such as photography. Even an immediate way through Instagram keeps up thoughts and memories in order to experience something differently.

Sharing provides the potential to open up discussions and engage with others. I learned that the balance of knowledge needs to be on the same level so this kind of workshop cannot stand alone but only in addition, and in coexistence with the 'visible' hard-skills which need to suit the individual. In the design context, such as in other non-designer contexts, or even in schools I see potential to focus a lot more on gathering 'invisible' knowledge through experiencing and engaging with the unusual. Stepping out of the daily role enabled me to access different feelings about value and skill to mentally survive in a social group.

Also I got access to understanding people who we were dealing within our time as homeless street musicians and saw how homeless people lived; some of them even helped our group. One person was just sitting on the piano and started playing. Our band gave him a stage to express his skills and he definitely felt proud and included in our micro-organism of a band.

It was a crucial experience which made clear that sometimes just a stage is needed, and in this instance and in our case, the stage was a piano.

This was where passions and ambitions can play out and be performed.



Role Play Education

I realised how important it is to know what part of a whole you can play and how important it is to find the correct stage.

Seeing how this homeless person became part of our group with his piano performance made me smile and become emotional.

'The best case is to live is in the target environment for years;

A good way to go is to travel in this environment for some days in order to talk to people;

The basic but bad idea is to learn as much as possible from distance.'

— Victor Papenek.

The Music Factory workshop confirmed my attitude to value and made me discover the hidden aspects of the unusual experience in order to 'learn' in the other sense. In my opinion the intentions from Papenek can be kept and inspire approaches nowadays. Moreover the method of teaching should fit to the current world in order to allow more variety of skills and personalities.

That's why the workshop of Lucas Maassen was to me a challenging new form of learning but driven by an old contribution from Papenek.

Victor Papenek's instruction that 'as a designer we have the responsibility to knock on doors which never opened before' already pushed me into situations such as being in jail (for a couple of days) or starting a journey without money or clothes (apart from underwear). The designer can discover this invisible knowledge by stepping into unstable situations. I believe this kind of alternative approach creates room for an unorthodox way of thinking and feeling.



Role Play Education

Begin forwarded message:

From: Jan.Boelen@nrc.nl
Subject: Re: FW: result after interview with Jan Boelen
Date: 28 July 2018 at 13:05:56 CEST

[illegible]

"The only thing that we have in common is shopping."

*Andrew Graham-Dixon,
Culture Show BBC2, April 2010*

How to hold fast to a vision, optimism in a world moving towards complacency, cultural conformity and corporate control?

A recent visit to Jean Cocteau Museum in Menton had incited me to question the definition of "criteria" in art practice. Cocteau's knowledge of literature and film, and his company to the most influential creative figures in the Parisian avant-garde didn't provide him with objective criteria to see his paintings as insignificant collage of motifs that he derived from the works of his contemporaries as Matisse, Picasso and Braque. On the other hand, the dysfunctional crummy designed museum signals that museums aren't any more a knowledge institution rather souvenir shops provide entertainment programmes that meant to vacuum art and culture from their essence. The consumer capitalist system produces advertisement, the totalitarian regime generates propaganda and the 'religious' authority composes fairy tale. They create void, the same narrative alters its title: the aesthetic of anaesthesia.

My practice is a form of protest against the given narrative and challenges its inevitability, striving against the conventions of established institutions of government, culture and industry. The 'educated art' appears no longer to offers practitioners strategies or methodologies with which to communicate significant cultural, aesthetic or political concerns, nor have an ethical reason to exist. My application and this latter, rather my practice is a constant rehearse on sustaining a virtual room to resist this void: the aesthetic of anaesthesia.

"It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong."

Francois De Voltaire (1694-1778)

The Tyranny of Popular

In the realm of globalized ideas of progress, not only the institutional art and design have come to express a certain degree of sameness around the world, the institutions' correspondence vocabulary too, "extremely high submitted applications". The regimes are ruling by divest substance and spirit, suppressing the individual in various forms: in school, in the army, in the factory, in the temple... everywhere. It is a system closer to the "priestly" ecclesiastical, where everyone must commit blind obedience and to renounce his questions.

Wherefore, the regimes recruited armies of 'artists' and 'art professionals' to eradicate any dissident to their propaganda/advertisement/fairy tale. Most of these recruited armies are failed artists to assure they stand firmly against any genuine innovative talent. As long an author has to perform within the parameters of a series of footnote written by Giorgio Vasari, serves the taste of the patron, disseminates regime's propaganda, advertises the corporations' insatiable consumption or works under overregulated scheme of the art establishment, as no room for a genuine research.

Art institution is authoritarian closed system too

You are either serve the mainstream or become extremist

"Look at history.
 Everything we have,
 every great achievement...
 ...has come from the independent work
 of some independent mind.
 Every horror and destruction...
 ...came from attempts to force men
 into a herd of brainless, soulless robots.
 Without personal rights...
 ...without personal ambition...
 ...without will, hope or dignity.
 It is an ancient conflict.
 It has another name.
 The individual
 against the collective."
Ayn Rand, the fountainhead 1943

test...test
 I see the mirror
 I get up
 One more time
 I see the mirror
 I get up

I'm absent,
 he is performing

I am he, who I was or
 will be

how to hold fast to a vision, optimism in a world moving towards
 complacency, cultural conformity and corporate control?

I ask you others to forgive me for dedicating this public
 statement to Lindear Johnson, who had "Never Apologize"
 to the ruling institution, whose province prospered, but
 devoid of substance and spirit. This institution has been
 suppressing the individual in various forms: in school, in
 the army, in the factory and in the church. It is a system
 where the "friendly" totalitarianism, where everyone must
 submit blind obedience and to renounce his or her questions.
 Johnson refused to apologize for his anger, his passion, and
 his desire to see his identity and the world more humane, more
 just and beautiful.

An individual reflection has never been as urgent as it is now!

VOID

AESTHETIC OF
 ANAESTHESIA

Is there an urge to begin calling into questioning and challenging the legitimacy of the
 commonly accepted cultural, social, and religious norms, revealing their hypocritical
 and repressive nature?

"Since 1960s we are in the end state of art."

Grayson Perry, 2013. Perry frequently appears in public dressed as a woman, does his appearance label his vases as contemporary pottery?

"Let me tell you one thing. In the world we live in, 98% of what gets built and designed today is pure sh*t."

Frank Gehry October 2014. Does he include his buildings in this percentage too? According to the report, his response was followed by an uncomfortable silence at the press conference. Gehry then apologised, explaining that he was tired from travelling. "Please, you have to understand that I'm tired and a little dazed by the trip," he said. "I'll mumble an apology." In the 'Free World' like in the other, dissent voice has to be suppressed too.

"We are witnessing the end of fashion as we know it, fashion has become a ridiculous and pathetic parody of what it has been."

Li Edelkoort, 2015. How she justifies her deed as advisor for fashion companies and consumer brands around the world.

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Can creative engagement be found or does it need to be distributed? And if we can find it how do we coax it out?

Educational pedagogies once taken for granted now slip easily between reality and fantasy; entering an altogether different realm of understanding and mode of existence.

Designer Lucas Maassen's introductory workshops to Design Academy Eindhoven MA students provide hypothetical stages for students to experiment in performing the hierarchies of freethinking and free doing. In doing so their insecurities become transformative tools. Whether it's a workshop wherein students force their bodies into physical disabilities while exploring method acting, or a weeklong survival camp spent in a cold fake church built by the Nazis; the experience drives a red flag into the hardened ground of established educational models.



This zine uses firsthand accounts of four of Maassen's students as a means of analysis. Each of the workshops is critically engaged with through the emotional response of the participants, creating a snapshot of what this approach to education does to the individual and the lingering lessons they learnt.

*Letters From
The Field Lab*

