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First European  
Assembly  
of Contemporary  
Art Centres

# *This Time We Talk About Gender*

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DCA

French National  
Network of Contemporary  
Art Centres

# First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres

## Mapping Material Conditions & Ideological Background of Gender Inequalities

Summary of the meeting on 12 April

This document produced by DCA — French national network of contemporary art centres is a summary of the discussions held during an online roundtable on 12 April, 2022 in the framework of the First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres.

The video recording of these discussions is available on:  
<https://europeanartassembly.org/en/programme/2>

# Discussion 1:

## Sepake Angiama & Vanessa Desclaux

### Chairwoman: Émilie Renard



## Art Education and Social Reproduction

Émilie Renard: In the field of art, in relation to art and art schools, mediation and educational actions create interstitial spaces that act as social interfaces. We will question how these intermediate spaces propose other ways of sharing collective experiences than those allowed by the usual exhibition spaces. What margins to specific and new forms of creation can be opened in the institutional space by educational programs? Do these programs allow institutions to establish themselves locally and durably, and thus to resonate with their own context? In what way does mediation allow artistic institutions to work differently and to weave links locally with the audience, but also with artists and partners? Could these embodied and discursive practices of unlearning, anchored in collective processes, influence the very nature of institutions? How do these practices propose methodologies that allow or even require the institution, in turn, to unlearn its own instituted practices to anchor itself in intersectionality?

Because we presume that the notions of arts education and pedagogy are not undertaken in the same way in different European contexts and countries, we will begin by defining certain terms. These questions of terminology are important because they allow us to invent ways of saying and describing actions that often deviate from established uses. It is important to create ways of talking about “support”, “access”, and “equity”.

We will also use concrete examples to illustrate pedagogical experiences that allow us to address these issues of education and emancipation, in art centres and art schools.

Sepake Angiama: We should question the terminology that we use: what do we mean when we say the word “education”? Do we use the word education? And in what context? How does it differ from our use of “pedagogy” or “mediation”? There is a shift in understanding how the curatorial might operate and that it can benefit from using pedagogical tools, methodologies, and processes. How can institutions reflect that knowledge of producing knowledge collectively? Could we understand the role of the curator and mediator as something that could be occupied within the same body?

Vanessa Desclaux: What is a feminist practice and pedagogy? How do we embody and carry out such practices and transform our institutions in concrete ways? I

would like to return to bell hooks' "Engaged pedagogy".<sup>1</sup> We all perform labour in an educational project. How do we manage within our institutions to diffuse hierarchy and support community and collective practices? How do we create the conditions to shift from knowledge reproduction to knowledge production? How do we explore embodied experiences and forms of engagement that involve our bodies as much as our minds? Excellence and talent are terms to disrupt.

At the FRAC Nouvelle-Aquitaine, in Bordeaux (France), we use practices such as what we call "easy to read and write": a simple way of writing sentences to address a diverse audience. It is a way of working with a group to explore how text can be an effective, imaginative, fictional response to an artwork. The bigger challenge now is how this production of text can be introduced in the scientific archive of the museum.


Sepake Angiama: We should think about the ways in which the responses to artworks are gathered within the archive or maintained or seen as valuable. Known forms of engaging with exhibitions include critical writing or critical reviews which are in established magazines, but the response of a 5-year old is not given the same weight. Feminist practices and pedagogies relate to solidarities, care, related to circulatory, shared, or distributed notions of how narratives can be told. Maybe we can move away from an authoritative way of how an artwork can be read or understood. Maybe there is a way to hold multiple narratives.

Vanessa Desclaux: When you welcome an audience of all ages, especially those that don't have a particular interest in art, the objective is not for them to come and learn about artworks. It is a much broader experience. For most audiences coming through the museum is not just encountering a work of art, you come through a building, encountering a specific way of talking, reading, language and sometimes overwhelming a lot of writing. If the museum is engaged in pedagogy and mediation, it should take care of its audiences, in creating a holistic experience in a hospitable and convivial environment.

Sepake Angiama: When we privilege the eyes, we forget about the rest of the body. Even sitting down on the gallery floor can feel like a disruption. The language of the gallery is really one that keeps you moving, on your feet. That also speaks to ableist ways of thinking about space. The role of mediation can be one of slowing down and spending time with work and others, which allows for other perspectives to arise. This is difficult in a very busy museum, so there is something to be said for the ways in which the museum has a different kind of life during different times of day, and how those might be utilized by different audiences. While the early morning might be suited for children, in the night-time, there is an opportunity for more social ways of interacting that could include dancing or music.

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1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge, 1994



Vanessa Desclaux: Teaching in an art school in Dijon (ENSA Dijon, France) for 8 years, thanks to people like Géraldine Gourbe and Isabelle Alfonsi who I invited to share research projects, allowed for different experiences than in a museum context. The first workshop as a feminist research project was to create a “Lecturium”, for which we found a space outside of the art school that was transformed for three days. They made some furniture from recycled material. We could sleep and eat in the space, read to each other and ourselves, and stretch the normal education time in which the atmosphere changed and liberated. Moments where time extends are precious, it allows us to reflect on what it means to spend time as a collective outside the normal times of education.

Sepake Angiama: The museum is designed to regulate the body, to view works, and to be quiet. Intentional creation of reverence. What does it mean to say that you have spaces that are open to all and what are the barriers to access? How do we embody these notions that we think about often in education such as equality? How to create a democratic space, how to break hierarchies in terms of dialogue and conversation?

For the School of Equals workshop at the LUCA School of Arts in Brussels, we wrote a text on which students jotted notes: “In this module we speculate on the spectrum of possibility and examine what is required to make change possible within art institutions; in order to support a transformation of a possible future, in which access to knowledge and education is understood as a social or collective pedagogy of self-determination; to ‘draw out’ knowledge which is embodied and not only transforms the self but also by extension – to ‘lead forth’, for others and for the environment in which these bodies come together”. We built geodesic domes with the students that became the space in which we spoke or thought together. It was reminiscent of the ignorant schoolmaster as a methodology and approach, it shows the ways in which we self-organize.

Vanessa Desclaux: What kind of practices do we encounter from outside of our field of work? In Dijon I was introduced to activist practices that could include working in groups in non-mixity. Most importantly, what has continued to structure my work has come from sharing competences by inviting someone from outside our work field to share their tools, i.e from popular education or yoga. Within the workplace, we should continue to experiment with those moments where we can learn together on a day-to-day basis.

Sepake Angiama: I would like to think about education as creating a shift: maybe a bodily experience but also the perception and understanding that can be produced collectively and creates different effects in every person’s body. I hope to build an understanding of one-another within communities, to open the conversation of art so that it is not navel-gazing. It becomes interesting where we can create a context for meaning through dialogue, collaboration and through action.

## Discussion 2:

Marthe Ramm Fortun & Dora García

Chairwoman: Émilie Renard

# Experimenting Opacity within a need for Transparency

Émilie Renard: Do we still have transparent and honest discussions about working conditions in an art world that we know is not strictly regulated? Transparency in institutions should guarantee more balanced power relations between artists, students, audiences, teams, boards, partners. Transparency is a factor of social justice. We can even affirm that this requirement of transparency is a fundamental condition for the development of creative work. Feminist approaches allow us to ask these material questions and to identify the parts of unpaid work, an invisible daily work.

Conversely, can a principle of transparency become a tool of control when one would need a certain intimacy to initiate safe spaces, preserve margins of experimentation and avoid any form of censorship? What about trust, a shadowy side and the margins of opacity within institutions?

Dora García: A fair equal art world will only exist in a fair equal world. There should be transparency regarding budgets, contracts and fees for artists, and clarity in the relation between the artist and the institution. The only positive sense that opacity takes is the need for an artist to have a private space and to not be constantly demanded to justify their activities. We should understand artistic freedom as something that has the right to be useless and opaque, not only for artists but for everyone. Artistic practices are attacked from all sides as to not be deserving of support with public money because what is produced is “hermetic” or “not understandable”.

Marthe Ramm Fortun: The idea that fiscal transparency and accountability and the fight for artists workers rights is at odds with artistic freedom is completely in line with split and divide tactics historically that affects emancipatory battles. To me, from a feminist perspective, the discussions on artistic freedom and the post me-too debate are deeply interlinked. In creating false opposites to the benefit of a dominant neoliberal and neo moralistic discourse, it reanimates bodies identifying as female as battlegrounds. The overarching question which is: freedom to whom and at what cost, if we don't have basic rights in place? We are in a Cartesian landscape where illogical arguments and emotions are

placed in the studio and arguments of reason are placed in the institution, omitting many voices. This links to Sepake Angiama's description of a solidarity of care, a shared distribution of how narratives can be told, moving away from authoritarianism into plurality.

Dora García: Many museums, art schools and institutions advertise with notions of care but not many take these to have real consequences in the way they treat their staff. There is a need for a healthy work environment in how artists relate to institutions, but also institutions relate to their own workers. Many people still go by Leo Castelli's motto, art is a business based on trust among gentlemen. The ugly truth is that the tradition of the art market has always been based on privilege, opacity, classism, sexism, and not rarely, on abuse, money laundering and tax-dodging. And many artists have participated in it gladly, blinded by notions of success, genius, and stardom. To dismantle this will take more than art institutions declaring a politics of care, it is a daily struggle.

Marthe Ramm Fortun: In efforts towards intersectionality is this problem of tokenism in which the institutions are not well-prepared to take care of- and be fully responsible for the consequences that the artists suffer when they carry out projects that aren't at the explicit advantage of the institution. This creates very vulnerable and isolating experiences for the artist. We should ask: who is hired? Who is curating? Who is proposing the historical lines? What is the potential violence that is executed in these paradigm shifts?

Dora García: One of the tricks of the boss to not only possess your time and product of your time, but also your subjectivity, is to work on affection: this produces an abusive relationship of dependency. There is this fairy-tale of the "successful artists". You have to be very much aware that they have an interest in your production and that you have to construct this solidarity with other artists, fellow workers, and defend not only your work but also your right to independence from this abuse of affection. I have often referred to art institutions as shelters, some work as such, but it is important that they do not remain isolated. Some may speak of the notion of the situated museum, and the porous institution. You cannot fight abusive relationships in isolated castles, they have to be open to the world. *The ART for UBI (Manifesto)*,<sup>2</sup> put forward by the Institute of Radical Imagination as an answer to the pandemic, is worth looking at for everyone. Most artists didn't have any kind of safety net. It has to be enough to guarantee your freedom.

Marthe Ramm Fortun: Regarding the idea of the artist as an entrepreneur, this abusive relationship is especially poignant for being at risk for executing

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2. <https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/2021/01/16/art-for-ubi-manifesto-launching-campaign/>

unpaid care work. “Erotic exchanges” happen in facilitating life as a single mother, not in terms of sexual relations or fiscal exchange, but relating to the use of the informal realm in terms of maintaining a practice and being a social entrepreneur in this neoliberal language that is imposed on the artist. Mutual dependency in Scandinavia means there are very few projects around. If you have been subjected to an incident in your life, there is no way to recover. When you are a freelance worker, you can’t participate in society on an equal level. The opportunity to show a project in a well-run institution as a form of protection is handed to few, creating an asymmetrical relationship for the artist that is precarious.

We must think about the longevity of artworks: artists are leaving their occupation because it is not sustainable for them to keep on working. Only a handful manage within the current frameworks, although the intentions might be the best. This is under-communicated because there is a lot of shame to not be able to be representative and “carry the face”. We need to encourage projects that are aggravating, uncomfortable, painful, alienating to some, now more than ever. Sometimes it has to be about sitting in pain, enduring that trauma together instead of trying to rid ourselves of it. That is safety, you can do that if you can go home and feed your kids.





## Q&A with the audience:

Vanessa Desclaux: I would like to return to bell hooks' notion of "who's in the classroom": can this be related to who's in the group in the context of mediation in the art centre? In the context of education, where you are among adults, you interact with and get to know them over a long period of time. How can this be applied to a moment of mediation that is much shorter? We can borrow tools from popular education, by for example sharing anecdotes of our first names.

Sepake Angiama: It is important to recognise our conditioning in terms of who finds it easy to speak. There is often a disparity, for example between how male and female students experience and perceive situations. Male students seem conditioned to believe that if they find something easy, everyone else should also find it easy. The patriarchy is upheld by all of us, and we must think about how to dismantle it because I think it is killing everyone. These small acknowledgements that we also all have a voice, and we can use it is something that might seem small but is one that takes a long time to learn.

Vanessa Desclaux: Unfortunately, a problem specific to art institutions is a lack of culture of ethics, of supporting people in the institutions that want to grow in their management. With Émilie Renard we experimented with diffusing the hierarchy by involving the artists and teams, yet they are difficult to disrupt.

Émilie Renard: In France art schools, museums and FRAC are the result of public cultural policy, but art centres are built from individual initiatives that have been recognized and have become part of it. There is a large commitment to rethink the institution itself and there is a long tradition of institutional critique which helps these relationships to be addressed in places such as the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, which as a shared space allows for experimentation with different ways of working.

Marthe Ramm Fortun: The programming at the Fotogalleriet in Oslo, Norway, has reflected a desire to go back into the archives to look critically at aspects of its founding history. How has this place been made vulnerable as an institution that has invited in ruptures at its own expense?

Antonio Cataldo: It is about redistribution of power but also transparency on all levels. It is important to say that if we define ourselves as a public institution and we demand public funding, we need to constantly be held accountable in this sphere of representation that we claim and create. There needs to be space for both critique, discussion, and self-critique at all times. The big freedom of institutions which are publicly funded should come with an openness to questions about what kind of space this is.

Summary written by Eleni Pantelaras for DCA, 2022  
Coordination: Marie Chênél

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