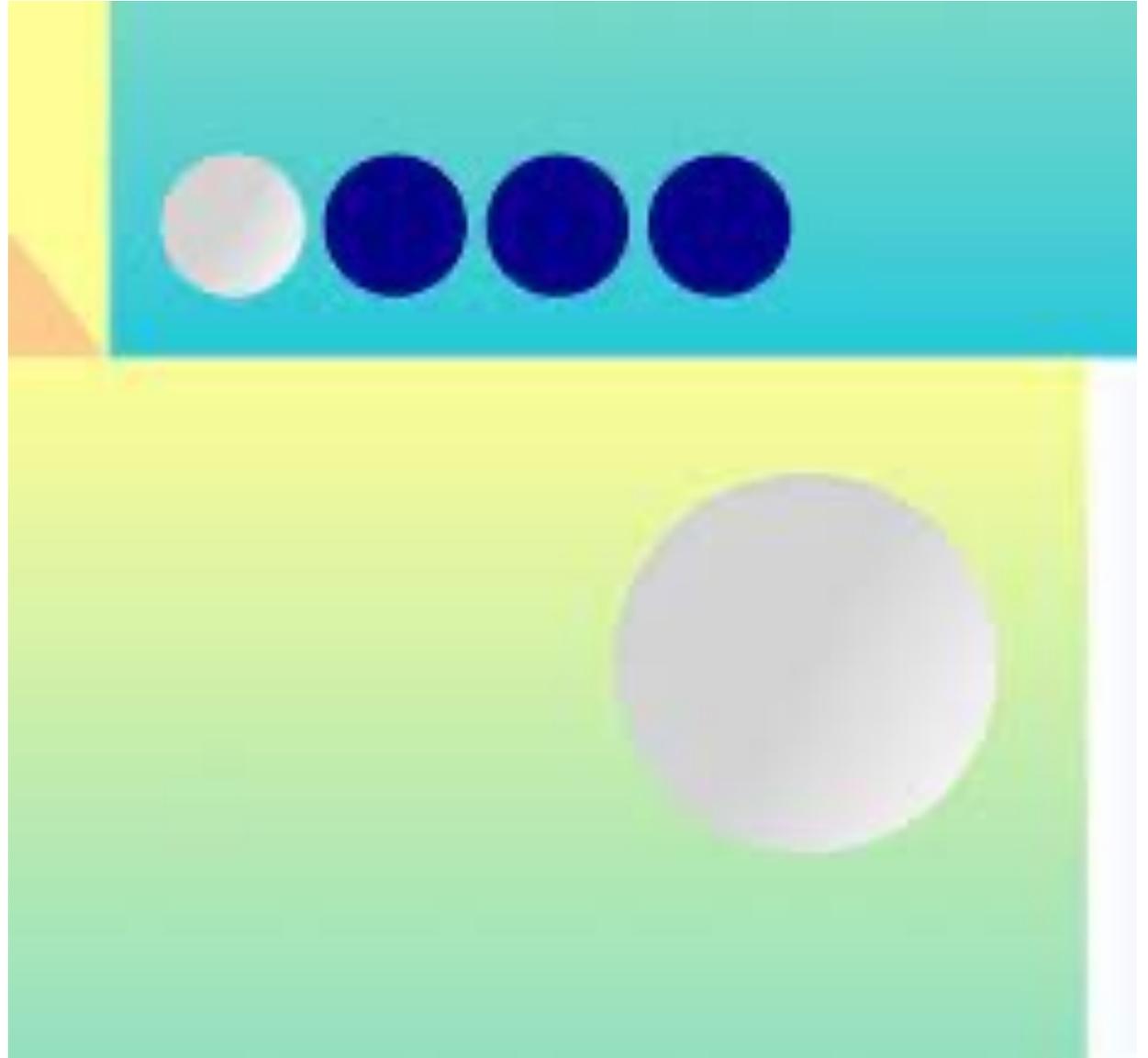


Power abuse in arts education

Petra Van Brabandt
Ilse Ghekiere
Engagement Arts

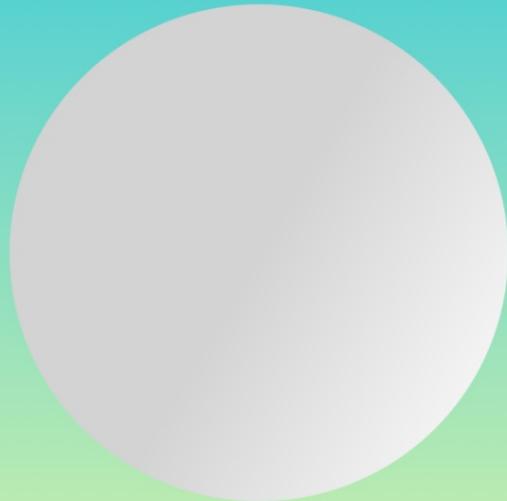


call for **ENGAGEMENT** to end sexism in the arts

tools & links

Here is a series of useful tools:

- ↳ [Tools for persons working in the arts](#)
- ↳ [Tools for employers](#)
- ↳ [Further readings](#)
- ↳ [Documents to download](#)



Racism and sexism in art education: a subjective mapping



Door **Ilse Ghekiere** op 22 October 2019

Higher art education offers students a challenging and safe environment in which they freely develop their artistic visions and capacities. At least that's the idea. In practice, Flemish art schools still struggle with many forms of sexism and racism daily. This is evidenced by testimonies that Anissa Boujdaini and Ilse Ghekiere collected among students and teachers at various schools in recent months.

[Lees hier de Nederlandse versie](#)



Subjective mapping methodology



“As a scholar, for instance, I am commonly told that my work on everyday racism is very interesting, but not really scientific, a remark that illustrates the colonial order in which Black scholars reside: ‘You have a “very *subjective* perspective;” “very *personal*;” “very *emotional*;” “very *specific*”; “Are these *objective facts*?”.

Such comments function like a mask, that silences our voices as soon as we speak. They allow the *white* subject to place our discourses back at the margins as deviating knowledge, while their discourses remain at the centre, as the norm.” (G. Kilomba)

In the dressing room the coach would ask me questions about my sex life

"I began eating less and cut my after the teacher told me I was too fat and ugly to look at"

The trainer would stand behind me and put a hand on my thigh saying my ass would look nicer if I'd lose some weight there

The coach told us that if we don't agree, we were *free* to leave

I never told anyone about what had happened because I was scared that it would ruin my career

Late at night, I received a message from my coach saying that they were thinking of me

While performing a duet on stage, my partner would suddenly whisper in my ear: 'you turn me on'

My role was cut down after I told the director I was not interested in him

Subjective Mapping

Anissa Boujdaini &
Ilse Ghekiere



Pedagogical Methods

Evaluation Methods

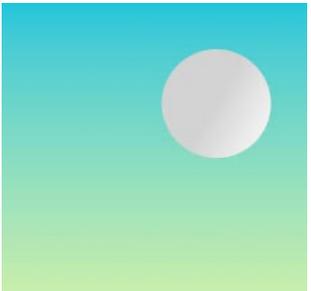
Artistic Paradigm

Representation (people)

Representation (bodies)

Behavior and social relations

RISK ANALYSIS AND POWER ABUSE



1. Selection and evaluation
 - No transparency and precise criteria
 - **Selection based on appearance and body**
 - Selection as a personality test (psycho babble)
 - Myth of intuitive selection: we 'see', 'know', 'feel' who will be the right person / what is good
2. A 'different' world
 - Informal professional/pedagogical relations
 - **Rhetoric of being progressive, free, liberated bodies....**
 - Rhetoric of horizontality, **friends, equals...**
 - **Trespassing boundaries private life (txting, remarks)**

3. Racism

- Micro-agressions, harassment
- Islamophobia: atheist normativity
- Instrumentalising of diversity
- Racist 'compliments', 'jokes', 'good intentions'
- The saviour syndrom

4. **The body & nudity**

- Sexual harassment
- Remarks and jokes about private life, sexual life, sexuality, gender
- "Nudity/bodily interaction will set you free": no methodology of consent and addressinng boundaries.
- Pushing boundaries as pedagogical method
- Fatphobia, transphobia, homophobia, heteronormativity



The Myths

The female nude is a celebration of female beauty

Our art history is not embedded in a racist and colonial history

The genius artist

Art is and should be the domain of absolute freedom of expression

Transgression leads to beauty and truth

Art is progressive, liberal, avantgarde

The art world is horizontal

Deconstructing the myths



The female nude

Myth: celebration of beauty

Reality:

Sexual violence and rape [culture](#)

Violent standards of beauty

Fetishism, exoticization and racism

Binary cisgender normativity

Heteronormativity

Exclusion of women (objects) from power positions (subjects)

→ Risk analysis: the cult of female beauty and nudity is more em-power-ing for the desiring than the desired party

The artist genius

Myth: The artist genius doesn't 'work', like god he (!) creates... His transgressions are the small price we pay for his genius creations

Reality: he is supported by a structure, made invisible

He profits from a socially constructed 'divine' aura and privileged position:

→ Risk analysis: prone to power abuse, grooming, sexual harassment...

Absolute
freedom of
expression

**Myth: Art is and should be the
domain of absolute freedom of
expression / of the a-moral**

Freedom of artistic expression is
not freedom of injustice

Whose freedom?

Whose expression?

Harming who? ...

Risk analysis: myth of absolute
freedom and the a-moral gives
licence to transgressions, power
abuse, violence...

Transgression
leads to
beauty and
truth

**Myth: Through pain, excess,
transgression... we reach
beauty and truth**

- Art-philosophical belief, cultural belief, and pedagogical belief
- Cult of pain and pushing boundaries

Risk analysis: it can be liberating to be carefully accompanied to push your boundaries; it is abusive when it is someone pushing you over your boundaries

Art is progressive

Myth: art is progressive, avantgarde

Reality: Art is often in the service of power

- Art as avantgarde: Whose avantgarde? When a woman is invited to take her clothes off: who is getting 'liberated'? Whose sexual freedom is facilitated?
- A Reputation as a shield against criticism

Risk analysis: abuse and sexual harassment sold as 'avantgarde' transgressions

The horizontal and informal

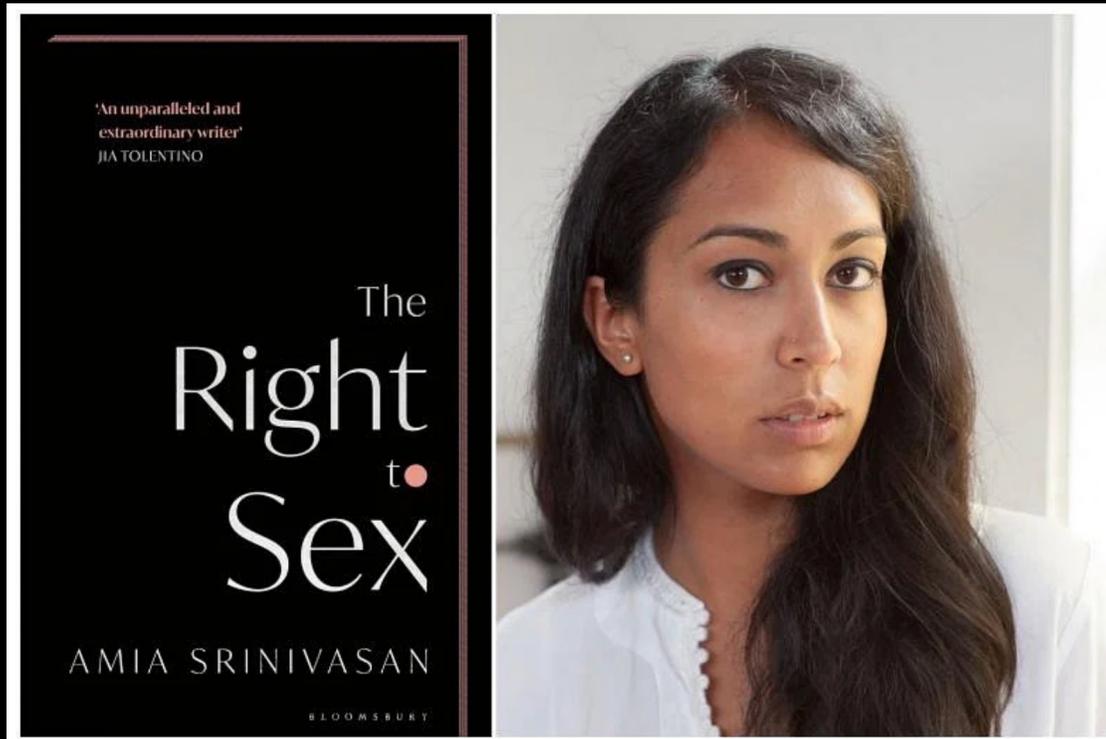
Myth: I don't see power relations, I don't have power / We are one family, one bubble apart from the real world (parallel world)

Informal relations: pretense of no hierarchy, we are all equals, no pedagogy or procedures needed...

Reality: Messy power relations, mix of private, professional and educational relations

Risk analysis: professional and educational contexts are de facto contexts of power relations (age, status, seniority, gender, race, network, professional position...), ignoring them or dissolving them in a culture of informal relations enhances the risk of power abuse and sexual harassment

Amia Srinivasan, The Right to Sex



- Intimate sexual relations might be experienced as beneficial to the transfer of knowledge/creation and learning process (eros) by the parties involved
- High risk of retaliation/pressure, especially for the party who has the least power
- (Perception of) favouritism/erotic capital is harming the pedagogical/professional situation of other students / employees

Intimate or sexual relations

When we are in a position of power, we don't pursue personal relations with people who are dependent on us. In case these personal relations do occur, we take measures to avoid (the perception of) partiality and favouritism and the risk of retaliation

Under personal relationships we understand love, sex, close friendship or family relations as well as professional partnerships.

We refrain from flirting, seduction, amorous or sexual relations between supervisors and subordinates, professors and students and teaching staff and students.

In the case a personal relation does occur, past or present, we inform our supervisor and arrange a transfer of responsibilities. We do not evaluate or supervise those with whom we are, or were, personally involved.

We refrain from showing intimacy, familiarity, attraction or desire at work. We keep an equal work or study environment for all.

Circus schools

Power

- No shared understanding of power differentials: we are 'friends' with students, and therefore there is no difference in power ('this school is not like other schools'...).
- On the part of students: culture of silence related to the prestige of the school (don't jeopardize your entrance ticket, career, your prestige) & to the dedication/investment of the prestigious teacher in your training
- Because the power differential between student and teacher is not well articulated, it's hard for teachers to understand why speaking out might be difficult or even impossible. When students don't defend themselves *in the moment of harassment*, discrimination, or abuse, this is understood as evidence that the incident was not serious enough to warrant a reaction.
- Shouting, bullying, insulting as encouragement / feedback
- Anger outbursts with physical contact

Circus schools

Consent

- No awareness that the power difference between the student and teacher might make the situation of pushing a student to cross their boundaries problematic
- No shared understanding that it's important to actively make space for students to refuse exercises, physical contact, and ways of speaking that make them uncomfortable
- Weak understanding of consent: no sense that consent can be withdrawn or modified at any time and that consent needs to be continually re-established.

'When I started thinking about this interview, and my work as a dancer ...it felt like worms coming out, like opening a Pandora's box that won't close again. The prospect was extremely unnerving, because speaking up might make me feel extremely negative about this industry that I work in.'

*When I became a professional dancer it was like **a dream** coming through...*

Why is it
hard to
speak up?

*The outside world calls this choreographer a **genius**...*

*I should be **grateful** that I was accepted in this school...*

*This person can give me also a lot of **opportunities**...*

*I don't want to see myself as a **victim**...*

*Nothing will come from filing a **complaint**....*

*I don't want to be **labeled** as 'a prude'*

*There will always be **another dancer**...*

*It's **just part** of the dance world....*

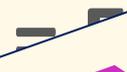
*If people know, it will be bad for my **career**...*

*Eventually this will **teach** me something...*

*How do you know your
boundaries?*

**Artistic Freedom = Experimentation
=> Grey Zone**

*How do you know your
boundaries?*

Artistic Freedom =  tation

CONSENT...?

CONSENT



Freely Given
Reversible
Informed
Enthusiastic
Specific

Criticism Consent Theory

- Legal term > sexual ethics
- Critique feminism
- Contract logic
- Patriarchal & Heterosexual logic
- Ambiguity of many sexual encounters
- Presumes high levels of self-knowledge

Criticism Consent

- Legal term > sexual ethics
- Critique feminism
- Contract logic
- Patriarchal & Heterosexual logic
- Ambiguity of many sexual encounters
- Presumes high levels of self-knowledge

Do unto others as you would be done by.
'I think this is a mistaken thought. We should do
unto others as **they** would be done by."
— John Cage

When does artistic transgression feel empowering?
When does artistic transgression feel oppressive?

- What do I define as harmful?
- Am I in touch with my physical and mental boundaries?
- Can I talk about my limits?
- Can I celebrate my boundaries?
- Are we talking about this in the creation process?
- I am free to talk without facing repercussions?

- And yes: under the right conditions, it can be extremely satisfying to go beyond your comfort zone!!

SIGNS OF A 'HEALTHY' WORKING/TRAINING ENVIRONMENT

- General transparency
- Good communications flow vs rumour culture
- Sense of horizontal
- No one 'Charismatic leader'
- Peers stand by peers vs bystanders culture
- Appreciation vs favoritism
- Protocol for conflict resolution vs silence, tension, fights, screaming, drama
- Collective moments for discussions and making agreements

Thank you!



Evisuals from engagement Arts website designed with care by Sarah Magnan and Loraine Furter, from the collective Just for the Record, with the open source font Hind, designed by Manushi Parikh.

