Room for Silence: Voice in the Feminist Classroom

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In the Dutch art-school system, the artist-teacher – teaching alongside their own precarious artistic practice – is expected to bring to the classroom their experiences and perspectives as a self-employed artist. Being an artist myself, I had few pedagogical tools when I began my career as an educator. Therefore I was forced to develop these skills by mimicking my own educational upbringing – in learning by doing. Later, after completing substantial hours in the classroom, I was able to slowly evaluate my teachings through consideration of my 'successful' endeavours, as well as my conflicts and confrontations with both students and colleagues. It was then that I was able to create room to critically question what it is we do in our classroom and in art school in general.

My own arts education, undertaken in a western European school system, was dominated by white, male, Western viewpoints. This left me with an inability to refer outside of this specific framework and thus with an involuntary tendency to perpetuate a discourse of exclusion. It was this realization that led me to view my teaching as a form of counter-teaching and, ultimately, to discover the feminist classroom. This meant believing that the content of our teaching at (art) school could be approached otherwise: focusing more on women's lives and experiences in the art world, without being solely about feminism or activism, and seeking neither to nullify existing narratives nor to simply add names to the curriculum. We are all aware of the continuous under- and misrepresentation of women artists, artists of colour, and nonbinary and genderqueer artists. In art schools, the classroom is largely dominated by men, not in terms of student bodies – given the significantly higher number of female students in each classroom we enter – but rather in terms of the ideal values that are attributed to cisgender men.

Within our art schools, we have to continuously acknowledge that there exists no single model for 'producing' a good artist. Each individual student needs to explore what school can offer them and how they can personally benefit from their time in the academy. Since there is no all-encompassing formula, self-representation is an important tool in students' individual journeys to becoming art practitioners. In order for students to navigate their academic trajectories and to cultivate and share their practices, art school should be an affirming space for everyone present.

Unlike educational models that place an emphasis on competition, solitary study, and the teacher's authority (the model I was brought up in), feminist

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pedagogy centres transformative learning as well as building a progressive curriculum that welcomes multi-disciplinarity and gives rise to new modes of critical seeing, thinking, and making. In addition, it aspires to include all voices, to empower individuals, and to stimulate peer-to-peer exchange within group dynamics, seeking thereby to create a consciousness that may lead to future change or novel approaches – in this particular case, with regard to art and the art world context. Feminist pedagogy allows women's lives, experiences, and methods to become an active part of the curriculum, with social transformation as a goal. This includes introducing themes such as the acknowledgement of privilege and power as well as building consciousness of present and potential future processes of marginalisation. Learning takes the form of making-oriented activities using other(ed) materials in order to build a praxis that values contributions, lives, and histories and aims to create an emancipatory experience for students in a classroom that is a cooperative community.

The development and equal distribution of voice are central themes in feminist theory and therefore became one of the four focal points of my research.[1] This means looking at the students' voices as tools with which they can respond, speak for themselves, and bring questions and perspectives to the classroom, connecting inner and outer worlds. The feminist emphasis on voice stems from a history – reflective of tendencies still normalised today – in which women have been silenced and overpowered. Personally, when looking back at my education, I recognise this very need to find a voice, which was later amplified by the overall absence or one-sided representation of women's voices (and stories) in the art world and still leaves me feeling muted by default.

In order to research how students experience voice in the classroom, I organised two focus-group activities called the Infinite Paper Meetings. There, I invited a small group of female and nonbinary students to talk about their experiences with using (their) voices in the classroom. The students were invited personally, followed by an exchange of emails to set a date that would suit everybody. Making it a voluntary activity allowed me to depend on the trust and investment of students whom I had previously had the pleasure of teaching. For the first meeting, I chose students based on their classroom participation, selecting one who was usually 'silent', one who was usually 'loud', and one who was 'outspokenly critical' and therefore represented a middle ground. For the second meeting, I invited two students who participated in numerous extra-curricular activities. I decided to openly share with the students the reasoning behind my selection. I knew this might prescribe their role in the conversation, but this was a risk I was willing to take in an attempt to keep all communication honest and open.

Although I wanted the conversations to be fluid, I used the following questions to guide us when needed:

1 Marijke Appelman, *A Pedagogy-in-Process, The Artist Teacher in the Feminist Classroom*, unpubl. thesis, Piet Zwart Institute Rotterdam, 2020.

- Are you aware of your contributions to classroom conversations?
- Are you aware of how often you are speaking?
- Do you make an effort for other people to speak, especially when you notice they haven't spoken much?
- Do you find it important to listen to others wholeheartedly?
- Do you feel you are learning to understand other people through the exchange that takes place in the classroom?
- Are there any topics that are off-limits for you?

These are loosely based on a series of questions from the *Intersectional Feminist Discussion Toolkit*,[2] created for activists wanting to facilitate a discussion group on intersectional feminism. They turned out to be very helpful, not only in terms of the conversations they provoked during the meetings but also, during all my classroom interactions.

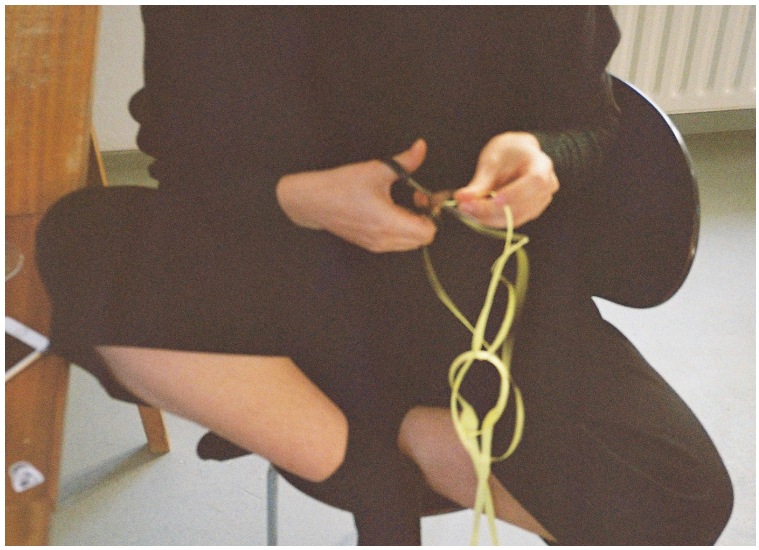
Both Infinite Paper Meetings began with an activity based on the work *Caminhando* (Walking) by the Brazilian painter, sculptor, and artist-teacher Lygia Clark (1920–1988). This is a work that must be experienced through direct action: the cutting of a Möbius strip with a pair of scissors (fig. 1 & fig. 2). This (infinite) paper cutting is a simple task, a 'mindless' activity; as Clark puts it, it "breaks our spatial habits: right-left, obverse-reverse, etc. It makes us live the experience of a limitless time and a continuous space."[3] The collective execution of this work served as the backdrop to our conversation, and it equally brought us into dialogue with a strong role model who has been overlooked in the European art discourse. It engaged the participants in the process of making, the basis of all our educational endeavours within art school as well as within feminist thinking: "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories."[4] Pedagogy, and particularly the feminist kind, is an embodied and sensuous work, in which materialities are utilised to activate thoughts just as much as the other way around. By using our hands while talking, we simultaneously self-express through the direct action of cutting the piece of paper and through our voices and words.

Although during both meetings there was a collective sense of urgency to share experiences, at times I got the feeling that participants were speaking about subjects for the sake of meeting my expectations. In general, this is something I struggle with in the inherently authoritative role of teacher. Students think of me as being 'politically correct' and try either to please me by being so,

2 Annie Lisle, *Intersectional Feminist Discussion Toolkit*, Camperdown, 2018, p. 5.

3 Lygia Clark, *Caminhando*, Tres Ríos, 1964, pp. 2–3.

4 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham and London, 2016, p. 12.



1 Marijke Appelman, *Cutting Clarks Möbius strips*, 2020, analogue field note photograph from a cutting session with Kamali van Bochove in Rotterdam (NL)

2 Marijke Appelman, *Infinite Paper Meeting with Denise and Suelae*, 2020, private 35mm photo documentation at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam (NL)

too, or else to annoy me by not. Aside from that fact, it is the predictability of the groups' answers that proved me they suffer similar ways of being silenced and heard. "Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one's experience. It is using that telling strategically – to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects."[5] The two questions "Are you aware of how often you are speaking?" and "Do you make an effort for other people to speak, especially when you notice they haven't spoken much?" elicited very different answers from each group. In the first group, composed of photography students, not everybody made a conscious effort to allow space for others to speak, but they all agreed that it was important to do so. The fine-art students who made up the second group interpreted speaking as an active interest in the subject of art or the artwork at hand. They suggested that being silent when discussing someone's work amounted to not being interested, and accordingly they preferred more aggressive participation in critique sessions, with emphasis not on who was speaking but on what was being said. I wonder if this has to do with the competitive nature of art in the Western mainstream and the way in which we are taught to assign meaning to works by analysing them.

During the meetings, the participating students moved through subjects and anecdotes quickly, leaving me with a transcription that at first glance lacks any structure. Without me bringing up the subject, the use of mobile phones in the classroom is raised. How could I forget that phones are part of our classroom conversations? Allowing for quick internet searches for information and opening conversations with an 'outside' world, they become significant portals and witnesses. "I am on my phone often. I'm really addicted to my phone." In both conversations, grading systems come up and are critically discussed. Grading is something that I value differently as a teacher compared to when I was a (research) student. I saw the strong influence grades had on my self-esteem and motivation as a student, but from the teacher's perspective I note how they influence and construct power structures – seeming to themselves function as opinionated voices. I have difficulty teaching when it becomes solely about testing.

The conversation lingers, and there is a moment where the participants switch from discussing classroom experiences to a gym visit detailing an encounter with mansplaining. I am happy to hold onto the questions I prepared, but I also feel I should let the conversation evolve. "Listening encompasses unpredictability: to listen, to see, to experience, without making preconditioned judgments, interpretations, or analyses. We could say that the act of mutual listening directs us to that which we do not already know: to listen for the unexpected."[6]

It was within the meetings that I was confronted with my blind focus on helping students find, awaken, and uncover voice. "As artists and educators, we

5 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, New York, 1994, p. 148.

6 Petra Bauer and Sofia Wiberg, *Rehearsals – On the Politics of Listening*, in Meike Schalk, Thérèse Kristiansson, and Rumia Mazé, *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice: Materialisms, Activisms, Dialogues, Pedagogies, Projections*, Baunach, 2017, p. 202.

need to assume a much more activist stance and actively build spaces for the articulation of complex, partially unknowable, difficult, painful, deep, rich, felt, and embodied experiences of diverse perceptions of humanity."[7] Acknowledging voice as power, I began to consciously manage each student's equal access to that power through equal opportunities to speak and to therefore influence and participate in the classroom. After instating this equal distribution of voice in my own classroom, I soon found myself going even farther by stressing its importance when working with guest lecturers as well as in conversations with colleagues about planning and evaluating lessons. This was a fruitful process in which I learned to stand up for myself – developing my own voice – and to question existing structures, for example, why women were always tasked with taking notes at our staff meetings.

"I don't think all students want to talk" was, for me, one of the most striking comments made during the Infinite Paper Meetings. This point stands out to me most because it conflicts with my theoretical sources and my newfound belief, to quote Audre Lorde, "that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect."[8] But in this comment I also recognise myself as a student, always trying to be present but not always being able, or even willing, to speak and share.

While I test notions of speaking and silence in the classroom on friends, colleagues, and strangers, I started to realise am so committed to the Western idea of 'power through speech' that I have developed a brand-new blind spot. I focus on equal distribution of voice, but what if not talking is just as valid as talking? How do I distribute silence, or simply give room to be still? What about the students' "right to opacity?"[9]

> The articulation between silence and powerlessness is almost common sense within Western culture, an assumption that is reified across literary, progressive academic, and activist contexts. Its equation presumes a political imperative: for an individual or group who is silenced to gain power, they must activate voice in order to resist and transform the conditions of their oppression.[10]

The Infinite Paper Meetings helped me realise that my actions in distributing voice failed to promote the history and culture of students who are (more) intro-

7 Anniina Suominen and Tiina Pusa, "FAQ What? What the FAQ? Where are Feminism and Queer in Finnish Art Education?" in Anniina Suominen and Tiina Pusa (eds.), *Feminism and Queer in Art Education*, Helsinki, 2018, p. 19.

8 Audre Lorde, *I Am Your Sister, Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, New York, 2009, p. 56.

9 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Ann Arbor, MI, 1997.

10 Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhorta, *Silence, Feminism, Power. Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, London, 2013, p. 18.

vert. The equality of quiet students was being denied through my approach. This is something that is becoming more urgent in education today:

> Staff/student ratios have progressively worsened. Introvert students are thus forced into large-scale, party-like, company-suffocating classrooms where their voices are often drowned out by loudmouthed Extrovert-Supremacists. This is an ideological attack on the preference for small company by Introvert peoples in an attempt to disempower us.[11]

Speaking is never without fear, but it may also be courageous to choose silence. "From the feminist concept of place, voice and silence must be seen as dynamic and relational. Voice and silence will emerge within the individual as a function of their historical and cultural place and their individual history of specific interactions with specific others."[12]

As I was forced to rediscover and carefully consider silence, the Infinite Paper Meetings surpassed my goal of facilitating a conversation that would not take place otherwise. Silence can be salvation, and teachers should take care when planning voiced participation:

> We should not force the pupils to participate in the discussions in our terms, but through ways they are comfortable with. Having personal experience of a certain issue does not mean that a pupil should be obligated to actively participate in discussing that issue, as, for example, marginalized pupils will certainly not reveal their experiences in the spirit of 'sharing'.[13]

We, as teachers, should be aware of the constant (power) imbalance in our classroom and never force students to speak. Silence and voice are equally flexible in their uses, whether in space, as part of teaching, or in conversation. A silent revolt – of not wishing to be seen or to express oneself in words – is not to be confused with absence. To do so would be a mistake comparable to looking at the existing canon of art history and assuming that there have been no women artists: in fact, they are there; they are not absent. To allow them to be there – or maybe rather, to trust that they are there – in silence, is already a lot. Voice and silence do not cancel each other out.

Silence can be a plan rigorously executed

the blueprint of a life

11 Hamjad Ahsan, *Shy Radicals: The Antisystemic Politics of the Militant Introvert*, London, 2017, p. 72.

12 Robyn Fivush, *Voice and Silence: A Feminist Model of Autobiographical Memory*, Atlanta, 2002, p. 8.

13 Larissa Haggrén, "Through Uncertainty and Discomfort. The Struggle of Searching for Anti-Oppressive Practices for Art Education," in Suominen and Pusa (eds.), 2018 (note 7), p. 149.

It is a presence
it has a history a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence.[14]

I value how the Infinite Paper Meetings allowed me to test theories and to question assumptions in a series of conversations that gave everybody – including myself – room to wonder. It made me more conscious about creating space for more quiet students either to talk or, from now on, to be silent together. "Silence allows us the space to breathe. It allows us the freedom of not having to exist constantly in reaction to what is said."[15] And as our understanding develops, so should our syllabi. I will continue to work through my blind spots and actively ask, What are we missing here, at art school today? In an increasingly interconnected and complicated world, we must choose to be intellectually humble and curious people. I believe education can be a vehicle for social change by fostering new habits and sensitivities, and I hold onto an overarching believe we can and must actively create space for everything and everyone within our (class)rooms.

14 Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, Poems 1974–1977, New York, 1978, p. 17.
15 Rowe and Malhorta, 2013 (note 10), p. 2.