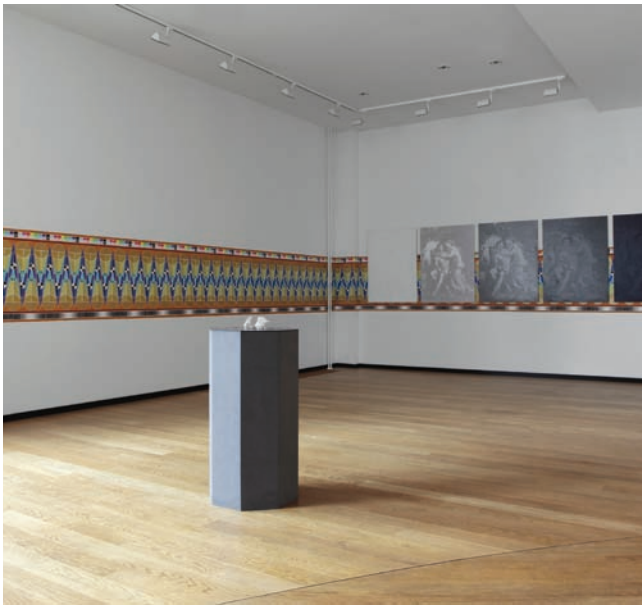


Co-operative Enthusiasm

PÁDRAIC E. MOORE SHARES HIS EXPERIENCE OF THE JAN VAN EYCK ACADEMY, "AN OPEN, MULTIFORM INSTITUTE FOR ACADEMIC TALENT DEVELOPMENT"



'The Girl With The Sun In Her Head', work by Dario D'Aronco, Vanessa Hodgkinson, Niek Hendrix

THE Van Eyck Academy is a 'post-academic' institute located in the city of Maastricht in the south of the Netherlands. Today the academy bears almost no resemblance to the organisation as it was when it was first founded in 1948. It was then established as a Catholic counterpart to the non-denominational Rijksacademy in Amsterdam and named after the fifteenth-century Flemish painter renowned for works such as *The Ghent Altarpiece*.

At the outset, one of the main objectives of the academy was to equip students with skills that would enable them to work in the service of the church. As a result, there was an emphasis upon draftsmanship, figurative sculpture, stonework and stained glass. In the beginning it was envisaged that the Van Eyck would be a source from which the Catholic faith would spread towards the rest of the country via the work of the artists and architects who were trained there.

A decade after the academy first opened it was decided that the adapted ecclesiastical premises which it then occupied were unsuitable – a purpose built edifice would be required. Construction of the now iconic building (designed by architect Frits Peutz) commenced in summer of 1959 and opened in 1961. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the influence of the church was eliminated entirely until the Academy emerged into something more secular.

In the ancient medieval city of Maastricht, Peutz's modernist monument, built from concrete and glass, is completely singular. The experience of working at the Academy is significantly shaped by the building, which is bathed in natural light and constructed around green spaces and gardens. Indeed, the building imbues the working day with an almost utopian atmosphere. In the period that followed the academy's reopening in the new premises, the emphasis on art in the service of the church began to wane.

In 2011 the architectural and pedagogical structure of the Van Eyck Academy were significantly overhauled. After extensive renovations the building reopened in 2013. The renovations to the interior spaces were intended to reflect the inherent aesthetics of the built structure, but also the ethos of the academy. For example all the signage in and around the building and the overall graphic identity of the academy were based around a typeface devised from traces of functional signage that had adorned the walls of the academy since the 70s, originally hand painted by caretaker Pierre Bonten. This vernacular typeface was named Bontepilke.

Every year artists, curators, designers, photographers and writers are invited to apply for a period of work at the Academy. The application process entails candidates proposing a project or particular path of research that they wish to develop within this context. In addition to this, each candidate submits ideas for a prospective study group or collaborative research venture that they might develop with fellow participants whilst at the academy.

These projects, termed 'In-Labs' by the Academy, might be developed around individual interests or concerns. Ultimately they are intended to facilitate discourse amongst participants. Successful candidates are allocated a private studio space and receive a monthly



The Van Eyck Academy

stipend for a period ranging from four months to a year. While working at the academy one can utilise the wealth of facilities offered and can also access the expertise of the staff members. There is an incredible array of facilities available – dubbed 'labs' – and participants are encouraged to experiment in fields that will enable their practice to develop.

The Charles Nypels Lab, the printing workshop, houses equipment for relief printing and screen printing; a multimedia workshop, the Werner Mantz Lab, offers facilities and extensive expertise relating to photography, film and video and audio. There is also a workshop for making constructions with wood, metals and plastics – the Heimo Lab. These facilities are managed and supervised by individuals who are experts in their field and offer professional support and assistance. Participants can schedule meetings with the heads of these facilities and receive feedback and advice on their particular endeavours.

I commenced my residency at Van Eyck in June 2014. I've found the experience of living and working here incredibly enriching on several levels. Participants are given financial support, time and space to cultivate existing projects – but they often also develop new ones collaboratively. Most of my fellow participants have already earned a masters degree (there are of course exceptions to this) or have been developing their practice for a number of years before coming to the Van Eyck. Therefore, there is a level of experience and knowledge amongst the participants which ensures that living and working here is an enriching experience.

The Van Eyck is described on the organisation's website as a 'multiform' institute and this is a useful term in communicating the structure and remit of the organisation, where one's work is individually directed. The Van Eyck is a place where interdisciplinarity and collaboration are encouraged and where the definition of production is extremely broad, including anything that emerges from the participant's research: the development of artwork, but also the presentation of lectures and the organisation of seminars, screenings and exhibitions.

As a curator and writer, the facility that has proved particularly useful to me is the extensive library, titled the Pierre Kemp Lab, which houses an exceptional collection of books and is also stocked with up to date art magazines and publications. In addition to these infrastructural facilities, participants have the opportunity to meet with visiting advisers who are affiliated with the Academy and are sporadically present. This core team of advising researchers supervise research projects, but also engage in lectures, seminars and presentations. Meeting with this core team provides participants with an opportunity to discuss their work and receive critical feedback and advice tailored specifically to them.

There are no classes or formally structured events at the Van Eyck. The week centres around Thursday evenings when researchers present the development of their current projects. These presentations and the discussions that emerge from them are a vital aspect of participation in the residency.

One of the central aims of my time at the Van Eyck was develop my



The Van Eyck Academy

practice through collaboration with writers and artists, and to present a new body of work, which has emerged from research carried out over an extended period. This main project consisted of an exhibition and publication, which enabled me to collaborate closely with several fellow participants. This project was also intended to respond in some way to the unique history of the Academy as an institution that was once conceived to propagate religious ideals.

The exhibition, entitled 'The Girl With The Sun In Her Head', took place in the galleries of the Van Eyck in March and April. The show featured new and recent works by Van Eyck participants Dario D'Aronco, Egemen Demirci, Niek Hendrix, Vanessa Hodgkinson, Joris Lindhout, Stéphanie Saadé and Susan MacWilliam, who was the only non-participant to be included in the project. The starting point for this project was the 1952 short story *Monte Verità* by English writer Daphne du Maurier. The story contains motifs and symbols that resonate significantly with the work of the artists involved in this project. Ultimately, the exhibition was a testament to the fact that although art is distinct from, and cannot be a surrogate for, religion, both are capable of satisfying similar needs.

Du Maurier's novella was significantly influenced by real events and this was another reason why it was selected as the starting point for this project. The 'real' Monte Verità was a colony of artists and freethinkers founded in Ascona, Switzerland in 1900. Although the structure and ownership of the commune changed throughout its existence, it remained a utopian community where tolerance was promulgated and various forms of creativity nurtured. Some of those who lived, worked and participated in the non-conformist colony included Hans Arp, Hugo Ball, Isadora Duncan, Otto Gross, Hermann Hesse, Carl Jung, Paul Klee, Rudolf Steiner and Mary Wigman. Significantly, a school of art was established at Monte Verità in 1913 by dance theoretician Rudolf Laban.

The sort of utopianism that flourished in the last century (and was concentrated in sites like the commune at Monte Verità) will probably never flourish again. Nevertheless, the realm of cultural production remains a place in which idealistic intentions and romantic aspirations can still frequently be found. And although art may not necessarily be able to change the world, it can still be a catalyst for change and a sphere of potential. Indeed, the decision to use du Maurier's novella as the starting point for this project was intended to encourage those involved to consider the parallels between the 'real' community upon which the story is based and the Van Eyck multiform institute. Despite the many obvious major differences between these communities, both were built upon and around openness, dialogue, exchange and the desire to create a space of egalitarian togetherness that defends contemplation and cooperative enthusiasm.

Pádraic E. Moore is a writer, curator and art historian. The various facets of Moore's practice are shaped by the conviction that visual art facilitates modes of communication and experience that are vital in an increasingly virtualised, technorational world.