

## The New Professionals

### Image caption:

In 2014 I co-curated a group exhibition working alongside 5 young international female curators. We were all participants on the de Appel curatorial programme, a relatively well-known career-launching traineeship for would-be curators, who come together from all over the world for an intensive period, to live, work, and travel alongside each other, while collectively developing and curating a group show.

The curatorial programme has a long tradition of attracting the participation of the best and brightest of the next generation of art curators. Among the top post-academic courses of its kind, it functions a bit like a finishing school for curators, opening doors for participants to a network of arts professionals and institutions that would otherwise be out of reach. For me, and perhaps most of us, it was a ticket to the wider world of contemporary art, outside of our home countries and in the midst of a thriving art scene in Amsterdam.

The exhibition we developed and realised was called *Father, Can't You See I'm Burning?* It featured artworks by over twenty artists, many of which were new commissions. On the night of the opening, we, the six curators of the exhibition, gave the customary opening speech.

It bombed.

I messed up the introduction by speaking too soon and too rapidly, and by failing to introduce any of the other curators. Another one of us went into way too much detail about the complexities of the works she personally developed, leaving no time for the discussion of the wider exhibition. We were all difficult to interpret, speaking abstractly about our own personal interests in unrelated art movements, while another one went for the philosophical angle and upstaged the rest of us with her own erudite take on the meaning of the show. One of us got way too personal and went into far too much detail about the various disagreements and arguments we had amongst ourselves, with the artists, and with the institution. Another only wanted to speak about the lack of any educational aspect within the curatorial process. The personal vendettas, dislikes, and annoyances between the six of us went undisguised and carried quite a heavy layer of begrudgery to the fore of our address. Sensing that we were losing momentum I for my part may have gone overboard with my enthusiasm levels, trying desperately to salvage what was coming off as one of the least cohesive and worst prepared public speaking moments in de Appel history. In the end, I had to be dragged away from the stage.

The whole thing was awkward and unprofessional. Yet it was intentionally so, for it marked the culmination of an artwork developed by artist Krõõt Juurak over the six-month period that preceded our exhibition. The opening speech was part of an ongoing performance that was played out over time by the six of us on the de Appel programme. Titled *Internal Conflict*, it was a performance that required us to publicly air grievances, to openly share doubts, disagreements and contentious issues about the development of the collectively-curated exhibition with anyone willing to listen. It required us to make visible in a manner that became exaggerated the petty nuances and misgivings of collaborative working tensions. The aim? To destroy one of the most important things de Appel curatorial programme could give us – our professional public image.

The opening speech, which I must admit was both my worst and best public address to date, was met with mixed reviews. Audience members who had studied the exhibition guide, who knew about the development of Juurak's work as a performance piece within the exhibition, or who previously had their suspicions aroused while bearing witness to any one of our many very candid and very public eruptions or disputes or full-blown arguments, reacted positively to it, compelled as they were to knowingly giggle their way through our squirming. However those who were unaware that what was happening was actually part of a pre-orchestrated and ongoing performative gesture, were bewildered, underwhelmed, and spectacularly disappointed with our failure to perform in the manner expected. Our lack of grace, of professionalism, of accomplishment, was keenly felt throughout the large-ish art crowd. People assumed we hadn't bothered to prepare, imagined that our entire production process must have been terribly fraught, and worse – even pitied us for having to go through such an ordeal when clearly we all lacked the charisma, confidence, and communication skills to stand on a public stage and address a crowd.

Reflecting on that work now, it's clear that *Internal Tension*, as a performance or a daily practice, had a cathartic dimension that alleviated any real tensions in the group by turning them into material for an artwork. It pre-empted arguments as content for our performance and allowed us to address issues with humour and openness, in the name of art. This was the real cunning of Juurak's gesture – tricking us into working more closely together, and in greater solidarity with each other, while making it seem, outwardly at least, entirely otherwise.

Following that opening speech, one woman was overheard saying 'de Appel must be teaching these young curators nothing!' Little did she know we had actually conducted ourselves - if curators are to care for

the mediation of art works - with the utmost professionalism. Sacrificing the value of our own hard-earned, newly-styled, professionalised self-image for the sake of art.