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**THOMAS DIAFAS**

# **PERFORMING THE REAL:**

**SELF-CARE PRACTICES TO COMBAT  
ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION IN ARTS  
EDUCATION AND IN THE ARTS MARKET**



**HOME OF  
PERFORMANCE  
PRACTICES**



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**THOMAS DIAFAS**  
**MA PERFORMANCE PRACTICES**

A Thesis presented by Thomas Diafas to Master Performance Practices,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts in  
Performance Practices, 2023.

**HOME OF  
PERFORMANCE  
PRACTICES**

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**2023**

## **SYNOPSIS**

“Performing the Real” is an ongoing practice-based research that functions at the intersection of performance art and education. By introducing “self-care” practices in the creative process, and by presenting this process as a performance, I investigate methods to combat anxiety and depression the way arts students are experiencing them at ArtEZ. The research is co-created by ArtEZ students from various departments. The content is charged with the personal experiences of myself and the research participants, students and alumni of ArtEZ University of the Arts.

By engaging with Tema Okun’s “antidotes to perfectionism, objectivity and individuality”, methodologies on performance art and community art in education, introduced by Marilyn Arsem, Danai Theodoridou, Eva Fotiadou and Jeroen Lutters between others, and by using autoethnography to combine personal stories with research findings, I propose a change to the conditions of producing art in the classroom by opting for a) community work instead individuality b) process based/performance art instead of perfectionism and c) non-hierarchical ways of collaborating in class, instead of an objectivity brought by a teacher. All of this comes under the umbrella of a general prioritisation of mental and physical health during education and arts production.

The research led to the creation of the long durational performance piece “Opera: we deserve rest lovelier than diamonds” where ArtEZ students and alumni created the space for rest and care that the research was aiming for.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To Elda Pouli, my psychoanalyst and Stergios Kaprinis, my psychiatrist.

## **DECLARATION**

I, Thomas Diafas, hereby certify that I had personally carried out the work depicted in the thesis entitled, PERFORMING THE REAL: SELF-CARE PRACTICES TO COMBAT ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION IN ARTS EDUCATION AND IN THE ARTS MARKET.

No part of the thesis has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma prior to this date.

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## **INTRODUCTION. ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION: HERE AND NOW**

In order for the reader to understand my entry point, I would like to share that my decision to join a Master's program in 2021, after many years of working as an arts professional, came from my need to investigate new ways of arts creation and education, due to the "unhealthy" conditions under which I have been studying and working so far: I had detected that education prepares us to be labour machines that will serve the capitalist system and the big institutions. I witnessed my friends abandoning the self-organised group projects we started in squats and alternative spaces, for "bigger" projects in the "big" institutions that would turn them into "big individual artists". No matter how stressful of an attempt, we are convinced that it is the only way to make it to the artworld. However, I still find some kind of "cure" in teamwork, as the only way to make it in life and the capitalistic system. Thus, also through this research I investigate communal ways that aim to combat anxiety in education and might have an impact on the arts industry.



Figure 1. May 2023. "Solidarity in depressions": A graffiti I found in my hometown Thessaloniki at the time I was writing my thesis. Reminding me of my artistic practice, I considered it as a sign that everything will be fine.

The present thesis contains the process of finding ways to help myself and others -in the moments of anxiety often related to existential crisis- by reaching out to the administration of ArtEZ for help, initiating projects and collaborating with students. Once I detected that there are more students and staff who feel discomfort during their studies and work, I created a network of exchanging knowledge on how to move on while taking care of ourselves and each other. These collaborations aim to create new methodologies, that intend to foster the conversation for a more sustainable education, free of anxiety and depression. The first project is "Transfuting the university: A manual on how to combat anxiety in arts education". Essays, workshops and events intended to raise awareness on the topics of anxiety and depression, invited a change in the educational system. Through this project, I got more familiar with other projects of ArtEZ, such as the whole agenda of the Studium Generale, and specifically the "Future <sup>1</sup> ", the projects<sup>2</sup> " by the Professorship Art education as Critical

<sup>1</sup> "What does art education of the future look like? We collect examples and challenging experiments that make us think about art education in the future. Social issues, changes and the Corona pandemic sharpens this issue." Available from: <https://studiumgenerale.artez.nl/nl/studies/dossier/future+art+school/>. [accessed 21 June 2023]

<sup>2</sup> "The No School project by the Professorship Art education as Critical Tactics (AeCT) started as a radical experiment in art-based learning. In conversation with the so-called creative industries, such as vocational training schools, it reflects on the nature of art education and tries to deconstruct its detachment from education as a tool for learning, sharing, and caring." Available from: <https://www.artez.nl/en/no-school> [accessed 21 June 2023]

Tactics (AeCT), and the "No <sup>3</sup> ". Even though there were a lot of voices inside ArtEZ offering an alternative education, as a student of a master's I was dealing with the issues that these projects were also addressing: many hours at school, many assignments, individualism, perfectionism, issues with grading, authoritarian relationships between students and staff. During my studies at the Home of Performance Practices, I experienced a collective and, sometimes, non-hierarchical way of working in class, that wasn't present during the assessment/grading process. Additionally, even though the program describes itself as a de-disciplined master's program, and an ecology, when it comes to the grading sheet's scales, one can see a not so "ecological language": "outstanding, very good, good (...), poor". I wondered: Why does someone want me to be outstanding and what is the criteria? And why should I be outstanding? Do I really want to be a good student or maybe something else/more?

After getting closer to projects that propose an education beyond capitalism and the old idea of the "good student/artist", I further developed community-based research. During this research, I came to realise that the educational system is built on the way the arts market functions: several of the

<sup>3</sup> "No University is an international community of non-conformist artists, makers and scientists, working together on inter-disciplinary, multi-level, non-reductionist research and experiments related to the important societal challenges of the next decades: sustainability, equitability and resilience" Available from: <https://no.university/> [accessed 21 June 2023]

arguments presented during my studies, on why education is the way it is, were mainly justified as prerequisites to make it in the arts industry. This is why, in the press release of “Opera”, I state clearly that the work *expresses the need for a radical transformation of the educational system and the arts market, proposing the prioritisation of collective mental and physical health, instead of the ceaseless production that serves capitalism and aims for individual appreciation*. Performance artist and scholar Marilyn Arsem, criticizes the way art is being taught in her home country, aiming to create professionals that will serve the arts market (Arsem in Torrens, V., 2014, 64). Performance duet Chondros & Katsiani detect that we raise our children with the idea that whatever does not sell it is being rejected. This idea shaped both professional and amateur artists (Chondros & Katsiani in Avgitidou A. and Vamvakidou I., 2014, 67). Their criticism might come from their experience in particular countries, USA, and Greece, however, I have experienced the same approach to education as a student in The Netherlands as well. In the current socio political context, and the post COVID-19 era, many of us detect a need for more rest and a healthier approach to what a “profession” entails. Additionally, during the pandemic, we (re)defined togetherness, and witnessed how more effective it can be compared to individuality.

Even though school has always promoted individualism, the pandemic brought an urgency and the possibility for a

transformation<sup>4</sup>. Working or studying remotely, showed us also a way for more flexible working hours. In many cases, we saw ourselves working less, responding to our emails through our phones while “relaxing” at the beach. Today, in my here and now, and more than three years after the first announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic -the moment when the world “stopped”-, I feel a personal need to collectively reconsider what production is, how, how much and why we produce. This feeling comes mostly from the fact that many of the people that surround me stated being tired of producing, or of producing *that much, or this way*. In the context of the residential periods of the MA HOPP for instance, *this way* means eight-hour long classes, back-to-back assessments, essays, performances, reflections, that on top had to be graded. Also, the material that was presented in class was focusing mostly on examples of “successful” individual artists, giving me a feeling that they were presented as an example of how the students should be(?). This was for me, another symptom of capitalism -the idea of the unique artist as a unique “God”-, where, in my mind, collectivity could be proposed as a method, an antidote, to heal the stress of “achieving”. Through this proposal, I invite

<sup>4</sup> On June 14, 2023, professor Jeroen Lutters gave the lecture “No University: The pandemic as a turning point” where he presented some ideas around how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced society, higher education and research. For more information, visit the website: <https://www.artez.nl/en/agenda/2023-06-14-lecture-no-university-the-pandemic-as-a-turning-point-dr-jeroen-lutters-research> [accessed 21 June 2023]

collectivity to infiltrate the curriculum, even grading, which is the main passport to an “outstanding” individual student career. “(How) Could we grade all the students together as a final exam through collective work?!” Can we really change the way we produce at school, towards a future that doesn’t make us feel tired, stressed, or depressed and takes care of our mental and physical health? And if yes, what are the tools ArtEZ is already providing us with? First, let’s take a closer look at how (over)production is related to mental illnesses, and how the pandemic brought an urgency for a change.

Byung-Chul Han starts *The Burnout society* (Han, 2015) -originally written in German in 2010-, with some clear data: “Despite widespread fear of an influenza epidemic, we are not living in a viral age.(...) Neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (1). Who would have thought that together with these neurological illnesses we will have to fight a virus?

For more than two years, we found ourselves and our governments prioritising physical health, maintaining distance from each other, staying at home, getting obsessed with hygiene, fitness and of course, culture. It is common knowledge that culture saved our mental health during the

lockdowns since there was an insane amount of art distributed online. Many institutions were uploading theatre works or live streaming them for free or for a low amount of money. However, at the same time, people were found to be working online, schools were happening online, students and workers had to stay in front of a screen for at least 8 hours per day, and at the same time, there was no physical touch between peers, something that created lots of discomfort. The students of HOPP that studied during the pandemic, admit that they only touched each other somewhere at the end of the second year. They were studying mostly online, or when at the studio, with masks, and without touching. Also, in my year, even though at the beginning there was a feeling of freedom, soon The Netherlands announced some new social measurements that made us wear masks again, or study through Zoom. The lack of physical touch, the isolation, and being in front of a screen all the time, created a feeling of psychic exhaustion. I experienced a need for people to address it, to open up, share what they were going through and ask for help during their studies. This intense presence of psychological discomfort had an impact on everybody’s studies, that made it even more difficult to follow the curriculum. In my case, my depression functioned as a surviving mechanism that told me that since all is in vain, we should take it slow. Thus, my offer was to prioritise mental health, while calming down the need to be an “outstanding” student.

For Han, it is this *pressure to achieve* in an *achievement society* as *achievement subjects* that causes exhaustive depression. Depression, for Han, is to *no longer be able to be able* (10). Quoting Hannah Arendt and “The Human Condition”, he explains how a *society of achievement and business* that fosters individuality has degraded the human being into an *animal laborans*<sup>5</sup> that is currently hyperactive and hyperneurotic. And he proposes: “If one abandoned one’s individuality and dissolved into the life process of the species entirely, one would at least have the serenity of an animal” (Han, 2015, 18). One of the antidotes to individualism the writer Tema Okun brings in “White Supremacy-Still here” (Okun, 2011, 21) is to “create a culture where people feel they can bring problems to the group; use meetings as a place to solve problems, not just a place to report activities”. “A place to solve problems” is a very present topic in performance and community art, and it is the main goal of my research. Later below, I will unfold examples of art projects such as Tania Bruguera’s “Arte Útil”, who directly intends to solve social problems through her community works, as well as the questions raised by Alain de Botton in “Art as therapy” (Botton, 2016), who proposes an understanding of art as a solution, as an answer to our existential questions. In order

5 (...)Animal laborans is, as the name implies, the human being akin to a beast of burden, a drudge condemned to routine. (...)By contrast, Homo faber is her image of men and women doing another kind of work, making a life in common(...) Whereas Animal laborans is fixated on the question “How?” Homo faber asks “Why?”. (Sennett, 2009, 7)

to combat individualism collectively, Okun suggests that the “group or organisation makes sure it is working towards shared goals that have been collaboratively developed and named”. However, in the case of a bachelor’s or a master’s program, where each one has their own research subject, it would be challenging and maybe unnecessary for all the students to have the same goals. Thus, my practice isn’t aiming to make everyone have the same goals but to create a space where everyone, no matter what their artistic discipline or their personal goals are, can take care of themselves and each other.

Going back to how my research started, and the first steps I took, I would like to mention some facts. ArtEZ has four student counsellors for 3000 students. Recently a psychologist was hired. Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to contact them, and this is something I should consider for the future of my research. However, as you will also see later in the survey’s charts, even though there is a feeling of support from ArtEZ’s side, there is still a lot to happen. The fact that only 53 students participated in my survey cannot be easily explained<sup>6</sup>. Staff members I interviewed said that students don’t have time to read their newsletters, others say that they just want to

6 Even though in some cases, surveys are not that successful, they are a known tool to collect data both for ArtEZ as an institution, and its students for their personal school projects. The format of the survey was based on the most common topics that were discussed in the rehearsals/meetings I already had with the students throughout my research.

study or that the topic keeps them indifferent. Turning these speculations into real answers and facts, should be part of the future of my research. Students might not read emails related to projects outside their curriculum, however, it seems that they have good relationships with each other. They all created a community of support and care in non-professional innovative ways. I had to document this! I published an open call on Apria<sup>7</sup>!

Open calls are a method I use in my projects, since I believe that even the publication of it is a statement, it raises awareness of an issue that has emerged, but also gives you access to new people to share their thoughts and offer their skills with you, creating a community broader than the institution/team/classroom. A person from another department, might offer a new “method” through their own artistic practice, which gives potential to a so called “transdisciplinarity”. This was my entry point to transdisciplinarity: creating a community of different voices and disciplines, blurring the lines between artistic practices by blurring the lines between the concerns of the art practitioners. This is why, after “Transfuting”, I started

<sup>7</sup> “Transfuting the university: A manual on how to combat anxiety in arts education” was published on Apria, with the support of Studium Generale. Four students, an alumnus and a tutor, all from HOPP, we proposed a series of practices that design “better” futures. There was created a community of shared knowledge based on personal experiences. Parallel to those entries, an open call was published asking for contributions from other ArtEZ staff and students. However, again, we received no entries. Since I wanted to have more participants from different departments, I had to use new ways of reaching out to collaborators: I contacted students that I know personally, to spread the word.

contacting people that I know from other departments and asked them to share to their contacts my open invitation to students and alumni, to join this time a series of meetings/rehearsals where we would exchange the self-care practices, we practise in our everyday lives to combat anxiety. This process would lead to a series of performances, in the context of my research at HOPP. The participants wouldn't be exposed to the artistic practice of each other, but to their concerns regarding anxiety of artistic production. This community of people who didn't know each other previously, was invited to explore togetherness to combat their personal issues, collectively.

Basarb Nicolescu writes: “This type of knowledge is globally open and entails both a new vision and lived experiences. It is also a way of self-transformation oriented toward the knowledge of the self, the unity of all knowledge, and the creation of a new art of living.” (Nicolescu,1997). What interests me is to examine what possible combinations might appear, and what they offer to the students, in the intersection of conventional and non-conventional ways of educating. Performance art scholars have frequently challenged the “disciplined” education, and its approach to knowledge, by shifting the focus of education from promoting the idea of the artist as a “great” craftsman to an active political citizen. Through Nicolescu's approach to transdisciplinarity one could detect commonalities in all forms of knowledge,

and if they want to, they learn how to live outside the normative arts market. If the student is “oriented towards the knowledge of the self”, they will also know their position in the *achievement society*<sup>8</sup>. In another essay, Nicolescu presents how transdisciplinarity also affects the conditions and the hierarchy in the moment of creation. An approach that explains further the conditions of creating a balanced self, between to be and to do, or in his words how to be *authentic persons*, and the role of cooperation in this process: by ensuring the conditions for the maximal realisation of their creative potentialities. Through the cooperation of structural levels in the service of personal creativity and the equilibrium between the exterior person and the interior person. (1997)

My decision to design my final performance based on the results of a survey on anxiety, depression and self-care practices that I will publish at ArtEZ, was another method to investigate if there was a collective need for action. Next, I present the creative process of getting to “Opera: we deserve rest, lovelier than diamonds” in the form of the steps that I took. First, were Tema Okun’s antidotes that I “took” with my team, during the research and performance process, and came as a response to *perfectionism*, *objectivity* and *individualism* (Okun, 2021, 10-12). Those antidotes, explain

<sup>8</sup> It is true that not all students react to their transformation into *achievement subjects*. The present thesis is written for those who see themselves reacting to the current “capitalist” educational system and are looking for alternatives.

how the survey was constructed and how it later constructed the performance. As we will see later below, these three issues appear also in the educational system and the arts market, and apparently, their symptoms are anxiety and depression. It is important for me to show how the decisions that I took for the rehearsals and performances, make these antidotes interact with my experiences during my studies at ArtEZ and that gave birth to new performative acts. Thus, I present how the antidotes shaped the methodology during the research.



## “PERFORMING THE REAL”: METHOD AND STRUCTURE

I named my artistic practice “Performing the Real” because it invites the participants to bring information from their everyday life<sup>9</sup> into performance art, the way they perform it in their everyday life, in order to reflect on the relationship between everyday life (the real) and performance art (the framed real). Self-care practices are presented in a form of problem-solving art that brings problems and solutions from everyday life into the world of labour, or in this case, the art world and academia. “Performing the Real” was constructed as a method, as a response to the educational material that I was exposed to, during my studies at HOPP. Next, I present the steps I followed.

<sup>9</sup> The notion of “everyday” in performance art has been investigated since the beginning of the previous century. “Art on the everyday focuses on trivial, banal and repetitive actions, “uneventful” events and common practices. According to Johnstone (...) “a turn to the everyday will bring art and life closer together” (Avgitidou, 2020, 74)

## STEP 1: THE SCORES

Self-Care practice:

Every day, alone, 5-10 minutes

I take the sanitiser: I clean my hands because they have to be clean before I touch my face.

I use the milky cleanser, I rub it all over my face to remove the dirt and the make-up, I wipe it off with some cotton (push it 2-3 times).

Then I use the Micellar water, to remove the milky product (2-3 drops).

Then I use two serums: hyaluronic & collagen (2-3 drops). Last, a moisturiser with aloe vera.

(If it is day, I add sun cream)

(A score from our rehearsals)

The specific format of the self-care practices as instructions in a form of a score that can be performed by another person is also inspired by the structure of Tema Okun's paper. Okun offers practical antidotes that one should follow in a form of a list (10-11). Next, some of her antidotes in conversation with the decisions I took during my research.

Antidotes to *perfectionism*:

accept there are many ways to get to the same goal; once a group has made a decision about what to do, honor that decision and see what you and the community or organisation learn from making that decision, even and especially if it is not the way you would have chosen;

By selecting data through surveys, one could see that there are different ways of approaching the same topic. (ex. Self-care practices that were challenging the common idea of care)

*create a culture of inquiry about what constitutes the "right way" and what defines a "mistake";*

During the creative process, our challenge was to consider everything that was produced "valid" or of a "quality", thus, we never discussed right or wrong, something that helped us collaborate even more easily and find non-verbal ways of communicating and synchronising.

To objectivity:

*assume that everybody has a good reason for what they are feeling, and your job is to understand that reason and how it connects to their position, particularly if you are the one with more formal or informal power;*

*realize that everybody has a world view and world view affects the way we understand the world;*

*realize this is true for you too; you are not "objective," you are steeped in your own world view and if it is the dominant world view, realize how that world view includes the belief that it has the capacity to be objective;*

Every member of the team could express their opinion, and this was considered in the creative process. We were all together, but at the same time, everyone alone. There was also space of no participation in what someone was offering. The entire process was based on the idea of "join however and whenever you wish". Since the beginning of our rehearsals, participants were invited to explore ways of participation from home, or by being present. In "No school manifesto" (Ouwens et al., 2014, 15) Cor de Koning and Ben Oligschlager propose a school with flexible working hours and participation, based on the needs and the availability of the student. Likewise, I wanted this research to find its place in each participant's life, the easiest way possible. Exploring non-hierarchical ways of facilitating the rehearsals, I insisted that everyone was there whenever and only if they felt it was the right moment to work with the research topic. The decisions for the group were consequences of the decisions they took for themselves. Everyone was participating in the co-design of the rehearsals and our next steps.

To individualism:

*honor process as much as product (honor how you do things as much as what you do or produce);*

The educational theories and performance art pedagogy mentioned above, contributed to arts production and arts education, honouring the process as much as the product (in case there is another product than the process per se.)

*make sure that credit is given to all who participate in an effort, not just the leaders or most public person;*

*make sure that when you are given credit, you distribute it to all those who helped you with whatever was accomplished;*

Even though the first performance was created in the context of a module for my studies, it was presented as a work by all of us<sup>10</sup>. Everyone's name was mentioned by the person who was introducing the work to the audience. Even though I consider all the performances as well as the research as a work done

by all the participants, I understand that in the context of my MA it would be impossible for all the students to be graded by their own department for this transdisciplinary project.

*create a culture where people feel they can bring problems to the group; use meetings as a place to solve problems, not just a place to report activities;*

During my studies, I could see that the students were gathering after classes and were discussing the problems they were encountering during their studies. Jeroen Lutters in "No University. A creative turn in higher education" (Lutters, 2021) shares how he was continuing "class" in the cafeterias after school, but with a drink. My proposal for problem-solving art, and education, creates the bridge between class and the cafeteria, transforming the classroom into a space where students can express themselves, the way they would do it elsewhere. *Performing the real* proposes also this: the absolute lack of distinction between art (education) and life.

<sup>10</sup> BUT DON'T WORRY I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU AND THIS WILL MAKE MY REALITY LESS PAINFUL (Concert for performers, a guitar, and a voice). 5 July 2022. Available from [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1koGcgFWeforvovEE\\_y\\_2newBM1D2KJan/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1koGcgFWeforvovEE_y_2newBM1D2KJan/view?usp=sharing) [accessed 27 June 2023]

## **STEP 2: HERE AND NOW. (THE DAY I “MET” SARAH AHMED)**

In *Queer Phenomenology* (Ahmed, 2006), Sarah Ahmed explores how infiltrated by queer theories, phenomenology can offer a new perspective towards the creative process. She explains how the “orientation” of the chair and the desk, what the writer is looking at, the relationship between the writer’s body and the environment in which they create, affects them and consequently, the material produced.

Going through her writings, we can understand that in the case of the queer individuals where their bodies are not always feeling hospitable in their “here and now”, the productive process will be affected accordingly. They might have no specific orientation; they might be lost. To be orientated is to know where you are and what is around you, “to feel at home” while producing in another country, and under these circumstances, for me it was disorienting. However, through Ahmed’s writings, I started practising the investigation and analysis of what was surrounding me, under which specific conditions I was invited to produce, what was expected from me, based on what norm, what were the tools I was offered and what the bodies that were around me were experiencing. I was reflecting and doubting everything so intensely, that sometimes I could say that it was like having social anxiety or a panic attack! Or maybe it was?

My queer body was struggling to orient itself, because my studies were demanding even more production and weren't an escape from the job as I wanted it to be. As I said before, and since I couldn't stop neither working nor studying, I made my artistic practice the safe space I was needing. Thus, Opera is an artistic product that also functions as a pause from individualist/capitalist artistic production, forming a space for contemplation, while investigating communal ways to solve the problems that emerge during one's studies and propose some direct solutions that will also affect their professional career. Next, I explain how my personal mental health conditions shaped my artistic practice.

### **STEP 3. THE MOMENT OF THE CREATION OF MY ARTISTIC PRACTICE**

In 2017, I was diagnosed with Mixed anxiety-depressive disorder (MADD). It is physically manifested as a general feeling of discomfort, numbness and sadness, lack of will to do anything (not able to be able), and at the same time panic attacks, feeling of lack of oxygen, trembling and a need to run away from everything. Since then, I have tried medication, meditation and other methods to calm the panic attacks and I would admit that everything works efficiently at a certain level. When I applied for the MA, I was asked to mention my mental health condition, in case I needed help, and during the auditions I was asked how I was planning to take care of myself when it comes to MADD. In both cases, I mentioned that I am doing therapy, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and I have reached a point where I regulate my mood. However, as I mentioned previously, my struggles were so many that the panic attacks came back, and nothing could help. So, I asked for support.

As a MA student, I was offered counsellor support. ArtEZ has one counsellor for the entire campus in Arnhem, that the students can visit with an appointment. There is also

financial support for those who want to pause their studies due to mental or physical health issues. In my case, due to my age, the rest of the options weren't applied, like government support for example, and since I didn't want to pause my studies, I just continued<sup>11</sup>.

In May 2022, during the HOPP three-week residency in Forte Marghera in the context of the module *Studio Practice & Feedback Frameworks*, the panic attacks came back, and the feeling of discomfort didn't allow me to focus on the creative process. The aim of the residency was to apply to our work a specific feedback framework that would allow us to look at art from a distance, objectively. Every day was a struggle: leaving together with my peers, creating with them, performing for them, was somehow too much for me. Thus, I started analysing what was exactly happening to my body and I took the decision to reflect on my artistic practice, to go back to its roots and to redefine it, minimising the needs and differences between my real self and my professional self, to combat anxiety.

The aim was to find a healthy relationship between my body and the conditions of production. This way, I framed and

presented in front of my peers, proposing it as an artwork, the everyday self-care practices I was "performing" most of the time alone, in my private life: writing, brushing my teeth and sleeping.

The grading sheet for all the modules was offering a rank between outstanding and poor, two words that increased the anxiety I was feeling. The anxiety to create something of a quality, an "outstanding" artwork, was shared vaguely between my peers at the beginning, but at the end all of them accepted the possibility of failing.

In my "here and now", due to this collective resistance to perfection, there was a need for a socially engaged art that will make us something more than just *achievement subjects*, more than "outstanding" artists that want to be part of the capitalist system: to be rich and famous. Hereunder, I explain how "performing the real" interacted with the theories of renown academics, scholars and artists, becoming a method that can be taught to others, a process that led to the performance "Opera: we deserve rest, lovelier than diamonds"<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> More information about student counselling and studying with an impediment. Available from <https://www.artez.nl/en/study-at-artez/student-counseling/studying-with-an-impediment> [accessed 21 June 2023]

<sup>12</sup> The title "Opera" refers to the transdisciplinarity of the work, challenging at the same time its characteristics as they are normally understood by the audience. It expresses the need for a redefinition of all the arts that participate in the formation of the piece. The subtitle "we deserve rest, lovelier than diamonds" belongs to the song "Kandy" (2023) by the artist Fever Ray, and it is a direct reference to the idea that rest is more important, and necessary, than wealth. Available from [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Hx802gwvYTu\\_bggH1pb7pkuQAmDIrMv/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Hx802gwvYTu_bggH1pb7pkuQAmDIrMv/view?usp=sharing) [accessed 21 June 2023]



Figure 2. June 2022. Vallerië Ludwig and Mireia Varón Gallofré practising self-care. One of our first meetings, performing the real.



## STEP 4: REFERENCES

The series of performances that preceded “Opera” re-examine, through a therapeutic gaze, six important notions that are being affected/transformed in the process of creating a new artform: space, time, audience, body, reality and art. These six notions came up from the feedback I got during the presentation of draft materials, by my classmates and my tutors. *Performing the Real* challenges, the idea of production in the arts industry, and the way it is approached in arts education, offering new aesthetics, structures and making-process. After the feedback, I started researching academics, artists, theories and activists that deal with the topics of life and art, care and self-care, performance art, and the idea of what I call *problem-solving art*, known as *art as therapy*.

Alain de Botton, in *Art as therapy* explores new ways to approach art, as audience, artists and arts educators. Focusing on the *problem-solving* aspects of the arts, proposes ways to improve our lives finding in them our therapy. Through his proposal, I shaped the conditions of how a possible “bottonian” artwork will be created in the future.

Figure 3. Performance July 2022. BUT DON'T WORRY I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU AND THIS WILL MAKE MY REALITY LESS PAINFUL (Concert for performers, a guitar, and a voice)  
PHOTO: Fenia Kotsopoulou



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**I) FOR THE ARTISTS:**

*The task for artists, therefore, is to find new ways of prizing open our eyes to tiresomely familiar, but critically important, ideas about how to lead a balanced and good life. (de Botton, 2016, 38)*

How can one judge a piece of art through the bottonian criteria? How can the performance of an arts student be “outstanding” and “of a quality”? In the case of my artistic practice, an outstanding performance would be the one who offers practical solutions to the audience’s and/or participants’ problems. Good art is the useful art, an *arte útil*.

**II) FOR THE AUDIENCE:**

*This book introduces a fifth criterion for judging art: that it can be deemed important in so far as it helps us in a therapeutic way. A work can be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on how well it caters to our inner needs, how well it can address one of the seven psychological frailties we have identified, from a poor memory to a failure to appreciate the more modest unnoticed details. (72)*

What, then, are the consequences of holding to a therapeutic vision of art? Principally, the conviction that the main point of engaging with art is to help us lead better lives- to access better versions of ourselves. If art has such a power, it is because it is a tool that can correct or compensate for a range of psychological frailties. However, I should make clear that for me, a better version of myself is not the one who is healthy enough to produce but the one who finds a healthy balance between their everyday life and production, without affecting their mental health or physical condition in a negative way.

Botton continues: *It is in relation to these seven psychological frailties that art finds its purpose and value as a tool and offers us seven means of assistance. For now, I focus on the sixth “6. A GUIDE OT THE EXTENSION OF EXPERIENCE: Art is an immensely sophisticated accumulation of the experiences of others, presented to us in well-shaped and well-organized forms”. (64)*

Figure 4. Performance July 2022. BUT DON'T WORRY I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU AND THIS  
WILL MAKE MY REALITY LESS PAINFUL (Concert for performers, a guitar, and a voice)  
PHOTO: Fenia Kotsopoulou



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## STEP 5: IS THIS ART?!

*My goal has been to try to teach performance is such a way that allows it to retain its idiosyncratic and anarchic nature, and honours a tradition where any and all possible of actions can be considered art.  
(Arsem in Torrens, 2014, 62)*

In this chapter I introduce the artist Tania Bruguera, who with her *problem-solving* project *Arte Útil* addresses the use of art as a tool for social and political change. Same as Botton, she shares the criteria a *useful* initiative should meet. At this moment, I would like to mention that I find interesting the use of adjectives by both Bruguera and de Botton, in their own reading of what art is. In 2013, Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera collaborated with the curatorial team of the Van Abbemuseum, to present the “Museum of Arte Util”. According to their website, *Arte Útil* draws on artistic thinking to imagine, create and implement tactics that change how we act in society. And continues:

The criteria of *Arte Util* state that initiatives should:

1. Propose new uses for art within society.
2. Use artistic thinking to challenge the field within which it operates
3. Respond to current urgencies.
4. Operate on a 1:1 scale.
5. Replace authors with initiators and spectators

with users.

6. Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users.
7. Pursue sustainability.
8. Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation.<sup>13</sup>

In her interview with journalist Chelis Lopez for the exhibition *Talking to power* in Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, Bruguera says:

*Making art is not having a gallery to sell, making art is communicating with the people, and precisely being part of the social movement is a tool. I think it can open up an imagery in the minds of people so that they and their circumstances imagine themselves differently, not to isolate themselves (...) but as a way of training for when those situations change, or what they want to change. (Marin Tv, 2018, 1.28-1.58)*

## I) THE AUDIENCE

The department *A1-08: Open Access of Museum of Arte Útil* is a mode of operating where availability to information, material or knowledge is exercised as an equal right". In "Opera: we deserve rest, lovelier than diamonds" the audience had access to all the material we use(d) to get to the point of the presentation of the performance. They were invited to just look (as spectators) or to get involved in the process and perform self-care alone or with us (participants). Both decisions were valid, and to both groups the self-care

practices and objects were presented, so they can even take them at home as a souvenir. Some members of the audience stated it clearly: "I will try this at home". And indeed, they sent me pictures to my social media.

A frequent comment I received by tutors and audience is if what I am doing is art, and why. I find this question interesting, not only because it shows that there is a pre-decided idea of what art is, but also because apparently my proposal doesn't meet the(ir) criteria. In several conversations I had, there is the argument that I am asked this question not because "my talent is being doubted" but because "they want me to be sure that I know what I am doing". But I wonder, would I have been asked the same question if I was presenting a monologue with a spotlight on me and some dramatic music? Even though at the beginning I had a feeling of discomfort, after reading de Botton, Bruguera and the *No school manifesto* (Ouwens et al.,2020), I realised that I had discovered something that was already discussed in the artistic and academic field. But, indeed, what is art (doing)? And where does this knowledge come from?

Alain de Botton states that we grow up with a specific idea of what a masterpiece is. Normally, we are being taught specific artists like Caravaggio and Rembrandt as role models. This is what a masterpiece is, and it should be recognised. However, "some of us might feel unimpressed or cold in front of them", he states (66).

<sup>13</sup> Museum of Arte Útil. Available from: <https://collectiveworks.nl/projects/museum-of-arte-util/> [accessed 21 June 2023]

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DESK

REST

Figure 5. Performance May 2023. OPERA WE DESERVE REST LOVELIER THAN DIAMONDS  
Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou

Some days after the presentation of my work I encountered Sandra Valk, project leader of Cultural Sensitivity at ArtEZ, and I asked her what she thought about "Opera".

"What I was feeling was a lot, but I couldn't understand anything. I felt dumb. I asked myself, "Is this art?"

I asked her: "Why was it not enough?"

She replied: "Yes, I don't know! You see?!".

I asked her again: "If I tell you that this is art and there is no place for doubting, can you tell me why this is art?"

She replied: "Yes!".

I asked her immediately: "Why?"

She replied to my question a bit faster: "Because it is radical, thought provoking, tackles current social issues, invites you to doubt many things, and this is art!"

I answered calmly: "Well, that's it!".

For me, Sandra's answer is related to the fact that I tackle issues

that are not frequently tackled in the public space of ArtEZ, like the tiredness of the students, in a way that it's too close to reality. The audience is invited to watch a performance that is nothing theatrical, and keep in mind that not everyone is "trained" to live art's language. There is no plot, no music, no lights. On top, as was shared with me from some of my peers, occupying a public space and placing a banner that says "We deserve rest" gives "squat vibes" in a country where squatting now is illegal.

During the performance, a lady had sat on one of the red sofas. She said "hi" and she asked me how I was. She told me that she was there to see a performance with her daughter, a student in the Dance Artist department.

-And you? Are you taking a break?

-No, I am presenting my graduation show. You are actually in it!

-What?! I didn't know that!

-Yes, these people next to you are performing self-care, this banner is an artwork, all these books are the books that we read in order to create this work and these products form part of our everyday self-care routine.





Figure 6. Performance May 2023. Fay in OPERA WE DESERVE REST LOVELIER THAN DIAMONDS  
Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou

She stood up immediately and read the text on the banner. She did a thumbs up and shook her head with enthusiasm. "Yes! We deserve rest!" She told me that she knows what I was talking about "that we are all the time with a screen in front of our faces, and that this should stop". She lives somewhere that is full of trees, and she suggested to be in contact with nature as an act of self-care. The day I printed the banner, I showed it to one of my colleagues, outside the BEAR department in ArtEZ, and a person that was passing by asked us: "what is happening guys, is the academy asking too much from you?"

After all the conversations I had, if what I am doing is art and if the audience can understand it as such, the first thing I asked him was: "Are you an artist?!". He said "no", but he could make the connections easily. "You are in front of an arts school. And... We are all tired!"

Another incident, that was shared to me by one of the performers was that two dance students was passing by and said "Fuck it, yes! Let's do it here! We deserve rest!". And lied down below the banner for some time.

## II) THE ARTWORK:

Jeroen Lutters, through the No University Manifesto, proposes new ways of approaching arts education. I focus on his

third proposal for post-creative research (Lutters, 2020) that "agree" with my research's aims and, as Sandra's feedback that we saw above. "Post-Creative Research is a claim of the arts and humanities A. to reframe the logic of creative nature; B. to reframe the language of creative culture; C. to reframe the lives of creative people". (Lutters, 2020, 164) Below, I present how the goals that I had while constructing *Opera* as an artwork, met these three claims.

- The performance blurs the lines between art and life. It cannot be understood who is performing and who is the audience. This creates a certain confusion and many questions. Some people like its openness and they interpret it the way they want, and some others reject it as they want answers. However, the decision to expose every detail of the work (self-care products, diaries, the survey results, the books that we read during the meetings) helped the audience to give their own interpretation. This is how the audience becomes a unity in the same way as the performers. The power dynamics between the "artists" and the audience were blurred at the end of the performance, where one could just witness a group of people resting<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> In Figure 10, you can see how performers, and audience became one. We all left the building together.



Figure 7. Alejandro Jiménez, student at BEAR and one of my collaborators, with the banner.  
Photo: Thomas Diafas



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Figure 8. Performance May 2023. Two students resting next to the space where the performance was happening.  
Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou

-The fact that the audience can get involved in the creative process has a positive impact, so they can have an inside in our process and share their part with us. There is no hierarchy.

- It brings the question of “why is this art/what is art” on the surface, which is also what the work aims for. In general, the work is a space of questions. The creators “reframe their language”, by creating a safe space where the audience can get closer to the questions we raise in the work.

-Performance art, and its relationship to everyday life, is an invitation to shift the focus of the audience from the work itself to the problems that emerge, as some people felt that they were there to speak about the need to change everything.

### III) THE PROBLEM-SOLVING ART

-The work shows the necessity of inserting self-care practices in our everyday lives, but also the idea of care in everything we do in life. A member of the audience detected in Opera, what Lutters suggests through Post-Creative Research. When Lutters states that it “reframes the lives of creative people” the spectator adds that “The fact that someone decided that this is art, it is because it lacks from everyday life”.

-The work showed that there is a need for a permanent space inside ArtEZ, so students and staff can rest.

-The idea of rest can infiltrate the curriculum. The workload is high, and students should have time to rest during their studies. Students claim that the school is preparing them for a hard arts market, when according to them, they should be two different things, or the arts school should create a healthier market.

-Assessment criteria should be customised based on the needs of each student and not on the needs of the program.

-ArtEZ needs to have more than one counsellor for each building, and the staff should be educated to deal with these topics in class. (Mostly in the cases of performance art where the topics that are being taught might be graphic and violent for some students)

Think of how arts education would be, and how the arts market would be formed if scholars were teaching the way Alain de Botton is proposing. My question is: are we ready to change arts education and production so we can also change the

arts market? What tools does “performing the real” propose that can be used as an alternative to the canonical way of understanding and teaching art? Can it combat depression and anxiety caused by capitalism?

I propose performance art education as a tool to combat anxiety and depression, based on the ideas of Marilyn Arsem, Jeroen Lutters, Danae Theodoridou and Eva Fotiadou who see in (performance) art education the capacity to do political anti-systemic art beyond the capitalist needs. By shifting the focus of the creative process to the subject that is being tackled, I end up proposing a problem-solving education.

## STEP 7: ANXIETY & DEPRESSION: ARTS EDUCATION TO COMBAT CAPITALISM.

*It is widely agreed that capitalism needs reforming. It is the claim of this book that there are vital clues about the nature of this reform to be identified within the field of art.  
(de Botton, 2016, 162)*

I am writing the present chapter sitting at a café somewhere in the central north region of the mother of theatre: Greece. There are people around me studying -it is exam period- some of them are completely focused and others chat and laugh between reading their books. *Every body* has their own way of making it through education and assessment, I think. Next, I will present the theories related to performance art and education that helped propose a practical way to combat anxiety and depression in arts education, the method that I call “Performing The Real”.

On Thursday, May 26, 2022, in the context of Performance now v.9 at the University of Western Macedonia, at the Department of Visual and Applied Arts, took place a round table entitled *Seeking a critical pedagogy for the art of performance*. Danae Theodoridou, director and performing arts researcher, presented a lecture entitled “The act of performance: process and critical pedagogy”. She proposes a(n) (arts) pedagogy that shifts the “importance” from the

performer's skills to the acquisition of critical thinking. She asks: "how can the teaching or the (participatory) process of producing a performance piece be transformed into critical thinking and pedagogy, in opposition to a pedagogy that focuses on the acquisition of virtuosity?" (Theodoridou, 2022)

Considering a performance art piece an incubator of critical thinking, instead of a tangible masterpiece, is directly connected both to the immateriality of the artform and to the political ideas that were emerging through it. Applying Theodoridou's proposal to my final performance "Opera", I asked the performers not to "perform perfectly" their self-care practices, but to make sure they are aware of the political implications of performing self-care in the corridor of an exhausted arts school, and to focus on our intention to change this situation. Thus, since the audience didn't see artists performing perfect movements, they thought that the performance hadn't started yet and entered "our space", to discuss the topic of the performance.

"Yes, we deserve rest!"

"We need to change this situation, NOW!"

"Let's create the space we need!"

The day that I took down the banner, a person yelled "we still deserve rest, though!", "of course!", I replied. They later found me outside, when I was unlocking my bike and they

introduced themselves as a tutor of the Dance department at ArtEZ. "I saw you the other day resting, and I thought of so many things, but I had class the whole day and I couldn't attend the performance. Didn't have time to rest, I had to work!". I invited them to have a conversation about their ideas but wasn't sure if they have time. This answer is enough for me, now. "We still deserve rest!"



Figure 9. January 2023. ArtEZ students are invited to practice self-care in the Theatrium to explore how space influences their actions.

During the same event, Danae Theodoridou, shared the characteristics of an educational/participatory performance process, to provide a critical framework for learning and development. Among others: it should

- a) mobilise questions*
  - b) take into account the locality of the context in which takes place*
  - c) to interrupt, disturb established pattern and hierarchies*
  - d) "commoning", to provide a framework for co-creation of commonalities".*
- (Theodoridou, 2022)*

At this moment, I would like to mention the case of "Black Mountain College" that is a great example of a need for a radical transformation, after a big historical moment. In 1933, when the United States were experiencing the Great Depression due to the rise of Adolf Hitler, John A. Rice proposed "Black Mountain College". Based on the idea that art is essential in the life of humans, because it teaches "observation, judgement and action" education was non-hierarchical and communitarian. In other words, there wasn't an authoritarian relationship between teachers and students the way we understand it today. The year program was designed collectively and there were no grades, no exams, no required courses, and no fees. Two of the graduates were John Cage and Merce Cunningham, both with a big influence on performing arts. It isn't a surprise that art students were collectively rethinking what art could be, blurring the lines between art and entertainment<sup>15</sup>.

In 1952, John Cage invited his peers to perform collectively, and spontaneously, all together, without setting a specific framework. Artists from all disciplines gathered and performed in what would later become the beginning of a new artform that was blurring the lines between art disciplines. Eva Fotiadou defines artistic research as "the scientific interest in what kind of knowledge art produces and how for both the artist and the audience". (Ion, 150) However, it is important for me to say that the knowledge that is being produced through "performing the real" as art as therapy, and the methodologies that are being applied, wish to challenge the common knowledge. For Fotiadou, (artistic research) "negotiates the process of knowledge production and acquisition in alternative ways to the established ways of the sciences and humanities" (Fotiadou in Avgitidou A. and Vamvakidou I., 2014, 151). Recently, the Greek Ministry of Health signed an agreement with the Greek Ministry of Culture to initiate a collaboration on therapeutic practices that contain both conventional "medical" interventions and artistic. Jeroen Lutters considers the usual methods insufficient to bring further knowledge. The Greek Ministry's agreement seems to agree with both Lutters and Fotiadou, and we only have to wait to see the fruits of this collaboration, in the future: "If we use predictable forms, we will get predictable answers. The usual methods/techniques of the natural sciences (deduction) and social sciences (induction) alone are insufficient to further our knowledge of creativity.

<sup>15</sup> Tate (2017) Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ManNYunSYkQ> [accessed 21 June 2023]

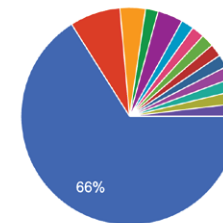


We also need the arts and the humanities as creative sciences". (Lutters, 2020, 86). I can see in these examples, some first steps towards a "post-creative" change.

## STEP 8: CREATING "OPERA"

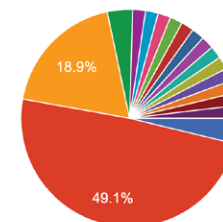
In the first rehearsals, the performers were asked to bring objects that they use to practise self-care at home, and experience what happens when we "perform" them a) collectively, b) in a dance studio and c) in front of an audience/ for an audience. In the second phase of the research, I collected the data from my collaborators and based on their answers, I later published a survey asking the same questions to all ArtEZ students and staff. However, only 8 people out of 53 were ArtEZ staff. As you can see, most of the participants were ArtEZ students.

Are you an ArtEZ student?  
53 responses



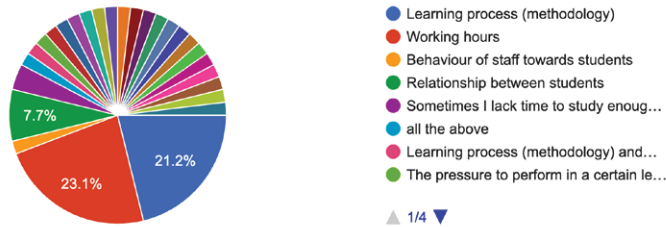
- Yes
  - Arts student, but not ArtEZ
  - Teacher
  - Art institution worker
  - Alumnus
  - Artist, Freelance
  - Artist
  - I'm a performer dancer actor, so I'm a...
- ▲ 1/2 ▼

Are you dealing with depression and/or anxiety?  
53 responses



- Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Both
  - Only when I am working towards a per...
  - I do not suffer from clinical depression...
  - Maybe. Not sure what the symptoms...
  - Stress
  - i have before, so i do deal with the rep...
- ▲ 1/3 ▼

What causes you anxiety and/or makes you feel depressed in your learning environment?  
52 responses



Do you feel supported inside ArtEZ? (services and staff that create a safe environment for your mental health)  
52 responses

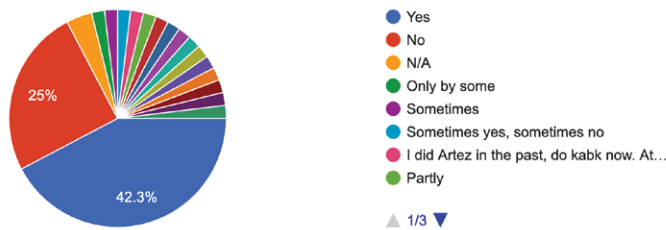


Figure 10. Survey results on anxiety and depression at artez

The results of the survey represent only 3,53% of the students. A strange phenomenon, since I already had conversations with lots more students. Same as with the previous open call that we received no entries, we worked with the material we gathered. No matter how small the results were, they showed that what the participants of my research, the performers, were experiencing, was what other ArtEZ students were experiencing. From the 53 people who filled out the form, 49.1% are experiencing anxiety, and the 18.9% both anxiety

and depression. The methodology of their studies is the main cause of stress for the 21.2%, and the working hours for the 23,1%. The 42.3% feels supported inside ArtEZ and the 25% doesn't. The methodology of the performance that we created, offered ArtEZ some "ways" to support more the students and to the students, a community where they can exchange practical knowledge on how to combat anxiety and depression, and form a space where they rest.

And this is how we got to May 2023. This time, the concept was experienced differently since we had known each other for a year. Most of the participants were there since the beginning of the idea in 2022 and the presentation of the 30-minute version in May of the same year, they had later performed long duration versions unofficially in a public space, three hours in front of the City Hall of Arnhem, and after that, three hours in February 2023 in the Eusebius Church in the context of Uitnacht23. The team was a safe-space and one can notice the difference in the way everyone was experiencing both the work and the others. It was our work; we were all alone and together at the same time. Everyone took initiative and allowed themselves to "disrespect" the rules. The space this time was the Theatrium of ArtEZ, I took the decision to go public after detecting that an official space to rest was missing from the building. Students were occupying the corridors, stretching wherever they could find a space to unfold their bodies. One day, I saw a female dancer crying on one of

the red sofas in the hallway. Her friend was comforting her. I asked my dancer friend what she thought was going wrong and these people were crying. She replied that the important thing in this image was that a ballet dancer was able to cry in public. "Not in my generation!" she added. I took the decision to have as a starting point of my final performance the same red sofa and create a safe space around it. I had to pay an homage to this moment of care!

In 1998, artist Tracey Emin presented the work *My Bed* at the Tate gallery, which was actually her bed, the way it was after she had remained in bed for four days without eating or drinking anything but alcohol, in a sexual yet depressive phase of her life. Despite the controversies, and the conversations about if this is art or not, it exposes the private to the public, shows the reality of the depressive subject and at the same time, has the capacity to raise awareness on mental health issues. Inspired by this work, and after I had read Sarah Ahmed's *Complaint!* (Ahmed, 2021) where she narrates stories of problematic behaviours in universities that are being covered behind closed doors. I took the decision to uncover "everything" and expose to the audience all the elements that consisted of the work.

I created a corridor where the audience was invited to explore its two sides, the left and right, to stay in the middle, or visit one side or both. The left side had the objects, the right side had the performers.

Objects:

- a) my calendar/notebook/notes where I present my secret thoughts that lead to the creation of the work
- b) notes from the rehearsals from previous performances/ the minutes from the creative process to know how this work was made technically
- c) the self-care practices we shared in the creative process
- d) the self-care practices that were gathered through the survey
- e) the "tools" that we use to practise self-care in our everyday life (products like perfumes, body lotions, face creams etc.)
- f) some nuts and fruits that we would consume during the performance but are also part of our daily nutrition as performing art students,
- g) the bibliography that helped me contextualise my work in the field of performance art and education, and that I would later use in the present thesis.

At the beginning of the corridor, there was a sign that was inviting the audience to choose between participating or watching the performance. By choosing the first, they were exploring ways of creating their own personal experience, based on what they were reading, smelling, eating, touching. Some members of the audience had different feelings from the



Figure 11. Performance January 2023. OPERA in the Eusebiuskerk in Arnhem, in the context of Uitmacht23.

others as they were finding connections between something that they were reading (alone) in a very specific moment, and what was happening around them in that moment.

Cor de Koning, director at the creative vocational school Cibap in Zwolle, and Ben Oligschlager, head of education at the vocational school SintLucas in Eindhoven and Boxtel, discuss their decision to join No School. They say that both schools agreed on a change and they started No School, (in order) “to develop other learning trajectories and provide opportunities that do not follow the well-trodden path”,(since) “No school is a movement, a platform for experimentation” (15). Please, allow me to present to you those changes that de Koning and Oligschlager see that will happen in the future, in the form of a list, to save words and to be faithful to the format of the lists we have seen so far.

Students won't go to school every day from 9 to 5. There won't be a strict study duration, as learning will continue through life.

Education will be multidisciplinary and multilevel, partners from different disciplines and ages. “Teams will include 15 year old students, a 50-year-old creative professional and a scientist looking for high-tech solutions to keep psychiatric patients calm” (...)

Teacher will be a guide, works from a position of equality, and it may very well be that the student is more of an expert in a certain field than the teacher and shares their knowledge. The new situation is about co-creation. (17)

Those three elements shaped:

The hours of the performance. Participants had the frame of the opening hours of the building (08.30 to 22.30) to come and go whenever they wanted, and whenever they felt that they wanted to perform self-care alone or with others. Some of the participants were leaving the space to practise self-care at home. What we experienced is that, indeed, “learning continues through life”.

The constellation of the participants. Participants were students and alumni of different ages, from different departments, with different needs and disciplines. Multidisciplinary artists collaborated in a collective self-care process by eating, drinking and sleeping together, massaging each other but also co-creating soundscapes, texts and drawings. All participants experienced how through the calmness and the safety, co-creativity and self-care inspire, one can redefine the notion of production.

All the participants admitted that there was a big change in the moment of creating, anxiety was softened or completely gone.

My relationship with the participants (both audience and performers), as I was open to any possible input, feedback, entry point to the subject, and I wasn't dictating how people should perform, or behave, or experience the performance piece.



Figure 12. The performers with members of the audience, outside ArtEZ after the end of the performance.

## CONCLUSION

“Performing the real” as a practice, and the performances that were created with latest “OPERA: WE DESERVE REST LOVELIER THAN DIAMONDS” were a combination of a) physical and psychological responses to the experiences me and my collaborators had during our studies b) the reflections of the students to assessment processes and the program c) the interaction with the theorists/references that helped us contextualise our work and further develop it. Based on the feedback, the audience had met our aim to raise awareness on the topic and create a space for rest, since both staff of ArtEZ and students expressed their wish to make it happen. Opera serves as a first pause, as a space of reflecting on the conditions of a “healthy” production.

Through the creative process, the questions I encountered regarding the pedagogical and the artistic aspects of my practice were answered through the community we created, offering new perspectives on what pedagogy and what art can and should be “here and now”. ArtEZ offers the space to challenge the common idea of education, with programs organised by Studium Generale, as the Future Art School. The aesthetic criteria, the tools I used and the paths I followed, were shaped thanks to conversations that I had with teaching staff and employees in the administration. The confidence to move forward and to believe that, indeed, I am creating a practice was thanks to them.

Performing self-care as an artwork raises questions regarding the relationship between the result and the process, a crucial question related to performance art since the beginning of its "invention". In this specific context, I used this element to reflect on the need of producing (more) and producing something material, tangible. Distancing myself from the capitalist understanding of production, related to - perfectionism, objectivity and individuality- I explored how one can create an art form far from exhaustion, but through care. Thus, the fact that the performers were invited to come in and out whenever they wanted, brings the question of if we do need specific working hours, and if not, then how do we "work" while taking care of ourselves. When these questions became a literal artwork, with nothing more than actually people taking care of themselves for several hours, the opening hours of the building, the audience started doubting the conditions of their work and their life. "Going through how the relationship between everyday life and art, was formed historically, Eva Fotiadou writes that "the recognition of a work as art is not self-evident: if one were to see these objects in the street, or anywhere else, there would be no reason to perceive them as works of art". (p.141). In the case of *Performing the Real*, the actions that are framed as works of art, focus on the problem-solving aspect of art, presenting solutions to the issues that one faces in life.

During my studies, I had the need to create problem-solving art, inspired by the material distributed in class, as well as the

events organised by ArtEZ. Community artists and scholars inside and outside the school, such as, Jeroen Lutters, Sarah Ahmed, and Tania Bruguera, "allowed" me to invite others to join my practice and co-create it. I detected a need for a new post-covid approach both to (performance) art and education. Thus, I inserted the notion of care and started investigating its impact. The common experience that participants and audience have, is that they both detect a change in the way they experience their body, time and space wherever and whenever they perform or watch the performance. The way "rest and self-care" is understood is also influenced by the space where the piece is performed each time (a dance studio, a hallway or a church).

However, I must admit that I understand that it is a complex concept that cannot be further developed and presented in the context of a master's program and thesis. Not only because of the objectives of a master's, but also because of the timeframe of it in relation to my current life state. Thus, I have already started conversations on how this concept can be Professional Doctorate research, supervised by Jeroen Lutters at ArtEZ. For now, I end the present thesis with some notes during the first months of my MA studies:

*(...) I look forward to the moment when art will come not from the point of pain, but from the point of wisdom. it will teach us how not to; it will educate little children, how to become good people, whether they are humans or not, I look forward to the moment when art will be exclusively educational, will be directed only to the lower social strata, will be free and will heal traumas and phobias. Three ml of art for plane*

*phobia, two ml for fear of abandonment and another five if you are addicted to rejection as a self-fulfilling prophecy, or have saviour syndrome (...)  
(December 13, 2021)*



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