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Deconstructing Instructions in the Art Academy

Scholten, Henrike; van 't Hoogt, Vanessa

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RESEARCH PROJECTS

HENRIKE SCHOLTEN

Utrecht University

VANESSA VAN 'T HOOGT

University of Groningen

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Abstract

Drawing as a manual discipline was long taught in the West according to specific 'academic' principles, culminating institutionally in the art academies of the nineteenth century. This educational process was mediated by visual images and three-dimensional objects, and relied on copying as a means to acquire manual skill along with a 'vocabulary' of idealized forms. During the twentieth century the roles, values and practices of art changed profoundly, and consequently methods of artistic education changed as well.

As symbols of a tradition overcome, in many (modernizing) art academies, instruction books, plaster casts of sculptures and *écorchés* were either discarded or consigned to storage rooms and libraries. In one such art school, Minerva Art Academy in Groningen (the Netherlands), a didactic experiment was undertaken in the spring semester of 2019. Art historian Vanessa van 't Hoogt and artist Henrike Scholten designed and taught an elective course that investigated and reflected critically on the art academy's history. Using a historically informed, experimental and practice-based pedagogic approach, the sixteen-week course challenged 23 undergraduate art students to engage with the material and didactic heritage of the art academy. Not in a nostalgic or neo-academic fashion, but on their own terms as contemporary art students. This project report describes some aspects of the authors' didactic approach during the course. As an investigative and sometimes performative project, it toes the line between educational action research and object-based teaching. The aim of the course was to provide art students with new tools to engage with the history of their discipline and its processes of skill acquisition in a reflective and generative way.

Introduction: *Boy Strangling a Goose*

In the teachers' lounge of Minerva Art Academy in Groningen, the Netherlands, stands a single plaster cast of a young boy with a bird (Figure 1).¹ It is a nineteenth-century cast of a Hellenistic sculpture.² A strange object, when you think about it: a nude toddler with a strange hairdo, strangling (or clumsily embracing) a powerful goose that is nearly his own size.³ While teachers pass by the cast every day, its original purpose as an educational object seems to have been lost and the art academy's students are rarely encouraged to pay attention to the *Boy Strangling a Goose*. On the wall next to the cast is a framed chalk drawing after the same cast by the painter Otto Eerelman (1839–1926), made when he was a student here in the mid-nineteenth century. The drawing is clearly a study: its intention was to train the draughtsman in rendering the plaster's subtle tonality of whites and greys, and to further develop his grasp of puerile and animal anatomy.

Both the cast and the drawing evidence teaching practices that were once an essential part of the art academy in Groningen (Figure 1). The institution now known as Minerva was founded in 1798, and much of its early instruction took place according to what art historian Carl Goldstein has dubbed the *academic doctrine*. The long-lived method of artistic instruction first developed in the Italian Renaissance, in which students firstly copied after drawings and prints, then drew from plaster casts and finally from the living model (Goldstein 1996: 30). Minerva has a multifaceted history and its curriculum changed and mutated often during the 222 years of its existence. Yet, the basic tenets of its drawing instruction remained largely the same until well into the twentieth century (Vierdag in van der Kamp et al. 1984; van Dijk 1998). Eventually, as drawing after plaster casts was

teaching
art academies
educational objects

1. Minerva is one of eighteen schools within the Hanze University of Applied Sciences and offers a forward-thinking and broad programme of contemporary art education. Minerva Art Academy will be shortened to Minerva from here on out.
2. A statue of this type was ascribed to a silversmith named Boethos by Pliny (1952) in book 34 of the *Natural History*. see Pliny 1952 ed. See Ridgway (2000).
3. The first sentences of this paragraph are adapted from the course proposal sent in by the authors.

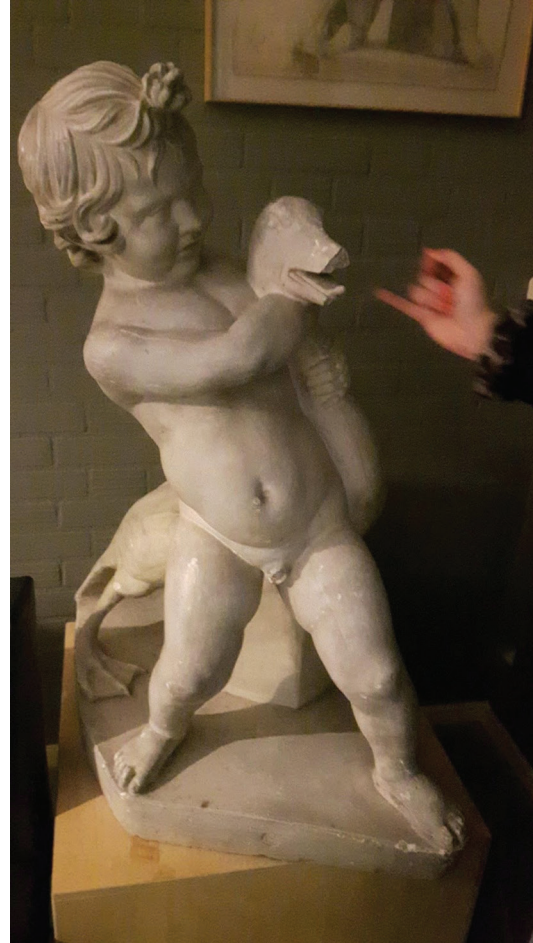


Figure 1: Plaster cast after a Hellenistic sculpture, plaster, ca. 90 cm. Minerva Art Academy, Groningen. Background: Otto Eerelman, Drawing after Plaster Cast, ca. 1860. Black and white chalk on paper. 47 × 64 cm. Minerva Art Academy, Groningen. Photograph: Henrike Scholten.

deemed increasingly outdated by modern artists, and the students had even taken to vandalizing these symbols of an outmoded paradigm, Minerva's once extensive collection of casts fell into disuse after the 1960s. Only a handful of plasters are still in the academy today: our *Boy Strangling a Goose* being one of the few that are displayed around the building. The others are kept in a small storage room in the painting department.

We, a visual artist and an art historian both based in Groningen, became interested in Minerva's disused objects and methods, because their history touches on our respective artistic and research practices. Our conversations and investigations into the visual and material traces of the academy's past led us to design a so-called *OffCourse* for the art academy.⁴ The course took place for the duration of one semester, from March 2019 until July 2019, under the somewhat tongue-in-cheek title *Deconstructing Instructions*.⁵ We taught 23 second- and third-year bachelor students, who came in about equal measures from the Fine Arts, Education and Design departments. Our approach was practical rather than theoretical, and critically investigative rather than nostalgic or reactionary: together with the students, we examined historical teaching methods and objects up close, in order to take them apart and create something new with them. Taking drawing as a practical starting point, and the story of their own art academy as a historical case study, the objective of the course was to facilitate reflective, open-ended creative processes through interaction with historical, 'obsolete' didactic materials. The history of art education is the history of artists: engaging with that history as a contemporary artist might lead to a more holistic understanding of where modern and contemporary art came from. Moreover, we invited the students to critically examine notions of copying, originality and skill-building within their own work, by exposing them to old school processes of copying by drawing.

For us, our guiding questions were as follows: in which ways can contemporary art students interact with historical educational methods and objects? And how can the history of the art academy reverberate into and complicate present-day art academy instruction?

Drawing and/as skill

In most Dutch contemporary art academies drawing is no longer taught systematically or according to the old academic principles, although as an activity drawing is considered quite important. Contemporary drawing is understood and taught as a multifaceted practice: there is more than one way to learn, more than one way for something to be good, interesting or generative (e.g. Coumans 2019). We have noticed – before but also during the course – that there is a certain longing among some art students for mastering past styles and techniques, often expressed as a desire to 'really learn something'. For most of its history, 'learning something', began with a long process of copying by drawing, to a degree that is hard to imagine for contemporary artists. Much of this

4. An *OffCourse* is a type of elective course offered by artists and professionals from the cultural field.
5. It should be noted that our approach is not related to critical theory, we did not attempt to teach 1970s style deconstruction to undergraduate art students.

6. Tellingly, in Italian and French academies in the 1960s, it was the plaster casts (and not the easels or the teachers) that were reportedly thrown down the stairs and out of the windows by students dissatisfied with the traditional teaching methods (van 't Hoogt 2018).

time-consuming process was intended to impart the manual skill of rendering the human body in a specific way, e.g. idealized anatomies in specific poses. The artist's goal was not to imitate, but to surpass nature (Goldstein 1996: 118). Through copying, the artist in training would learn an 'ABC' of idealized forms (Goldstein 1996; van den Akker 1991), and come closer to the examples set by past masters. The sheer amount of copying in painter's workshops and in art academies ensured that new artists became quite intimate with the processes of their predecessors. As art historians Haverkamp-Begemann and Logan wrote in *Creative Copies*,

Each copy constitutes a dialogue between the interpreter and the interpreted; this dialogue fosters new solutions to problems shared by the two artists and creates new ideas. Since art not only belongs to the time in which it was made, but exists in subsequent time, an artist can learn from the generation that preceded him[/her] as well as from all previous generations of artists whose works have been preserved.

(1988: 13)

Further, in the history of artistic education, the act of drawing was long seen as the foundation of artistic skill: in the Low Countries, Karel van Mander's early seventeenth-century didactic poem already named drawing as 'the father of painting' (van Mander 1604, fol. 8r–8v). Drawing was a means to improve manual skill, to design and refine compositions, to enhance theoretical knowledge and to collect visual reference materials (van den Akker 1991). This process of acquiring manual skill and mastering a vocabulary of idealized forms was an intimate dialogue with past artists, but it was also strongly shaped and mediated by material objects: the plaster casts and exemplary drawings. Such objects were what students once stared at all day, as they laboriously copied the anatomical structures, heroic poses and tonal variations in their own drawings. As the material remains of the academic doctrine, they embody the complex relationship between artists and their predecessors, between individuality and tradition. The didactic objects came to represent a set of visual conventions to acquire, and to rebel against.⁶

Our project, which foregrounds these material objects, is informed by a broader movement that seeks to incorporate tangible objects, especially historical and 'obsolete' ones, into higher education (Ulrich et al. 2015). Objects from university museums and other collections are reintroduced into higher education curricula, to counteract the current overemphasis on text and virtual materials at the expense of the visual and the haptic. Under the moniker of object-based teaching, a broader theoretical and methodological framework has recently been proposed by Ann-Sophie Lehmann (2016, 2017). In addition to object-based teaching we also drew inspiration from the practice of reconstruction in history of art and science (Hendriksen 2020). This performative methodology under the umbrella term 'RRR' (reconstructions, replication and re-enactment) is recently growing

in popularity in academic historical research and teaching (Taape et al. 2020: 324). A pioneering example is the 'Making and Knowing' project initiated by historian of science Pamela H. Smith.⁷ We re-enacted historical teaching methods using authentic historical educational objects (e.g. copying after plaster casts). In doing so, we hoped to enable the students to approach the history of their discipline in a hands-on, experiential and sensory way.

7. See the 'Making and Knowing' project website: <https://www.makingandknowing.org/>. Accessed 20 October 2020.

The course

Here we describe three sessions that exemplify our didactic approach in the course. For reasons of brevity and privacy, the personal creative processes and results of our students are not included.

Introductory session: Drawing after Boy Strangling a Goose

In the first session, we asked the students about their motivation and expectations for the course. Their motivations for choosing the course varied from an interest in figurative painting to really wanting to go on the excursion to the Rijksakademie we had advertised with. What stood out was that (a) surprisingly many expressed an interest in traditional drawing and painting techniques, which they felt they were not taught enough of, and (b) ours was one of the few *Offcourses* offered that focused on manual drawing and making, and less on more socially engaged, performative or technology-focused practices. One student pointed out, half joking, that our written description was the only one she understood.

When asked how and when they had learned to draw, most of the students reported that they were initially self-taught. As children and teenagers, many had taught themselves to draw based on images from magazines, cartoons and tutorials on the internet. As a result, some of them were experienced in photo-realistic rendering, while others had taught themselves a cartoon-like style. Several students mentioned starting out by trying to draw eyes – unconsciously mirroring the very first steps of early modern drawing books (Bolten 1985).

Somewhat contrary to our expectations, it turned out that several of our students already had a formal traditional training in drawing. Half of our class were international students, originating from places as diverse as Belgium, Bulgaria, Serbia and Pakistan. Notably, some of those who had received their high school education in Eastern Europe were instructed according to academic drawing methods. The way we as teachers thought about art education turned out to be strongly influenced by the mainstream Dutch system. We were curious to see whether our course would make these students reflect on their high school education in a new way.

For this introductory session, the plaster *Boy Strangling a Goose* had been moved from the teachers' lounge and was now positioned in the centre of the classroom. As a first exercise, we asked the

8. The subject of drawing was an integral part of the celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Rijksakademie. Next to the anniversary publication on the history of the institution *Er is eene Rijks-Akademie* (1995), they published another book on the meaning of drawing. *De betekenis van het tekenen* (1995) was a way for the Rijksakademie to differentiate itself from the other post-academic institutions.
9. Van 't Hoogt's research master's thesis examines the history of the institution and answers the question how contemporary artists in residence make use of the teaching collection of this nowadays post-academic institution.

students to draw after the cast. We did not provide additional instructions, as we wanted to see what the students would do when faced with the object. Instinctively and dutifully, they collected drawing tables and easels, gathered around the cast in a half-circle, fiddled with the lighting, took out their drawing equipment and started copying.

Interestingly, students from the Education department seemed the most concerned with making a beautiful, neat drawing, with half of them rendering the plaster cast in subtle grey pencil tones in their sketchbooks. Others took a bolder approach. A group of mostly Fine Art students immediately took out large pieces of paper and started producing drawings with charcoal and crayons, taking more liberties in their depictions (Figure 2).

In the sessions that followed we organized excursions to various collections and acquainted the students with historical teaching materials. For example, we took them to see various instruction books at the Special Collections of the Groningen University Library that were used in the first century of Minerva's existence, linking local history to broader artistic phenomena. In doing so, we encouraged them to adopt a critical and investigative approach by bringing them in contact with historical objects and methods alongside contemporary practices, attitudes and contexts, as well as entering locations they might usually not turn to for artistic inspiration. Exemplary of this integration of past and present was our excursion to the Rijksakademie.

Excursion Rijksakademie Amsterdam

As a *post-academic* institution, in both senses of the word, the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam hosts professional contemporary artists as 'residents' for two years, providing them with studios, supervision and access to various technical specialists and workshop spaces. The Rijksakademie is often considered one of the most cutting-edge institutions fostering artistic development in the Netherlands, but it too began its life in the eighteenth century as a traditional drawing academy named *Stadstekenacademie* (van Odijk et al. 1995; Knolle 1979). Drawing and the academic doctrine were a big part of teaching at the Rijksakademie until the 1980s.⁸ Interestingly, the institution never discarded its material heritage as a traditional academy, but instead kept the plaster casts, library and other collections on site, where the residents may work with them if they want to.⁹ Regularly, individual artists in residence are inspired to work with the historical objects, making them an integral part of their creative processes and resulting works of art. One recent and salient example is Tchelet Pearl Weisstub (resident 2016–17), a sculptor and performer. In an installation, she repurposed an exemplary drawing after Raphael by Bernard Picart (1673–1733), one of the first teachers at the *Stadstekenacademie*. A spear, suspended from a rotating mechanism and moving dangerously close to the eighteenth-century red chalk drawing, symbolically questions the value of the copy and the level of technical skill associated with the teaching object (Figure 3). For Pearl Weisstub and other



Figure 2: Various art students, drawings after plaster cast, 2019. Various drawing materials. Minerva Art Academy. Photograph: Henrike Scholten.

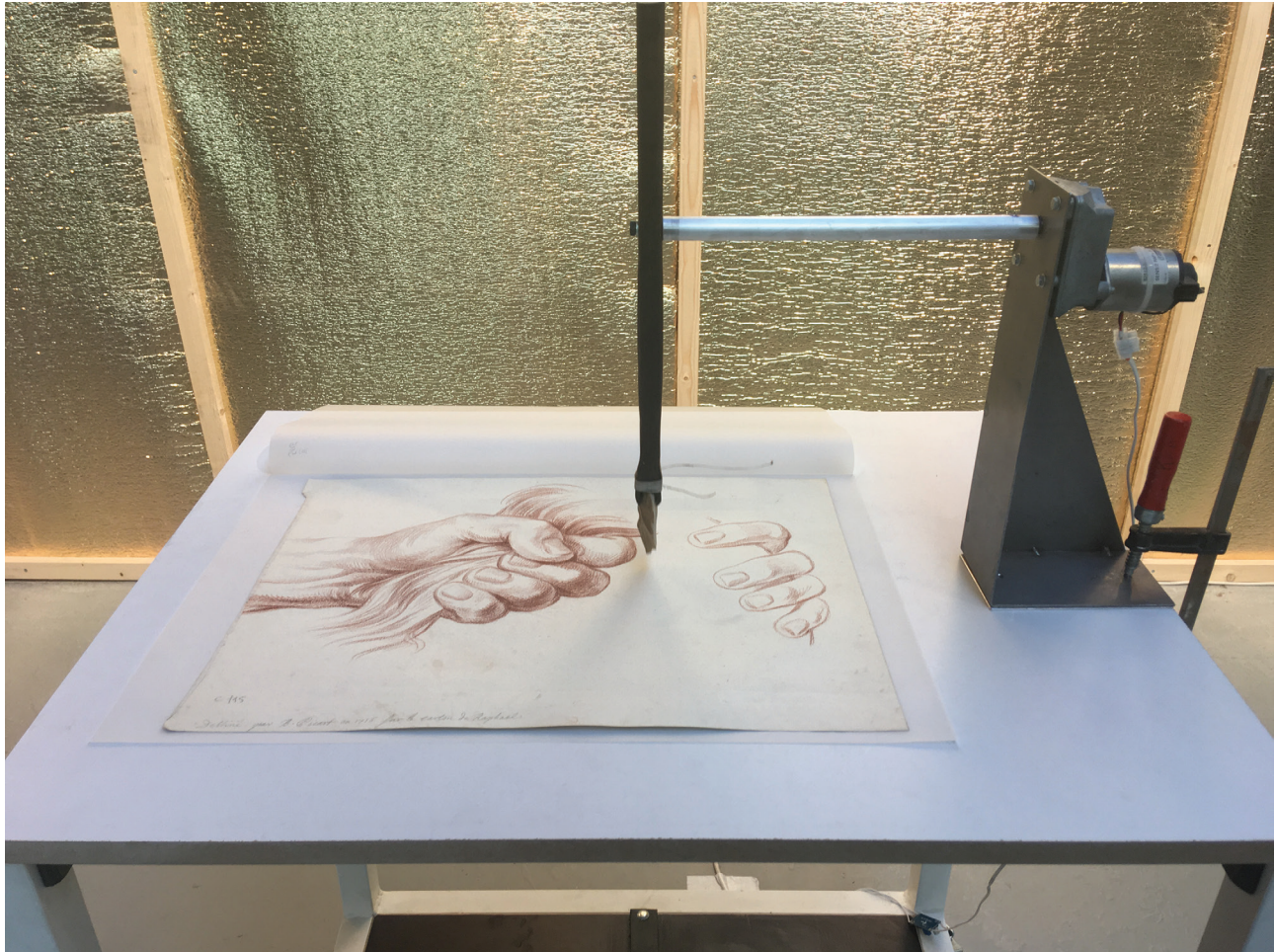


Figure 3: Tchelet Pearl Weisstub, *Manhandled (detail)*, 2017, installation during RijksOPEN 2017. Photograph: Vanessa van 't Hoogt.

artists, the inspiration to work with the collection emerged from the need to have a dialogue with past makers, to place themselves in a tradition and/or question this very tradition by adopting these materials in the here and now (van 't Hoogt 2018).

This contemporary and critical dialogue with historical collections was our reason for organizing an excursion to the Rijksakademie. There, van 't Hoogt and Mariëtta Dirker, the head of collections, told the story of the Rijksakademie through a series of books, drawings, prints and objects. When they revealed a few nineteenth-century drawings after *Boy Strangling a Goose*, the students ooh-ed and aah-ed in recognition.¹⁰ Van 't Hoogt led the group around the plaster cast collection and explained how the contemporary artists at the Rijksakademie are allowed to work freely with these materials (as long as they are kept intact). Former resident Marije Gertenbach gave a lecture about her work, and the way her creative process is influenced by historical materials and art forms. At the Rijksakademie, Gertenbach has worked extensively with a nineteenth-century print collection of wall paintings from Pompeii. She transforms these historical images into highly abstract paintings. Students were able to observe how contemporary practices can reflect critically and productively on past didactic materials. The interaction with art from the past is not only limited to the sites of art academies, it can occasionally be found in unexpected places.

10. In fact, art academies all over Europe owned similar plaster cast collections.

Performative intervention in IKEA

Artworks, as historical objects, do not only belong to the time they were produced in, but also exist in subsequent time (Haverkamp-Begemann and Logan 1988: 13). Over time such objects, and their reproductions, can acquire new roles, meanings and connotations. This idea was brought home to us, unexpectedly, when Scholten visited the local branch of the well-known Swedish furniture retailer and noticed a familiar educational plaster cast – the head of Michelangelo's *David*. The head itself was not for sale, and was not produced by the furniture giant, but it was placed in a model interior, presumably as a 'personal touch' alongside the store's furniture, tableware and lamps. On closer inspection, the head of the David was not made of plaster but of plastic, painted white: a cast of a historical artwork, remade in an even cheaper modern reproductive material. A wall text informed visitors that the living room belongs to a (fictional) middle-aged couple: Therèse (57) and Robert (60). The interior seemed carefully designed to convey that the inhabitants were middle-class, cultured and even somewhat trendy (Cain 1995) – decorative plaster casts were at that time becoming popular in interior design. Various art books were on the shelves and placed casually on the coffee table. A dining table was festively set up to host an intimate dinner party, with a large artificial flower arrangement in the middle.



Figure 4: Various art students, performative intervention in IKEA, 5 April 2019. Photograph: Vanessa van 't Hoogt.

Together with the students we decided to organize a performative intervention. Recasting the *David* into its former role as a didactic object, we organized a drawing session in the store. With their drawing materials at hand the students positioned themselves on the sofa and armchairs, around the dining table, and on the floor (Figure 4). The students drew for about an hour and many were remarkably absorbed in the process. Others wandered around the store, and drew and photographed different model interiors. Meanwhile we talked about art and mused about Robert and Therèse's lives. Onlookers expressed surprise at finding twenty art students at work in a model living room and admired their drawing skills. By placing an historical practice squarely in the present, the drawing session added a new layer of fictionality to an already deliberately constructed space.

Conclusion

In which ways can contemporary art students interact with historical educational methods and objects? And how can the history of the art academy reverberate into and complicate present-day art academy instruction? These were the guiding questions that informed our experimental and performative didactic approach in the course *Deconstructing Instructions*.

We found that hands-on interaction with the didactic objects and the re-enactment of historical teaching methods in contemporary settings offered new insights into artistic practices from the past and the present. Exploring the time-consuming activity of drawing after plaster casts, we found that it (a) leads to an increased understanding and appreciation of these historical practices and (b) reinforces the reflective attitude of the students towards historical as well as their own contemporary artistic practices. Through the hands-on interaction with the objects and methods, students ask questions which they otherwise might not have asked – questions about for example the definition and meaning of skill, the connotations of idealized anatomies, plaster as a reproductive material, and so on. This reflective attitude was also visible in the individual creative processes of our students during the 16-week course (omitted here for reasons of privacy).

All in all, what we hope to have imparted on the students is a way of reflecting on notions of skill, influence, continuity and discontinuity within their own disciplines. We think engaging with the material and didactic history of art can engender a multifaceted and layered approach to making and understanding contemporary art. Introducing historical methods from art education makes contemporary art students reflect on the past and present of their discipline, making them aware of the origin of their own implicit assumptions about skill.

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Contributor details

Henrike Scholten is a visual artist, researcher and educator from the Netherlands. Scholten's artistic practice is mostly based in drawing and investigates historicity, corporeality and early modern visual language. She holds a bachelor's degree in fine art at Minerva Art Academy in Groningen and a research master's degree in arts and cultural studies at the University of Groningen. Scholten is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Utrecht within an ERC-funded project titled DURARE (Dynamics of the Durable: A History of Making Things Last in the Visual and Decorative Arts).

Contact: Drift 6, 3512 BS Utrecht, the Netherlands.

E-mail: h.scholten@uu.nl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3846-0403>

Vanessa van 't Hoogt is an art historian and educator working and living in the Netherlands. She is currently doing her Ph.D. research at the University of Groningen in the NWO project 'Curious hands: Moving making to the core of education'. Her research master's thesis examined how contemporary artist in residence at the Rijksakademie make use of the teaching collection of this nowadays post-academic institution. She teaches various courses at the Faculty of Arts and the Medical Faculty at the University of Groningen.

Contact: Oude Boteringestraat 34, 9712 GK Groningen, the Netherlands.

E-mail: v.van.t.hoogt@rug.nl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5340-8008>

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