

Paradox as Praxis: Toward a Living University of the Arts

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Introduction: The Urgency of Paradox



Across Dutch higher arts education, a growing tension has become visible. Institutions are being asked to guarantee social safety, accountability, and transparency while also fostering creativity, experimentation, and critique. These demands arise from genuine care yet often work against the very conditions that make artistic learning possible. When safety becomes procedural rather than relational and when compliance replaces trust, the social body of the school begins to harden.

New legislation, such as the forthcoming *Wet Vrij en Veilig Onderwijs* (expected 2026), have intensified the demand for control and measurability. Within this climate, discomfort is often treated as danger and contradiction as failure. Yet, as bell hooks (1994) reminds us, genuine learning requires the courage to engage discomfort within community. The vitality of the arts depends on friction: on the meeting of difference, the tension between form and freedom, and the willingness to remain with what cannot easily be resolved.

Our work within Workspace Social Sculpture (WSS) arises from this urgency. WSS is an ongoing inquiry at ArtEZ into how paradox can be lived as a creative and institutional practice by students, educators, and administrators working together in cycles of dialogue, reflection, and renewal. We

understand paradox not as a problem to be solved but as the rhythm of life itself, the pulse through which communities learn to stay alive in complexity.

This text introduces *Paradox-as-Praxis* as a framework for cultivating aliveness across three interwoven domains: dialogue, pedagogy, and leadership. Together these form what might be called a living university of the arts: a social sculpture in ongoing motion, constantly forming those who participate in it while simultaneously being formed and reformed through their participation.

Paradox as Ontological Orientation



Ontology refers to the ways we understand being itself, the orientation through which life, learning, and institutions come into existence and sustain themselves in relation. To describe paradox as an ontological stance is to affirm that contradiction is not a deviation from order but the very texture of existence.

Thinkers such as Martin Buber (1970) and Paul Ricœur (1992) describe human life as unfolding in the between, the relational field in which meaning arises through encounter. Paradox belongs to this field. Opposites such as stability and change, risk and safety, self and other are not mutually exclusive; they generate one another in continuous exchange.

Byung-Chul Han (2021) argues that contemporary Western societies have become palliative, seeking to remove pain and thereby diminishing vitality. Hartmut Rosa (2019) similarly observes that the acceleration of modern life erodes resonance, the capacity to remain in a responsive relationship with the world. When educational institutions replace dialogue with protocol or outsource discomfort to therapy, they participate in this wider cultural anaesthesia.

A paradoxical ontology resists such flattening. It recognises that learning, like breathing, depends on contraction and expansion. As Gootjes (2024) notes, regeneration is not harmony restored but rhythm rediscovered. To live with paradox is to move with the cycles of depletion and renewal that sustain creativity and life itself.

Artistic Grounding: Beuys and the Social Organism



Joseph Beuys' concept of *Soziale Plastik*, or *social sculpture*, offers the artistic ground for this orientation. Beuys (2010) proposed that "everyone is an artist," meaning that all human actions participate in shaping the social organism. The university, seen through this lens, is not a mechanism for knowledge transfer but a living artwork composed of gestures, conversations, and decisions.

To work artistically within such an organism is to treat governance, pedagogy, and administration as aesthetic processes. Every meeting, critique, or informal conversation is a sculptural act that shapes the institution's evolving form. This perspective invites sensitivity to both form and formlessness, to the dialogue between structure and emergence. As Beuys suggested, social sculpture is never finished; its life depends on our willingness to engage creatively with tension and uncertainty.

Beuys' vision resonates with Rosa's (2019) idea of resonance and with Freire's (1970) notion of praxis, reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. In each case, the creative act becomes ethical when it is directed toward sustaining the vitality of relation.

Pedagogical Grounding: Critical Pedagogy and the Practice of Freedom



If Beuys offers an artistic ontology, critical pedagogy offers the ethical and political foundation. Paulo Freire (1970) described education as the practice of freedom, a process through which teachers and learners unveil and transform their world together. bell hooks (1994, 2003) extended this by envisioning the classroom as a community rooted in love, vulnerability, and critique.

In this lineage, the educator is a leading-learner rather than an expert. Dialogue replaces transmission, curiosity replaces control, and authority becomes relational. As Freire warned, leaders who impose rather than engage “do not organise the people, they manipulate them” (p. 178). Britzman (2009) deepens this insight by calling education an “impossible profession,” one that perpetually exposes teacher and student to the limits of mastery.

These commitments are currently taking form through the evolving *Certificate in Critical Art-Pedagogy*, co-developed at the ArtEZ Academy of Theatre and Dance. Emerging from the shared inquiry of artist-educators, students, and institutional partners, this process positions teaching as social sculpture: an unfolding dialogue between artmaking, pedagogy, and institutional culture.

Grounded in Freire, hooks, Biesta (2010, 2017), Beuys (2010), and Mignolo (2011), the Certificate is less a programme than a living inquiry, continually re-shaped through collaboration. It explores how education can become a site of aesthetic, ethical, and social transformation.

Participants work through six seminar cycles combining theoretical study, artistic experimentation, and critical reflection. They learn to navigate the paradoxes at the heart of arts education: freedom

and responsibility, safety and risk, individuality and collectivity. In this way, the Certificate serves as the pedagogical strand of Paradox-as-Praxis, cultivating educators capable of sustaining aliveness in complexity.

Institutional Grounding: Complexity and Leadership



The same dynamics that animate the classroom also shape institutional life. Complexity theorists such as Ralph Stacey (2010) and Chris Mowles (2015) describe organisations as complex responsive processes of relating, networks that evolve through local interactions rather than central control. Leadership, from this view, is not a function but a relational art of participation.

At ArtEZ, this understanding underpins the emerging *Paradox Work Fellowship: Leading with Paradox, Complexity, and Creativity*, which grows from the same participatory ethos as the Certificate. Rather than a fixed programme, the Fellowship is a collaborative process through which educators, students, and leaders explore paradox as a condition of institutional life.

Developed within the context of Workspace Social Sculpture and in dialogue with ongoing governance reform, the Fellowship invites cross-institutional participation and local adaptation. It is designed not to prescribe solutions but to hold space for inquiry: how can leadership become a creative and relational practice that sustains the aliveness of the whole?

Participants from across faculties engage in reflective inquiry around tensions such as efficiency and experimentation or equity and excellence. They learn, as Mowles (2015) suggests, to stay with uncertainty long enough for meaning to emerge collectively. Rosa's (2019) language of resonance again proves useful: institutions come alive when those within them experience mutual responsiveness.

Together the Fellowship and the Certificate demonstrate how *Paradox-as-Praxis* moves across scales, from the intimacy of pedagogy to the complexity of governance, forming a shared culture of reflection and renewal within the living university.

The Social as Living Weather



Social life, like the natural world, depends on movement between extremes. Wind arises from pressure differences, vitality from oscillation. Gootjes (2024) describes regeneration as a movement “from exhaustion to renewed vitality.” The university, too, breathes through contrast and variation.

When institutions pursue perpetual harmony, they create still water where nothing grows. Rosa (2019) calls for resonant orientation, a sensibility attuned to what is moving, stuck, or silenced. Han (2021) adds that the refusal of pain is the refusal of transformation. Learning to orient within this social weather requires practices of dialogue, reflection, and pause.

Paradox-as-Praxis provides such rhythm. It is a form of maintenance art, echoing Beuys’ view that social sculpture is never complete. Through ongoing cycles of attention and renewal, the institution remains porous and alive.

Invitation



We offer this work as an open invitation to colleagues, students, and institutions across the SAC KUO network and beyond. Paradox-as-Praxis is not a finished model but a shared orientation that becomes real only through collective experimentation. We invite universities, academies, and art schools that are facing similar tensions to collaborate with us in co-creating site-specific iterations of this work—through dialogue, residencies, and participatory workshops that bring together students, educators, and policy makers.

Our wish is not to export a method but to join existing communities of practice in exploring how paradox, dialogue, and creativity can renew institutional life. Through collaboration, we hope to nurture a wider ecology of inquiry in which social sculpture becomes a practice of governance as much as of art and education.

We are particularly interested in collaborating with those who wish to cultivate spaces of learning and leadership grounded in dialogue, relational ethics, and creative experimentation. Through partnerships, residencies, and collective research, we hope to explore how Workspace Social Sculpture with *Paradox-as-Praxis* can take root in diverse institutional ecologies and contribute to the wider movement for renewal in higher arts education. This may for instance take the form of co-creating institutional dialogues and open ateliers or exploring pedagogical or institutional interventions.

Together we can learn how to hold tension as a source of vitality, how to keep the question of the good open, and how to reimagine our universities as living artworks that breathe through difference and renewal.

As Beuys (2010) affirmed, art is the only possibility for evolution. For Freire (1970), education was the practice of freedom. Brought together within a living understanding of the university, these traditions remind us that transformation begins not with certainty but with courageous relation, the willingness to stay present in the movement between.

As Gootjes (2024) suggests, regeneration depends on rhythm rather than resolution. Through this rhythm of paradox, dialogue, and collective creation, the university remains a living system—never finished, always becoming.



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We warmly invite you to reach out so we can explore, together, how best to support you and your institution.



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