



CONDUCTING COINCIDENCE

The art studio as a space of suspension

Kasia Dembinski

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INTRODUCTION

This research is about how to cultivate conditions for artists in education to develop a studio practice by creating or recognising a suspended space. My focus group is teenagers and young adults, who are on the cusp of becoming independent from the institutional learning environment and are beginning to establish their own art practices. I see the need to encourage ambiguity and spontaneity in our learning, for them to become unburdened by the weight of expectation and outcome focused making during their time in education and thereafter. Consequently, my intention has been to encourage students to develop their intuition and independence in art making, by participating in process led learning in a studio environment.

My practice as an artist and educator is based in the context of The Netherlands in 2023 and more specifically, my interventions have taken place in Rotterdam and the surrounding area, where I live and work. The lack of appropriate studio spaces is evident

both anecdotally amongst fellow makers and present in the media. The collective 'Atelier Unie', whose aim is to coordinate artists and studio providers and assess shortages, conducted a 2020 survey of Rotterdam artists concerning studio space. The results demonstrated that there is a severe lack of studio spaces available in Rotterdam, out of a total 244 respondents, 67% were searching for a studio space and 30% had no studio space at all.¹ It is increasingly difficult to obtain suitable artists studio space to work professionally and inside education institutions, classroom settings are more common than designated or made for purpose studio spaces.

The Dutch media contains many accounts of artists struggling to sustain a studio practice, such as Sebastian Harquin who was interviewed for in De Volkskrant newspaper, he says: I hear every day how difficult it is for

¹ Martin, T. and S. Setola. and T. Walskaar. and S. Van Wettum. and P. De Jonge. (2020, december). *Groot Rotterdams Atelier Enquete, Resultaten*.

artists to find an affordable studio. Friends went to work at home. That's not an option for me.²

The problem is not unique to Rotterdam, in other big cities artists are struggling to sustain a studio based practice. In her book, 'Artists in the City: SPACE in '68 and Beyond' Anna Harding writes:

“Practices, studio sizes and lifestyles have had to adjust to the challenge of living in a congested and increasingly expensive, yet stimulating, city. Vital resources, such as studio space and alternative arts venues, should not be taken for granted. Without them, London's preeminence as a creative city is at risk.”³

This is a bleak prospect for artists emerging from education, and I put forward this research as a counter offer to prevent a stagnation in the artists working process during more difficult circumstances relating to studio

² Dirks, B. (2022, 16 May). *Een kunstenaar heeft genoeg aan een rotplek om te kunnen creëren. [An artist just needs a lousy place to be able to create].* De Volkskrant.

³ Tapper, J. (2018, 17 March) *London will lose creative crown if rents keep forcing artists out.* The Guardian.

space, in or outside an institution. Whilst acknowledging the serious problem that a lack of studio imposes on an artist and detriment to their practice it can present, my work supports the artist during these difficult circumstances, without erasing the relevance of those circumstances or proposing a false equivalence between suspending space and having a studio.

The methodology I have developed during this research is not intended as a substitute for specifically designated and appropriate spaces for studio work. Instead, the methods I offer are intended to 'suspend' an existing environment, taking the artist in residence format of temporary adaptation to a space and applying it in institution settings. I therefore set out to gain an understanding of what a 'suspended' studio practice can be, especially when a physical studio is unattainable. I hope that gaining an understanding of how to have studio practice without always having a physical studio space will help students to have a sustainable practice in the future.

SUSPENSION

At the inception of this research, my intention was to take the format of a traditional studio space and place it into an educational context, to exist as a 'suspended space' in which to practise process led learning. I have since reviewed this, to include the potential for recognising and creating a space of suspension and my role in facilitating this. In the article 'Educational states of suspension' written by educators Tyson E. Lewis and Daniel Friedrich, the authors speculate about the implications of Masschelein and Simons ideas about the school being a suspended environment.

"Masschelein and Simons (2013) argue that the root meaning of school is to be found in the Greek word 'schole' which can be translated as 'free time'. Such free time contains within it a radical promise to 'give everyone, regardless of background, natural talent or aptitude, the time and space to leave their known environment, rise above themselves and renew (and thus change in unpredictable ways) the world'".

As well as investigating suspension as an outcome, fundamental to this research is recognising what a studio, both in and outside a school, is and suspending pedagogy within that space, inviting unexpected outcomes.

"... the unique potential of the school in the ancient Greek polis was precisely its capacity to suspend the 'natural' order linking one's race, class, and gender to one's allotted social role. Although this might never have been realized in any historical form, we read Masschelein and Simons as theorizing the idea of the school which in itself made possible such suspension...If the school is a detached, suspended form of life, then the subject matter which is taught in such a school is itself inoperative, detached from immediate utility and daily life, it's potentiality released from the (need) to actualise itself in socially productive forms." ⁴

⁴ Lewis, Tyson E. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, Educational States of Suspension*. Educational Philosophy and Theory, 30 January 2015

CONTEXT

The context in which I have focused most of this research is Acato Rotterdam, an education centre for young adults and teenagers who are not in mainstream education for a variety of reasons. Primarily, referring to a clash between Dutch educational institutions' procedures with neurodivergent students' needs. I have been teaching art and studio practice at Acato for four years, and my role also includes being a student mentor. The students and I have established a trusting relationship over a period of months and in some cases years, in which we have found mutual understanding and respect for one another and our shared space. The trust that we have established helps us to navigate through issues together and we try to take an honest and reflective approach when we encounter difficult situations.

At Acato, there is a group of around ten participants, aged 15 to 25, who work in and around the studio space at Acato. They have consented to participate in the research and understand that changes to their ongoing

consent will be respected. At the outset, I was sceptical about whether this research would be well situated at Acato because I had the impression that it would have to happen despite the challenges of the context, namely, a lack of structure or contrast more commonly associated with mainstream education institutions in which to create suspended studio space. I was also aware of the necessity of being mindful of neurodivergent students' needs and how this would translate in our processing of the space. However, I was advised to make use of the possibility I was being offered to look closely at my educational space over a long term period of time - to not look away but look again.

It has since become clear to me that, through conducting my research at Acato, I have had the chance to stay with my current group of students for a challenging period of time these past two school years and make research as a path to walk together and work out the way as it unravels ahead of us. These same challenges which I saw as a

hindrance actually gave me the opportunity to develop a sincere and meaningful research, allowing me to develop this research and both my practice intensely, receiving constant, honest feedback.

To give an impression of some of the most frequent participants - Juul is funny, excitable and ambitious, we leave each other notes and tangerines. Sean is kind and sharp. He sometimes sings self written folk songs to us. Anouk is resilient, determined and cheeky. Luka reads and critiques my writing and we discuss and edit together. Her notes include “Is this creating unnecessary conflict?”, “Should the research question focus more on the effect of the space rather than its implementation?”, “C’mon, say it like you mean it!” and “Bold is cool”.



The hands of people working at Acato, 2022

POSITIONING

Since I started teaching, my approach has been student led. I found this challenging at Acato because, with no externally set targets and no curriculum for the arts, I understood a student-led approach would mean needing to stay one step ahead of the students, to preempt what they needed. I have since asked myself, am I assuming what the student needs? Subsequently, I've been experimenting with finding out what they need by saying yes to their requests and releasing us both from the usefulness of our activities or the outcome of a task. Instead, focusing on suspension as an outcome in itself.

My research question is:

How can the art studio as a space of suspension be meaningfully introduced in educational institutions?

The value of my research is evident in moments of attention, where I see the effect of my interventions, where my invitations to participate are accepted or where

I feel my efforts are reciprocated, not on the measurement of students' success or having instant recognition that the work is worth doing. The distinction between students leaping with me from step to step in a process of experimentation, as opposed to calculating a whole route to an end point and following it, is key to the student developing intuition and trust in their own practices and abilities. My thesis is for them, and for others who are in the position of preparing students to be artists in their own right.

DEVELOPING A VISUAL LANGUAGE

As a visual artist, the process of making art which relates to my research subjects has helped me to recognise the circularity within my practice, the education side feeding the art and vice versa. In both my visual art and education practices, I recognise the recurring themes of metaphorical significance and conducting coincidence. Making art as visual research, I was using the process of

making art as a lens through which to understand the events which surround my research, concerning both the theoretical reading and practical presentations. Through making these pieces, I was also establishing a visual language to communicate with my peers and students. Over the course of this research, I have used visual and performative artistic expression as well as written work, through which to study. A selection of the relevant works are detailed here.

This is the long way home

The first visual representation of my research was developed intuitively, during the first days of the Masters Education in Art. I struggled to find a process based link between writing an essay and making an art piece, not that there had to be one necessarily to give value to either but as an attempt to be honest and communicate in an authentic way. I simultaneously produced the essay in the given format of writing and in sculpture, presenting both to the class. I drew parallels between making the sculpture and the essay and this became the first evidence of my visual research. The sculpture is made from

painting on tile and stone, including a performance element of erasing and re-writing the text 'This is the long way home'.



'This is the long way home', 2020

Thug Ant

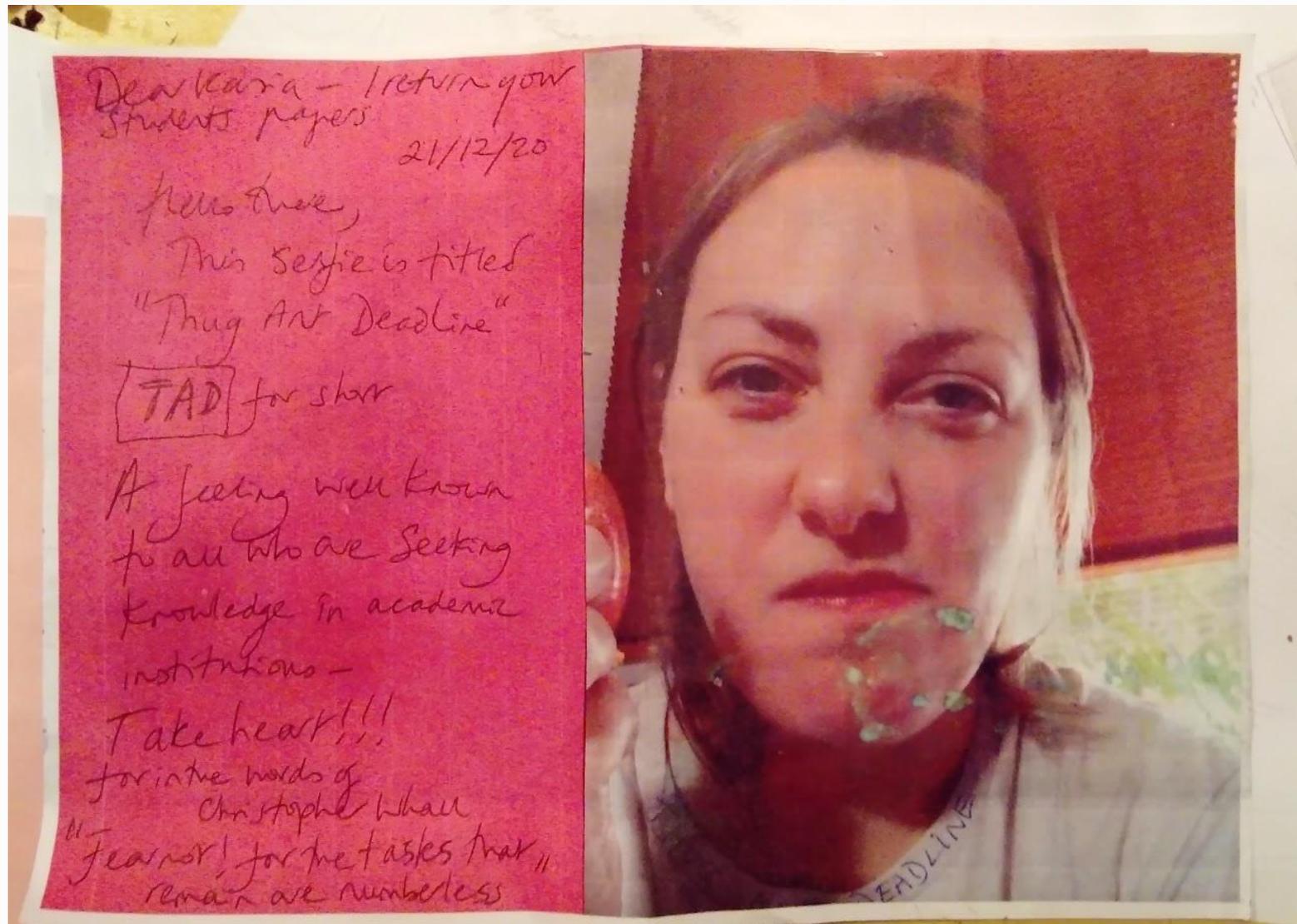
I sent a photo of myself to my mum, eating an apple with the caption 'I look like a Thug Ant' and I subsequently received a letter from my mum, with the acronym 'T.A.D.' Thug Ant Deadline. I briefly developed a thug ant character, with the purpose of misbehaving, as I realised both my students and I were bored and equating educational institutions with behaving ourselves. My invented character of thug ant was a reaction to this. It was a concept for a performance character who could be rebellious.

The accompanying text was:

“Thug Ant is a troublemaker, they are subversive, abrasive and mischievous. They are happiest in dim lighting with snacks. They don't thrive in the daylight tax paying, teeth brushing world, they itch to blurt out things and dance or be allowed to stay silent. No homework for thug ant, thanks all the same, they don't want it. Thug ant could be you. Thug ant makes a big mess for students to clear up.”



Double exposure at Acato, 2021



The 'I look like a thug ant' correspondence, 2020

An apple for the teacher's desk

I made a series of two apple sculptures, originating from the concept of the student putting an apple on the teacher's desk as a gift. Through this association, the apple on the desk has become synonymous with a good, conformative student. At the time of making the first apple, this seemed the opposite of the behaviour that I hoped to encourage in my studio space. Apples also symbolise knowledge in art history, and I combined this symbol with a common message I learned during my own time at school - my first apple says 'Learn the rules before you break them.' I was ruminating on the cycle of rule following and rule breaking, which has often created unnecessary conflict in my practice and consequently made the second iteration of the apple after around a year of unlearning and learning at the Masters Education in Art, It says 'Learn the rules *and* break them' denoting the shift in my practice.



'An apple for the teacher's desk', iteration 1, 2020
and iteration 2, 2022



During my making process I carved my message into an apple during online classes, 2020

Masters in Education in Art Collage

I made a series of collages, depicting my experiences at the Masters Education in Art using an iconography style to symbolise the passing of knowledge. During the making process, I read about the truth of revealing the process, referenced in 'The studio' edited by Jens Hoffmann⁵ in which artist Daniel Buren writes about the shift in context between studio and museum affecting the work:

“...the reality of the work, it's 'truth', it's relationship to it's creator and place of creation, that was irretrievably lost in this transfer (from studio to museum). In the studio we generally find finished work, work in progress, abandoned work, sketches- a collection of visible evidence viewed simultaneously that allows an understanding of process; it is this aspect of the work that is extinguished by the museums desire to 'install'.”⁵

In my practice, I research and collect traces of our moments of attention. By combining and presenting these traces in my work, I strive to make them resonate with others. I create a visual representation of them to serve as a gestural image, as someone who can offer a glimpse into their qualities. I capture scenes of ambiguous value, though 'conducting coincidence' A term which I created to encapsulate my methodology. Metaphorical meaning is a running thread in all my work, in which I use layering to combine objects and places with symbolic natural elements. In doing so, I draw out and highlight their value as well as create a new reality.

⁵ Hoffmann, Jens 'The Studio, documents of contemporary art' Whitechapel gallery and the MIT press 2012. p. 88



The collage in progress, 2022

School photo day

As part of my role at Acato, I decided to create an intervention as an artist in residence in the school which would form the research, instead of recording the situation already present there. I invited the students and staff to have their picture taken on analogue film and give them butterfly wings as a second layer, by double exposing the film. I chose butterflies because of a metaphorical cocoon/ metamorphosis association I had been considering in relation to our space. The students and I set up a backdrop using a cardboard arch shape, reminiscent of iconography, which relates to my previous research collages. During the photoshoot, the students held the backdrop for each other. It was important that you could see the hands holding the backdrop instead of it being stuck to the wall, as it represents the support behind the people at Acato and crucially, breaks the staged scene of the portrait, removing the illusion and bringing it back to a 'real' image. It's honest staging, a theme that returned later in my work with conducting coincidence using double exposure as a methodology- a performance which can also be the truth.

Artist Wolfgang Tillmans, interviewed for the Whitechapel gallery series 'In the studio', speaks of the possibilities created in allowing coincidence in the making process:

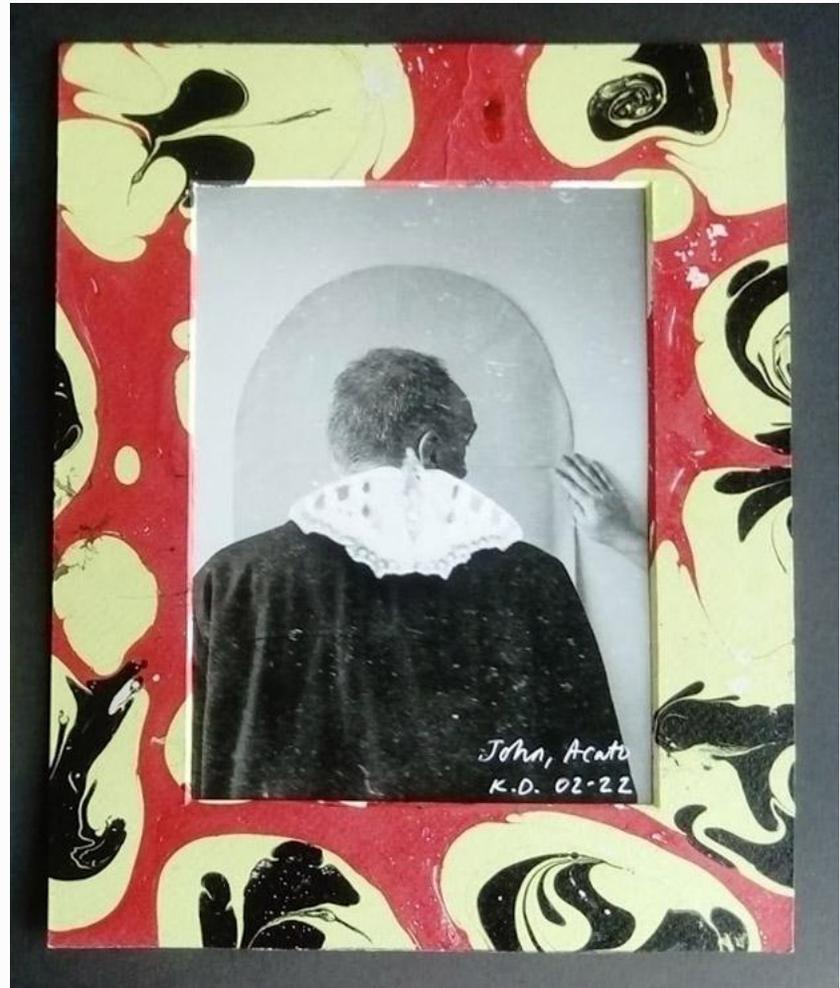
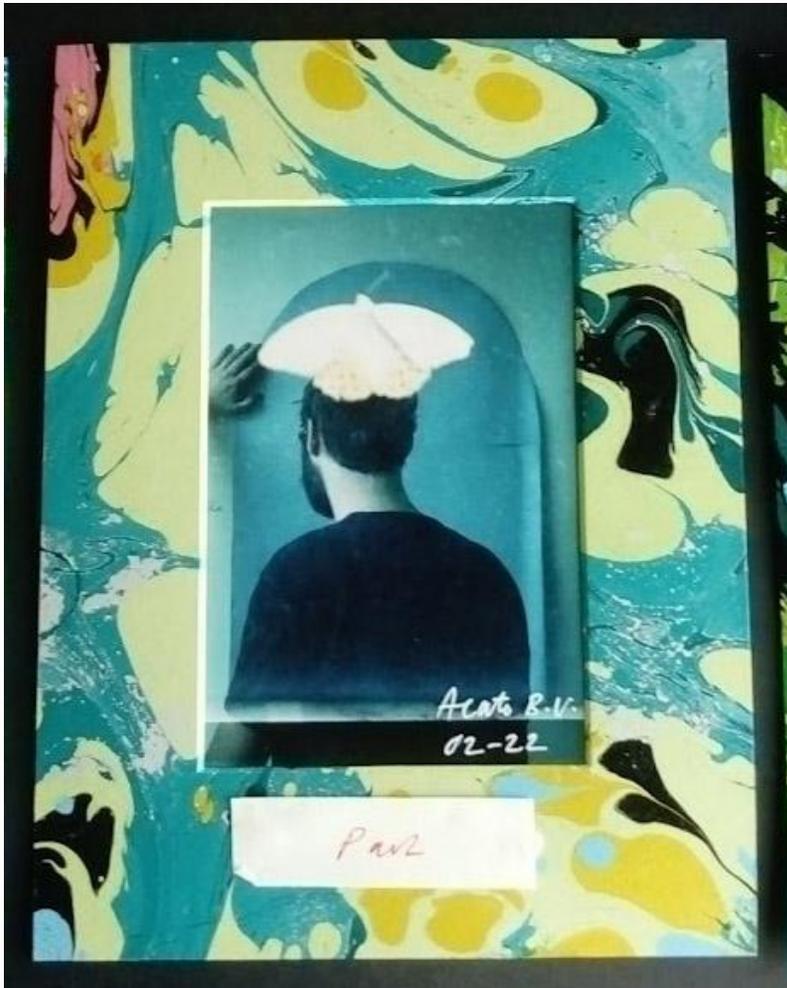
“There is not a hard line between my portraiture and my abstraction... there's an assumption that abstraction is more experimental. But all of my work allows for the mistakes. Allows for chance to come into play in a skilled and controlled environment.”⁶

I intended to double expose the films so that the butterfly wings would appear on the subjects' backs, and we posed them accordingly, but the unexpected result is more interesting: the wings sometimes covered their faces. This created an antithesis of the familiar school portrait. Rather than identifying the subject, I made a more anonymous photo, in which the subject could recognise their own features. This means that the portrait really was for them.

⁶ Finkel, Jori *'In the studio: Wolfgang Tillmans'* Art + Auction May 2006
Referenced in Hoffmann, Jens *'The Studio, documents of contemporary art'* Whitechapel gallery and the MIT press 2012 p. 53-4



The resulting photographs from school photo day, which were given to the students, 2022



Two of the final photographs from school photo day, 2022

THE STUDIO

My original understanding of what constitutes a studio came from my background as a visual artist. My own studio space is in an ex-housing block in Rotterdam, where I work on my projects, driven by both external deadlines and what sparks my attention from the collections of my works in progress, materials, detritus and debris I leave lying around in there. I work more prolifically in this space than without it and I feel drawn to it, as artist Jenny Saville describes in *The Guardian* newspaper:

“A studio changes depending on what you need at a particular time. It can be a laboratory of ideas; it can be a safe haven; it can be somewhere you don’t want to go because the work’s not going right. If I’m not in the studio I feel a magnetic-pull back to it.”⁷

⁷ Turk, G. (2012, 18 March). *Secrets of the studio - in pictures*. *The Guardian*.

In ‘The Studio - Documents of Contemporary Art’, in which artists contribute their reflections on the artist’s studio, the response of French sculptor Christian Bultansky resonated with me. He says:

“Really there’s nothing here. It’s like a place where you live. The only useful thing about the studio is that after some time you can imagine something. A forest, for example. I walk in it. Today it is nothing for me, but perhaps in two weeks it will become something”⁸

An important element of this reflection by Bultansky is that you must speculate. A studio has the potential to provide the influence of a cocoon for this speculation period in making work, being separate from other spaces and therefore allowing for tinkering and development. This incubation is referred to by Pascal Gielen in his contribution to the book ‘Mobile Autonomy, Exercises in Artist’s Self-Organisation’, in which he writes:

⁸ Christian Bultansky, Studio visit, *Tate magazine* no 2, summer 2005.

“The first destination for most artists was called ‘the domestic space’. That means home, the artist’s studio, a place to experiment and create in peace, free of any obligations. Here artists can work at their own pace, have their artistic efforts judged in confidence and intimacy by their near and dear ones, friends and lovers. Every artist needs such an oasis of calm and confidence, a garage where they can tinker undisturbedly at the engine to get it running at all.”

The Warsaw studio of artist Edward Kransinski’s studio is discussed by Joanna Mytkowska and Andrzej Przywara. They address the incubation and privacy a studio can provide during the artistic process:

“The studio was not a typical artists studio, and we were always reluctant to call it a ‘studio’. Kransinski never let anybody see him ‘working’ and was indignant whenever someone called what he was doing ‘work’. If he invited anyone to the studio, it was to show the final effect rather than the process itself. ... Transforming one’s life into a work of art is one of the few forms of asceticism available

today. His studio was a microcosm, a world arranged his own way.”⁹

As mentioned in my positioning, through this research I have expanded my understanding of what is possible without a fixed working space, in order to be resilient and progress despite whatever circumstances artists are faced with and recognise that artists autonomy does not have to be dependent on this external factor. My research does not suggest a competition between nomadic forms of studio and more fixed ones. However, over the past few years, having a lack of consistent studio space has hindered my art practice significantly, and I started to realise I need to gain more agency surrounding this or my reliance on studio space would continue to be to the detriment of my practice. An important realisation for me has been that a fixed studio space is very useful but it should not become essential or there is an increased risk of stagnation at various points in your career when a fixed studio is unattainable.

⁹ Mytkowska, Joanna and Przywara, Andrzej, ‘Edward Kransinski’s studio’ in *Who if not we should at least try to imagine the future of all this? Seven episodes on (ex) changing Europe* Artimo 2004, p.145 in Hoffmann, Jens *The Studio, documents of contemporary art* Whitechapel gallery and the MIT press 2012 p. 165

INSTITUTIONALISED ART EDUCATION

When art is taught similarly to other subjects in the curriculum; based on assessment criteria, linear progress and focus being placed on end result and public achievement, it can become formulaic and performative. I have watched my students struggle to align this with ambiguity and spontaneity, because they are conditioned to perform art rather than actually make it. We cannot expect students to study art effectively or be process led, within the outcome focused structure often imposed by institutions. As Pascal Gielen describes in 'Mobile autonomy, Exercises in Artist's Self-Organisation':

“For their part, art academies are focussing on calculating student numbers, grinding out graduates and attuning curricula to the labour market. Education in the peer space presents itself as a precisely calculated, and therefore low-risk investment. In other words, school stops being school. Or in the original Greek sense: a place to spend free time. As collective institutions, polytechnics and universities seem unable to keep market and power outside the walls. They can no longer guarantee their

students' 'freedom', not least the freedom to reflect with the necessary distance on this same market and power. In effect, universities are losing their autonomy to determine what is and is not relevant knowledge.”¹⁰

This is not to say there is no autonomy inherently within institutions but there could be substantially more, especially in the subjective and complex art department. Institutions also provide an essential component in the production of art, as Gielen explains :

“No autonomy without heteronomy, i.e., no artistic authenticity and idiosyncrasy without a heterogeneous social network. Similarly: no modern and contemporary art without institutions, no individuality without collectivity, no art without culture.”¹¹

Being simultaneously a teacher and a student is interesting for me, it provides a combination of perspectives which allows me to draw parallels between

¹⁰ Mobile Autonomy, Exercises in Artists' Self-Organization - A Caravan of Freedom, Mobile Autonomy beyond 'Auto-Mobility', Dockx, Nico. Pascal Gielen, 2015. p. 73

¹¹ Mobile Autonomy, Exercises in Artists' Self-Organization - A Caravan of Freedom, Mobile Autonomy beyond 'Auto-Mobility', Dockx, Nico. Pascal Gielen, 2015. p. 69

my experiences at the Master Education in Arts and those of students at Acato. Specifically, our relationship with failure and performative success, a desire to create authentic work and the hesitation we have experienced with relinquishing a certain amount of control associated with wanting to measure our success.

For example, I was talking to my student Sean in the Acato kitchen, about my presentation and his work. I recounted that I had told my class at MEiA about his painting, how moving and interesting some of us had found it, because he had painted right into the edge of the paper. I didn't want to talk to Sean about my perceived significance of this too much as I think there is a danger of over analysing, so decided just to let it be a moment of attention. He responded by saying he didn't remember doing it, and returned to baking a cake. It's not of the utmost importance whether he was profoundly changed by making it, it's about the fact he participated at all. It was a moment of attention, and these moments accumulate and form your practice through studying.

DEVELOPING METHODOLOGIES

Photography

Instead of talking to my student Sean about his painting, I photographed the painting for him in a way I hoped would articulate its importance. In a supportive gesture, one of my students, Juul, held the painting in the right light by our window, and then another student, Luca, and I had the following exchange:

Luca, referring to me photographing Sean's painting: "Is this art?"

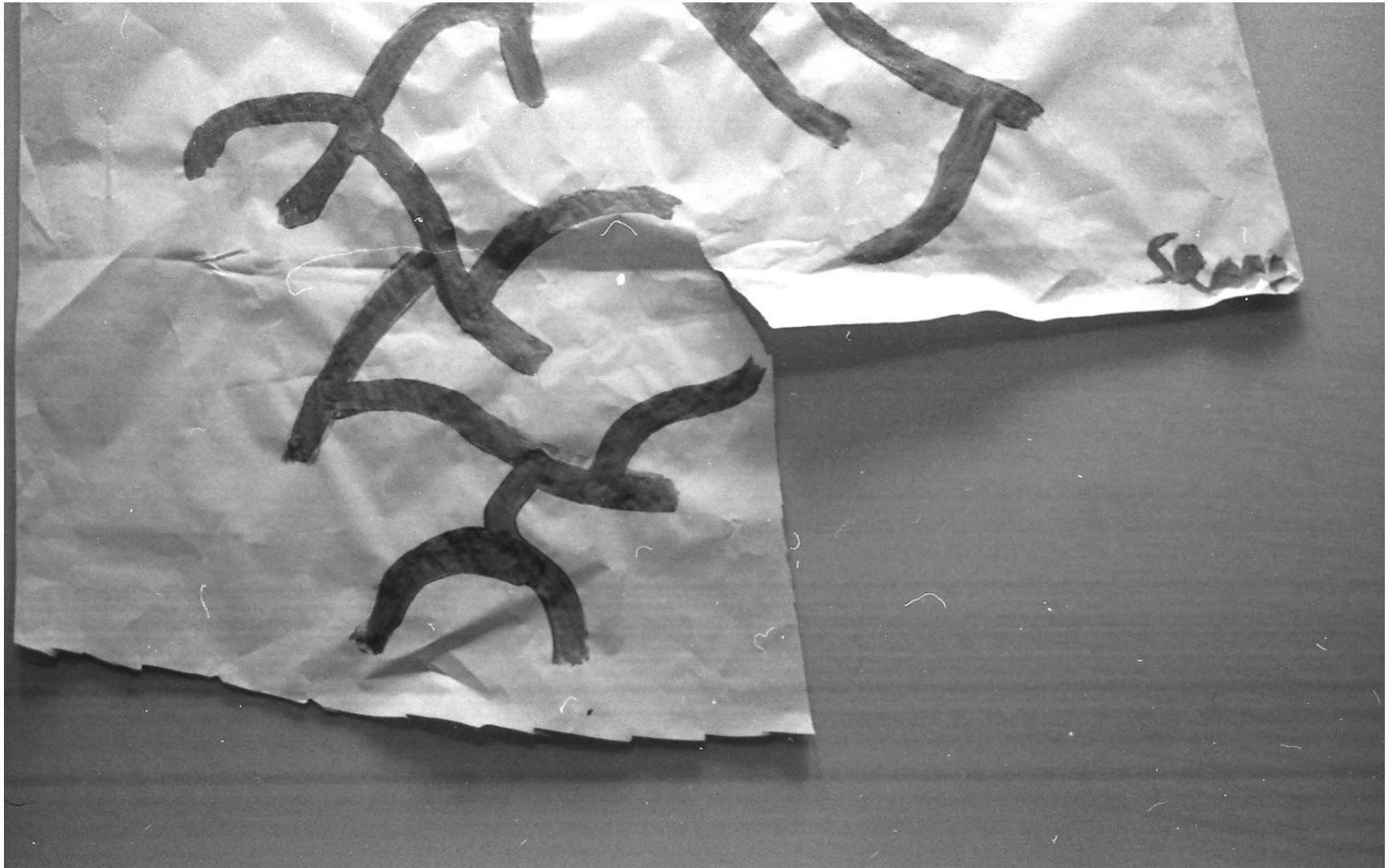
Me: "Yep"

Luca: "Is the photograph also going to be art"

Me: "Yep"

Luca: "Everything's art?"

Me: "Yep"



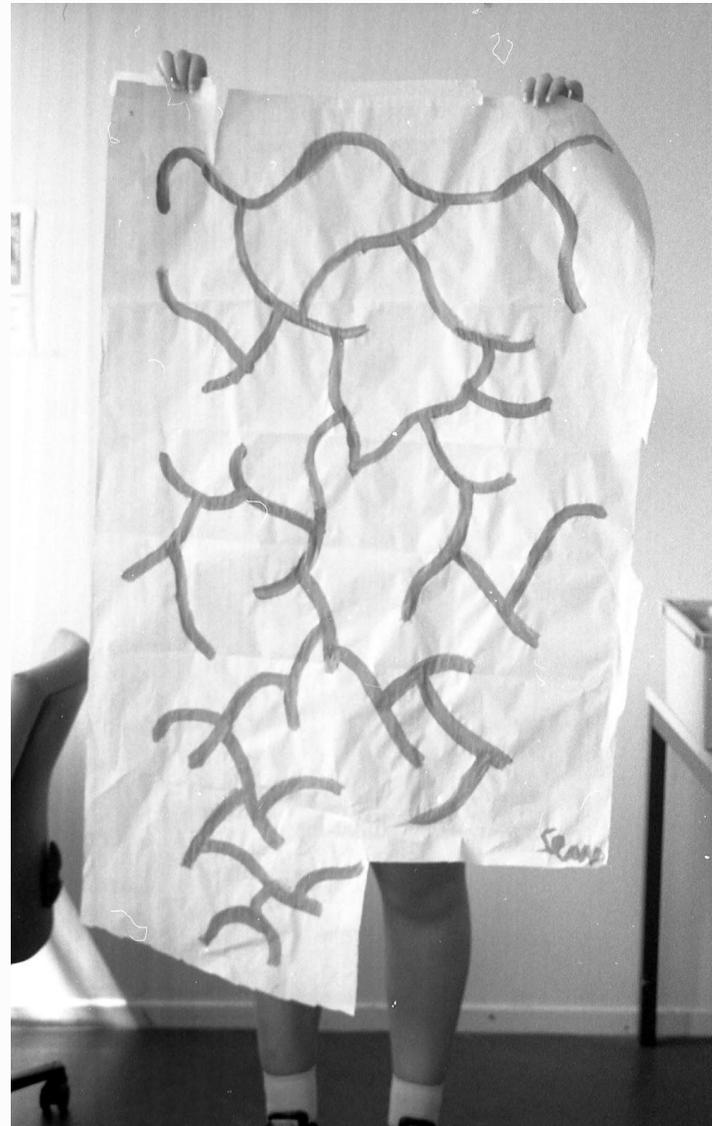
My photograph of the edge of Sean's painting , 2021

Similarly to the school photo day intervention, I used photography to process this event.

Artist Ian Wallace talks about photography in the making process:

“When I began to make photographic documentation of my workshope in the late 1960s, I came to realise that this documentation could be considered as a part of the work process, and even as a finished work in itself. It also became apparent that the space or place of production, the studio as an actual as well as a symbolic environment, would be a necessary element in the imagery of this process[...]

The act of my student Juul and I moving the painting into the light and photographing it before carefully storing it, and when I later developed and scanned the film, was part of my teaching them from my position as an artist.



Juul holds up the painting for Sean, 2021

Paper cutting

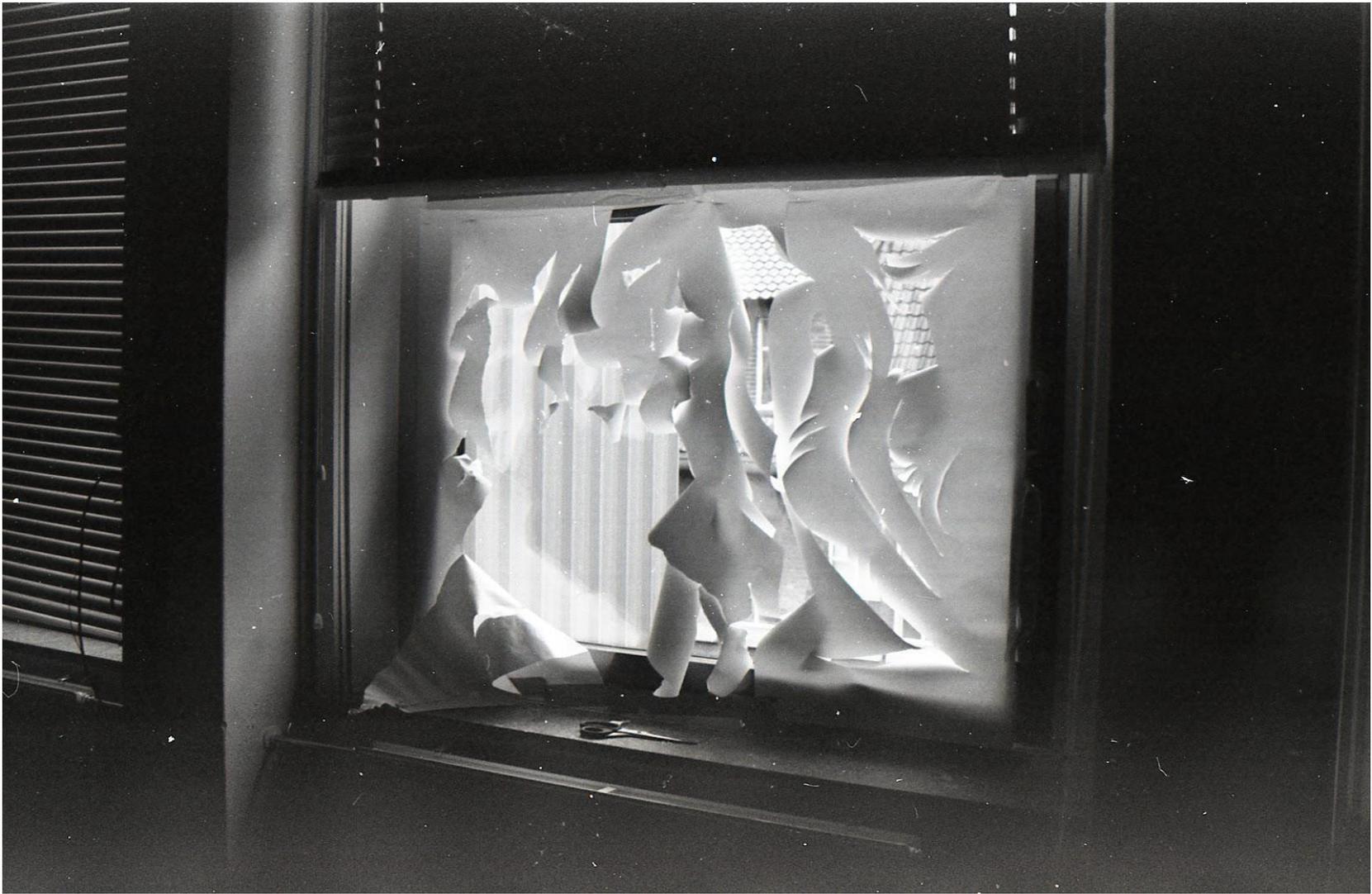
An activity I developed at Acato is collaborative abstract paper cutting. The first step is to cover the windows of the available room with paper. I use thin 'chip shop paper' which is easy to cut without ripping. Next, we choose music to inspire your making, and help create an immersive experience and motivate students. We cut into the paper, making abstract patterns. During the cutting, you are not allowed to talk, to avoid shifting focus from the cutting and observing how the space changes. When everyone stops cutting the activity is over and we gather to walk around the space, discussing the patterns and the effect the activity has had on the space, both pragmatically and perceptively.

The potential outcome is that making this piece together encourages abstract and intuitive thinking and participants are asked to observe and reflect on how or if the room changes as light filters into the space through the cuts. This has become one of the most common exercises I repeat in my practice and I have since

integrated it into my methodology for creating spaces of suspension, in combination with double exposure photography.



Paper cutting at Acato, 2020



Paper cutting at the Piet Zwart Institute, 2021

Letter writing

Communicating through hand written correspondence encourages me to formulate a more in depth response than an email or instant message, which are mediums which are also mediated by platform user interfaces. Through the action of finding pen and paper to consciously write, this method of communication can encourage more filtered articulation of thoughts. A letter also feels more private and intimate, because you are reading through the particular handwriting of the writer and because the letter physically enters someone else's domain to be read, and held. In my experience, this can mean that letter replies get closer to someone's honest concerns. I was encouraged to write as a methodology after reading a letter by Thomas Hirschhorn, from 'Critical Laboratory' :

*“Dear Véronique,
You asked me to express myself on the subject of publishing.
...I've always known that expressing one's thoughts in writing commits one, and that's what I've done. I like to*

commit myself, to set myself a task. I like to affirm. I like to throw a stone far ahead of me so I can try to follow its tracks.”¹²

My letter writing as methodology embodies the throwing of a stone. I have been exchanging letters with my colleagues, to ask each other questions and steer the other to a point of investigation. During my research I have written to my thesis supervisors, my colleagues, my family, and strangers. There have also been letters lost or late, having a different outcome than expected. For example, my colleague sent me an invitation with a picture of the house we would meet at in France during the school holidays, but by the time I saw it, it was after I had been there and seen the real house. She drew it as speculative but it became memory, the letter had become a suspended form of communication, connecting the concept of suspension with my communication.

¹² Lee, Lisa and Hal Foster. *Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn*. MIT Press, 2013

Every week for almost two years, I exchanged letters with my colleague Emma at Acato. The letters contained our observations and questions. I would write and stick the envelope to a wall in the middle of Acato on my work day, Wednesdays. When Emma came in on her day, Thursdays, she wrote back. Starting my working days

by reading the letter each week, I was confronted with something unexpected, bringing spontaneous elements into my working day. This helped me to reframe Acato from; being a place for lessons I planned and have the responsibility to execute, towards more process led learning with unexpected results.



‘Post’, 2022

KUNSTLAB BORNERVELD 169

I presented my paper cutting activity to children at 'Kunstlab', a project space in Rotterdam where each Saturday, primary school aged children make art together under guidance from artists, educators and parents. I hung up paper and arranged scissors and proposed the activity to the children, and no one wanted to do it. My colleague Jip van der Hek intervened at my request, introducing coloured paper and pens to use and encouraged the children to approach the paper more freely. She is a familiar face at Kunstlab and, perhaps because the children have a more established relationship with her and trust her advice, they responded by seriously considering the proposal and then the majority went to do something else. The activity was to take place in 'art lab' time, during which the students are not expecting any assignments from the adults, just guidance with their self-directed work. I placed a lot of importance in participation in the paper cutting, using it as a measure of the success of my intervention and value in the project

space. I felt resistance to one child trying to use pens because I had planned it with scissors, concerned that it was not part of the plan. Whereas, once released from the constraints of my parameters, she was the only one who put anything on the paper and worked joyfully for a considerable stretch of time.

After the activity ended, I was sitting on the edge of a sandpit reflecting with Jip about what didn't work and why, whilst having my arms painted by three year old Marwe, opening and closing my eyes when she told me to. Jip said the framing of art lab versus structured workshop days was probably relevant to how the activity was received, they are not as open to structured activities during art lab time, it is not the established practice. If the activity is a necessary launching point for making, then it is important that the children follow my instructions, but in this case, they don't need me because they are already active makers. I then considered what my role was, and observed the other adults who were present. They were

doing things that the children orbited around, cooking or making their own art, listening to questions, facilitating through being passive participants. In hindsight, sitting still having my arms painted after I'd left them to their own devices was a welcome, unexpected outcome of the day and was valuable for all of us. I let go of performative success in that moment by acknowledging the success which was present unexpectedly. I have since aligned this with the concept of 'non practising practice' which the architect Chiara Dorbolo writes about in 'Non-Practicing Practicing, Flaneusing the Streets of a Profession':

“Embracing the non-practicing practice I reject the focus on building, and the idea that the final product of the creative process is the main goal and only possible way of relating to my work. Perhaps what all my projects share with the history of architecture is the ambition to see and influence the future. Yet, I believe more in the potential to do so through the creative process rather than its end product. And in that, as I commit to exploring both freely and critically – I reserve for myself the right to fail.

It's okay to realize that I'm at a dead end, and change direction.”¹³



Marwe's painting on my arms, 2021

¹³ Strauss, Carolyn f. (ed.) *Slow Spatial Reader, Chronicles of Radical Affection*.
Dorbolo, Chiara. *Non-Practicing Practicing, Flaneusing the Streets of a Profession*, p. 129

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

At Acato, the established roles of teacher and student had led to formulaic learning. They did what I asked them to do, which was not conducive to an intuitive, spontaneous or speculative process for making art. It was also leading us all away from my original intentions, namely, to encourage agency and autonomy through gestural teaching. As opposed to seeing the students emancipated through their independence and own intuition, I saw them doing what they thought they thought was expected, even when unobserved. I have since considered the implications of implicit duress, and I underestimated its continual effect on students after they are 'freed' from restrictive education, such as at Acato where they are not actively institutionalised or instructed but often still feel pressure based on experiences engaging with teachers in the past. A lot of the effect of these experiences is internalised, and recognising this led me to adapt my teaching, becoming more focused on artistic shared process and speculative learning. As an artist in residence, I placed myself among them, in a less hierarchical and

authoritative position than I had previously occupied. I realised I could use the artist in residence format at Acato to change my approach and the dynamic of our studio space, stepping back from an interventional role to a more passive one, thereby relinquishing control and allowing for a less outcome focused education.

Ambiguity is not the enemy of clarity

Writing letters to my colleague during this time provided the reflection that there needed to be a change, because of our consensus about how boring it had become for both teacher and student. I looked at the methods of my own art practice and through the process of articulating these thoughts in writing a letter to my supervisor, I was able to see the potential of exploring the role of artist in residence, which has been consistently effective in freeing up my own art practice, within an educational institution, containing me as an artist in residence. This could become a place of suspension in which to engage in process led learning.

I was reminded of Thug Ant, how that character came to be because we were all bored and I thought misbehaving could release us but wanted to steer away from this divisive rule breaking vs. rule following cycle. My students are caught in a cycle, back and forth between freedom and rule following, between the bubble of freedom at Acato and the 'real world'. It is not my intention to perpetuate the cycle of freedom and restriction by making an art club so we can be free. Suspension is not a bubble, I want to use suspension to transcend this cycle. I think we can learn, through studio practice, to situate our art practices in the in-between spaces, not to polarise. The key to this is acknowledging that ambiguity is not the enemy of clarity and that clarity is not only found in absolutes.

Suspension of pedagogy

I read Marieke Hoekstra's position on studio based education in which she refers to the nonlinear nature of the creative process, which is something that an artist can bring to an educational institution. Hoekstra emphasises

the value of having an artist present in the space, to guide students in the creative learning process, given the artist's creative skills and knowledge of the unpredictability of research. Hoekstra also acknowledges the agency that can be present in a studio environment, stating that, in the studio the children take the lead, deciding in which direction their research and experiments will go. This relates to the potential for suspension which was evident in Kunstlab's approach, a suspension of pedagogy. Consequently, part of my approach as artist in residence has been to document and observe our studying as a passive participant, using photography. I created opportunities for the students to work with no teacher figure in the space, to allow them to use their own initiative. I did this by joining their activity so I was more absorbed into the student collective or physically going somewhere else, or doing something else, like the facilitators at Kunstlab. Sometimes the students do nothing, sometimes they start interesting discussions or work things out interesting developments amongst themselves.

Stepping back from an interventional role as teacher, I became more open to the students having agency over their time by asking what they felt drawn to, and saying yes to almost all their requests, without a value judgement. For example: “yes you can sit here with me, yes you can make a dress on the floor, yes I will put up a paper wall for you to rip through with reckless abandon, yes I will walk out to the streets with you to take weird pictures for your project, yes you can teach in art club this week, yes I will bring British tea for us all next week and teach you how to make it, yes you can dip various objects you find in the school in marbling inks.” This led to more generous responses from them: “yes we will clean up together, yes I will try to explain why I’m doing what I’m doing and yes I will join in a mystery activity on trust alone.” This has also on occasion meant: “yes, I will have a difficult discussion with you or apologise, or come back to class.” Generosity and humour from both sides is important in this process.



Screenshots from a video in which my student, Cail, cuts through a paper wall, 2021

The red wall

At Acato, I initiated a public studio space surrounding a large red wall which became dedicated to leaving work up in public view. I chose to make our studio outside of the existing art department space downstairs because I wanted to capitalise on the lively atmosphere of our upstairs communal kitchen next to the red wall to cultivate an active working environment. Being located at a physical intersection of the school, staff and students frequently walk by and look at what is happening and sometimes join or offer comments and suggestions. While this type of studio space is suitable for interactive making, the current configuration does not serve the needs of students who want incubation or prefer a calmer environment, they can retreat to a closed room nearby.

The red wall doubled as an exhibition space when needed, and has become a constantly changing space, where work can linger and be seen. I leave traces there for my students as prompts or invitations, for example a note, a book or some materials on their desks, extending

my participation in their learning outside of my physical time with them.



My student Juul with the red wall, 2022

Tuesday Morning Art Club

Through our weekly letters and meetings, my colleagues and I at Acato discussed that some of our prospective activities were unsuccessful because the students struggled to engage with more abstract and unpredictable processes in which they had no control. We found a way to encourage them and give them agency through running 'Tuesday Morning Art Club', facilitating a suspended studio environment by placing the focus of my presence back on gestural, invitations to make and not on outcome. As Alice Van der Wielen-Honinckx writes in 'Slow Spatial Reader':

“...I surrendered easily to a pleasing and gentle process of lingering attention and deep perception, I know that the indeterminacy of this space also demands responsibility. Not only because the suspension of usual modes of engaging, even with art, can cause boredom when one doesn't find a way 'in', but also because the time and space that is opened up can be used to practice contemplation just as well as absentmindedness. How

can we collectively inhabit this vague realm, full of under-identified and thus unknown things?”¹⁴

The art club is a place to practise 'tinkering'. This approach related closely to my intention to participate as an artist in residence as the focus was on shared process, wherever that may lead us. In 'Educational states of suspension' Lewis and Fredrich explore the potential in tinkering:

“...it is not uncommon to find 'perpetual tinkerers' - those who resist closure, measure, or judgement over whatever they are doing. Outside of chronological unfolding (where 'trying out' pushed toward a future evaluation) tinkering is recursive and highly experimental. Indeed, it is an educational activity released from any towards.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Strauss, Carolyn f. (ed.) *Slow Spatial Reader, Chronicles of Radical Affection.*, Van der Wielen-Honinckx, Alice. *Space as Atmosphere, Floating in a Molecular Bath.* p 94

¹⁵ Lewis, Tyson E. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, Educational States of Suspension.* Educational Philosophy and Theory, 30 January 2015

This tinkering process was very interesting artistically but it also disturbed the safety of our more predictable activities. One recurring obstacle for students was that they wanted to be in a studio environment but needed specific conditions to feel safe which were not in place and they were not always able to articulate this or ask for what they needed. We talked one on one about these

things and I found ways to accommodate their needs such as chair and table arrangements, time schedules and listening. Working this out together was constructive and helped us form a space together instead of me imposing the conditions. Art club continues to be a suspended space within Acato, for trying things out.



Art club, 2021

CONCLUSIONS

Double exposure photography

I have developed a visual research concerning the traces of our moments of attention, which we leave in the liminal spaces of our studio and learning environments. These manifest both as the 'mess' surrounding an activity and the deliberate evidence we place in the environment to acknowledge the work we have done and show it to others.

At Kunstlab, I recognised for the first time that acknowledging what is already present in a space is valuable in itself. In my research process leading up to that, I had attributed all of the value of my being there as actively intervening and needing to change the space, until I sat still enough that Marwe approached me and painted my arms. I could see it for myself but had not yet reached the point of exploring it with others. During this time I had been making gestural images using photography, and would later bring these two elements

together, forming my visual research project by using double exposure analogue photography to process liminal spaces in learning environments. This project connects all the elements of my research; exploring the studio, using double exposure photography, suspending the space through this process and providing gestural images which show suspended scenes to discuss with others.

Looking inside the microcosms created by the photographs, people can recognise the objects and places and see them obscured and reimaged by layering into suspended scenes. I isolated parts of the studio, through the lens of my camera, which has the ability to focus literally on what's through the viewfinder to the exclusion of all else, condensing the image. This is in itself an act which suspends the space. Doing this also offers a new perspective of a familiar surrounding.

The traces of our artistic practices form a library to reference- the studio is formed by its liminal spaces, its margins and its wastelands. There's potential in that space. To harness this potential you must imagine and speculate. Reading about liminal space, and found correlation with those descriptions and my metaphor of wasteland spaces. For example, how the studio environment is described by dramatic arts author and educator Phillip Zarrilli in the book 'The Studio'¹⁶ as

“The studio... a place of hypothesis, and therefore a place of possibility...where something can come of nothing. Sound from silence. Light from darkness. Therefore, a liminal place.... As a place between, a location without coordinates or answers. A place to map, temporarily, space/time along some continuum...The studio... a 'liminal' place between... a place dedicated or set apart. ...a place to explore the relationship between the doer and the done. A place of fundamental paradox. Implicit in any

¹⁶ Hoffmann, Jens 'The Studio, documents of contemporary art' Whitechapel gallery and the MIT press 2012 p. 104

paradox is ambiguity, change... the potential for transformation.”¹⁷

My visual research concerning 'suspended' places uses imagery from wasteland nature spaces, where things occur from being allowed to fester to the point where the result looks instantaneous but actually has built up, where plants grow determinedly where they have not been planned, because the space has not been occupied or maintained. As Paul Evens writes in 'How to see nature'

“We misjudge the weeding wild if we think of it only as a relic of the past. beautiful, novel versions of it turn up in street ends, traffic islands, abandoned fields- new places of ignominy.”¹⁸

This determined spontaneity has become a metaphor for things which are allowed to divert from the intention of an outside force, and subvert the planned course towards

¹⁷ Zarrilli, Phillip 'The metaphysical studio' The drama review volume 46 no.2 2002, p. 159-65. In Hoffmann, Jens 'The Studio, documents of contemporary art' Whitechapel gallery and the MIT press 2012 p. 104

¹⁸.P. 45 How to see Nature, Paul Evans, Batsford publishers London 2018

something unexpected. I find the non curated wasteland spaces particularly poignant to see in The Netherlands where the physical landscape is so manicured in such a strict and orderly fashion. Evans continues by referencing the disruptive nature of wastelands, which correlates to the studio environment.

“In ecology, wasteland plants are called ruderal to describe their colonisation of disturbed land ; ‘ruderal’ comes from the Latin ‘rudus’ or rubble, Elliot’s ‘stony rubbish’. However, ‘rude’ may also be a way of describing plants offensive to a traditional aesthetic that grew out of horticultural and agriculture :weeds outside culture, without refinement, of unruly behaviour, vulgar, harsh, uncouth, primitive.”¹⁹



At Tent, 2022

¹⁹ P 36 How to see Nature, Paul Evans , Batsford publishers London 2018

Kunstlab Bornerveld 169

Returning to Kunstlab after working hours, I looked for the traces of a practice I had not been part of, in contrast to Acato where I actively contributed to the build up of work and use of space. The first layer was a collection of cumulative mess tangled with student work, conveying the character of Kunstlab as a space. Some of the second

layer of photographs used the student's paper cut out shapes on a window, negative space through which the scene underneath was revealed. I later used this technique in my methodology for suspension. The resulting photographs from this project have been made into a book, which can be found in the appendix of this thesis.



Photo from the Kunstlab series, 2022

Acato

I started by walking through the space which surrounds the studio each week and photographically collecting a series of liminal spaces in Acato, which would later be double exposed with natural imagery from wasteland spaces to draw out and highlight their potential. By doing this, I recognised that these are our liminal spaces and they form our studio practice. The images I have made are an invitation to students to recognise what surrounds and cradles their practice.

Looking inside the microcosms created in the double exposure photographs, people who have walked these same paths can relate to the objects and places in a new way, by seeing them obscured and reimagined by layering. These photos also demonstrate the students' ownership and influence on their space and how it can be transformed into a studio by them.

When I returned with the photographs, the students understood directly what they represented, as they had all been involved in my research process throughout.

However, they expressed that understanding my impressions of our space was not an act of suspension, but a demonstration of it. They made it clear that they needed to take the process into their own hands to experience their role and gain agency in it. This was the catalyst for the shift in my visual research, from gestural images into including taking photographs as a methodology, when I handed over my camera to my students.

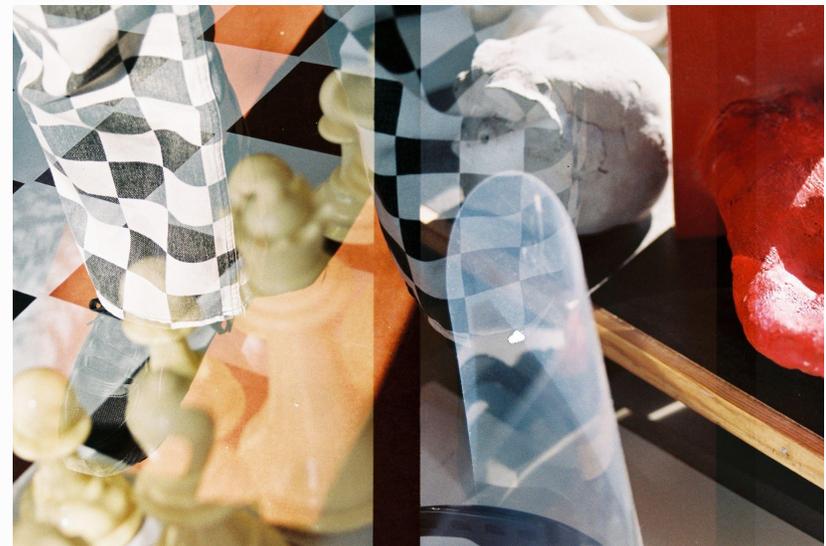


Photo from the Acato series, 2022

My studio

I photographed my own studio space and some surrounding spaces in the same block of studios in Rotterdam. By finding the liminal spaces in my studio block I had the opportunity to test my method in my own familiar environment and one which is used over a

longer period of time by visual artists. In my studio, it became evident that it was necessary to deliberately avoid photographing 'active' spaces as opposed to liminal spaces.

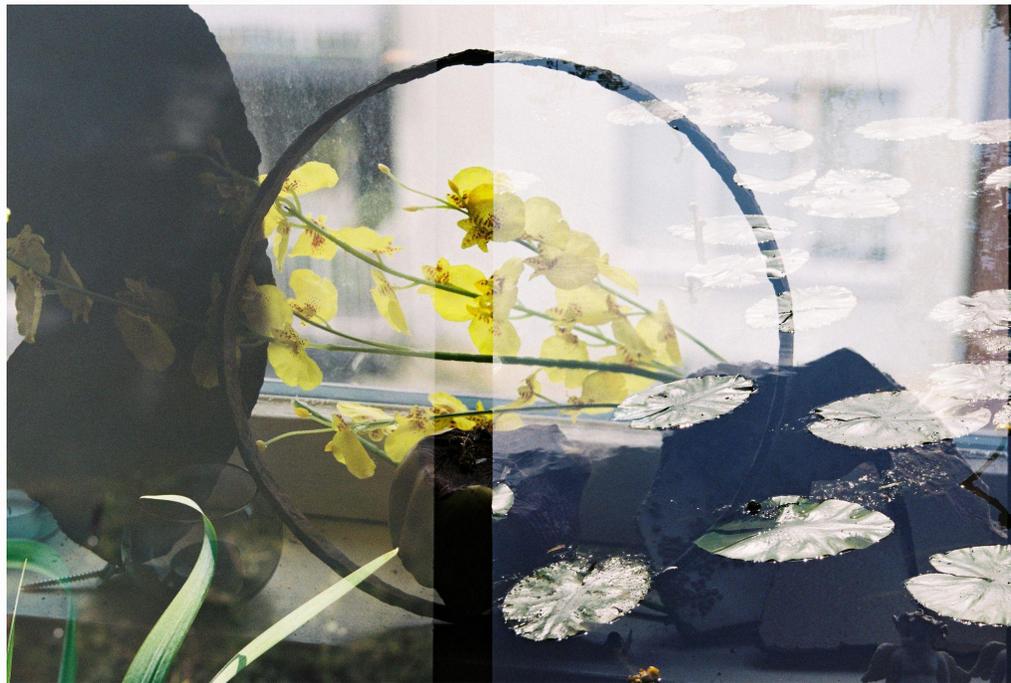


Photo from my studio series, 2022

Piet Zwart Institute

When I was at the Piet Zwart institute building for a meeting, I challenged myself to include a space in my visual research which, at first glance, did not contain visually intriguing liminal spaces. Studio spaces like the rooms at Piet Zwart institute are not designed to keep traces of previous work so they can function effectively for many students to work across each day. There, I

tested my methodology in an environment which was more empty. This iteration demonstrated that all kinds of spaces could be processed through this double exposure method, offering a new perspective through abstraction, even in those spaces which are multipurpose and therefore bare.



Photo from the Piet Zwart series, 2022

International school Delft

I was invited by a colleague, Mark Shillitoe, to bring my project to his primary school classroom at the International School in Delft. The students were not present when I took the photographs and had the task of recognising their liminal spaces when I later returned with the photographs, to discuss our new view of a familiar classroom. This gave me the opportunity to reflect with them about what we were seeing in the photographs and cultivate a discussion surrounding liminal spaces and by extension, spaces of suspension. We used the Harvard University method which they often use in their lessons, in which you write responses using 'I see, I think, I wonder' allowing them to think beyond what they could recognise in their classrooms. We also 're-mapped' the classroom space by reverse engineering, finding the liminal spaces in the room, through the photographs.



Photo from the International School Delft series

Zohier Zomer at Tent

During the summer school holidays I participated in a program at TENT called Zohier Zomer, an atelier for artists to work with primary school age children in a large room at TENT Rotterdam. In preparation to work with the children I distilled my visual research process of double exposure analog image making, forming a methodology which could be used by the children to map their studio space at TENT. I invited visiting children to learn the camera process and then explore the space, finding elements of our shared studio which they were drawn to, and photograph them, these were the liminal spaces of our studio through the eyes of the children.

The children and I talked about the element of time which enters the process- waiting for an analog result and also working together across time with the other children, who you didn't meet but you did work together in an cumulative process. My initial intention was to have a second set of children make the second layer of the double exposure but there were not enough participants to complete the task that way so I used silhouettes of

children's work in the atelier to form the second layer. This was effective in abstracting the images and provided an invitation to look past the initial reaction and deeper into the scene of the photographs, and I now include it as a step in my methodology, through the medium of paper cutting.



Photo from the Zohier Zomer series, 2022

THE STEPS

I have distilled my process for suspending a space into a methodology in four steps, which can be taught in education and studio spaces as a para-institutional program. The steps are designed to create autonomy through creating the possibility to have a nomadic studio practice.

1: Look

Map the studio space, using an analogue camera with a colour film roll inside. Walk around the space, noticing what details you are drawn to, paying attention to the edges, the corners and the materials and spaces which are not actively used. The liminal spaces. Engage with these elements of the space by looking at them through the macro lens on the camera, focussing very closely, blocking out other visual noise and blurring the background until some small overlooked element becomes a microcosm through the lens. Take photos in this setting, wind the roll into the dark canister in the camera and wait.

2: Change

Cover all windows with large sheets of paper, blocking out as much of the light as possible. This is most effective when the sun is shining through the windows as the effect is amplified. Choose music to play to get us out of our heads and encourage activity, which also helps inspire the cutting of the paper, for example bold strokes for bold music or careful tiny cuts for quick beats. It's also about taking ownership of the space. Cut abstract patterns out of the paper using scissors and small knives, this can be done individually or collaboratively, depending. As the cuts cover more surface area, the light floods back into the space and we can observe how light shifts in our space, we remove it and then layer it back in. Sometimes, you have to clear the areas in the studio and gradually reintroduce elements of your work.

3: Layer

Wind the film roll tab back out of the dark canister and put it into the camera again, to double expose it, creating a second layer over our studio microcosm photographs. Photograph the negative space created by our paper cut out exercise. Through the dark space will come the photograph and through the light space, the 'positive' will come less. Doing this will create a collage which you cannot predict, you can place things together in your mind and see how it comes out. This is conducting coincidence. Work from memory with the images from the past, speculating for the future, mimicking the studio working process and then send the film to develop and wait.

4: Look again

Print and hang the resulting photographs of the studio, the layers of abstraction will help us see unexpected potential. Search in the images for what we recognise and be able to look again.



Double exposure photograph, 2022

Forming a studio

Artist Robert Irwin packed up his studio and began a nomadic practice, as described by Lawrence Weschler in 'Facing the World':

“You know the biggest loss in giving up the studio?’ Irwin asked me one afternoon. [...] it was the loss of a way of thinking. It was the loss of the physical things themselves.”²⁰

When it came to translating this to the public, Irwin made an important distinction. As Weschler describes:

“...rather than literally pasting the desert visa to the walls of such spaces, Irwin chose to absorb the *lessons* of the desert and apply them, on a site by site basis, to each new room whose presence he would be confronting and trying to modulate during the coming years.”²¹

²⁰ Hoffmann, J. (2012). *The Studio. The evolution of studio—and “post-studio”—practice over the last half century*. The MIT Press. P. 188

²¹ Hoffmann, J. (2012). *The Studio. The evolution of studio—and “post-studio”—practice over the last half century*. The MIT Press. P. 190

As well as introducing a space of suspension, I now use my methodology to reveal that it is already there, wherever we work. Liminal space extends beyond our classroom or studio environment, into the rest of a school, out onto the street, in the wastelands. Through this research, I have found new ways to work within existing spaces, both inside and outside education. My research contains proposals for the removal of obstacles within a space, as opposed to proposing a full or interim solution to the lack of studio spaces available. Encouraging students to develop their autonomy in both recognising and forming spaces of suspension means they can make a studio, and perhaps most importantly, as it is formed by them, it has the potential to be formed anywhere they go.

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Conducting coincidence

A visual research on liminal spaces in the studio environment

Kasia Dembinski 2022

Conducting coincidence

A visual research on liminal spaces in the studio environment

Kasia Dembinski 2022



In this book, Kasia Dembinski shows a selection of photographs from her visual research on liminal spaces in the studio environment. Dembinski researches how to cultivate conditions for artists in education to develop a studio practice. Fundamental to this research is recognising what a studio is and inviting unexpected outcomes within it. The studio is formed by its liminal spaces; its margins and its wastelands. There, the traces of our artistic practices form a library to reference, and there is potential in that space. To harness this potential you must imagine and speculate.

In her visual research, Dembinski photographs liminal objects and places which are precious for ambiguous reasons for those who can relate to them, at various studios and art education spaces. She uses a technique in which two layers are created by double exposure of analogue film, conducting coincidence by layering imagery from both the location itself and wasteland nature spaces. In wastelands, things occur from being allowed to accumulate to the point where the resulting scene looks instantaneous but actually has built up, just as in a studio environment. The plants which grow in wasteland spaces have become symbolic in these images, representing things which are allowed to divert from the intention of an outside force, and subvert the planned course towards something unexpected. The resulting photographs are gestural images, through which Dembinski invites participants to reflect on the studio space.

KUNSTLAB BORNERVED

An art space in Rotterdam for children, parents, artists and local residents to collaborate.

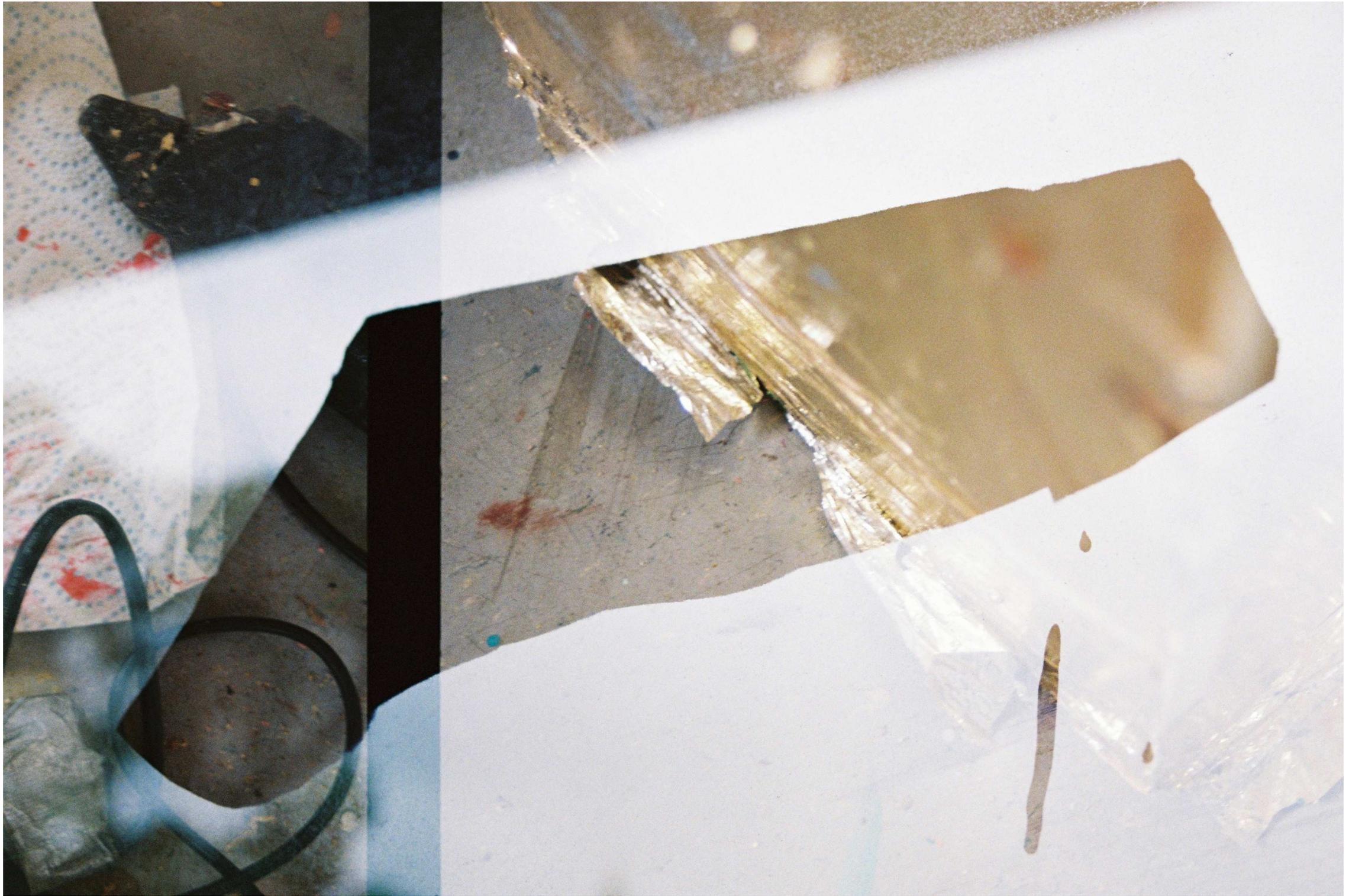










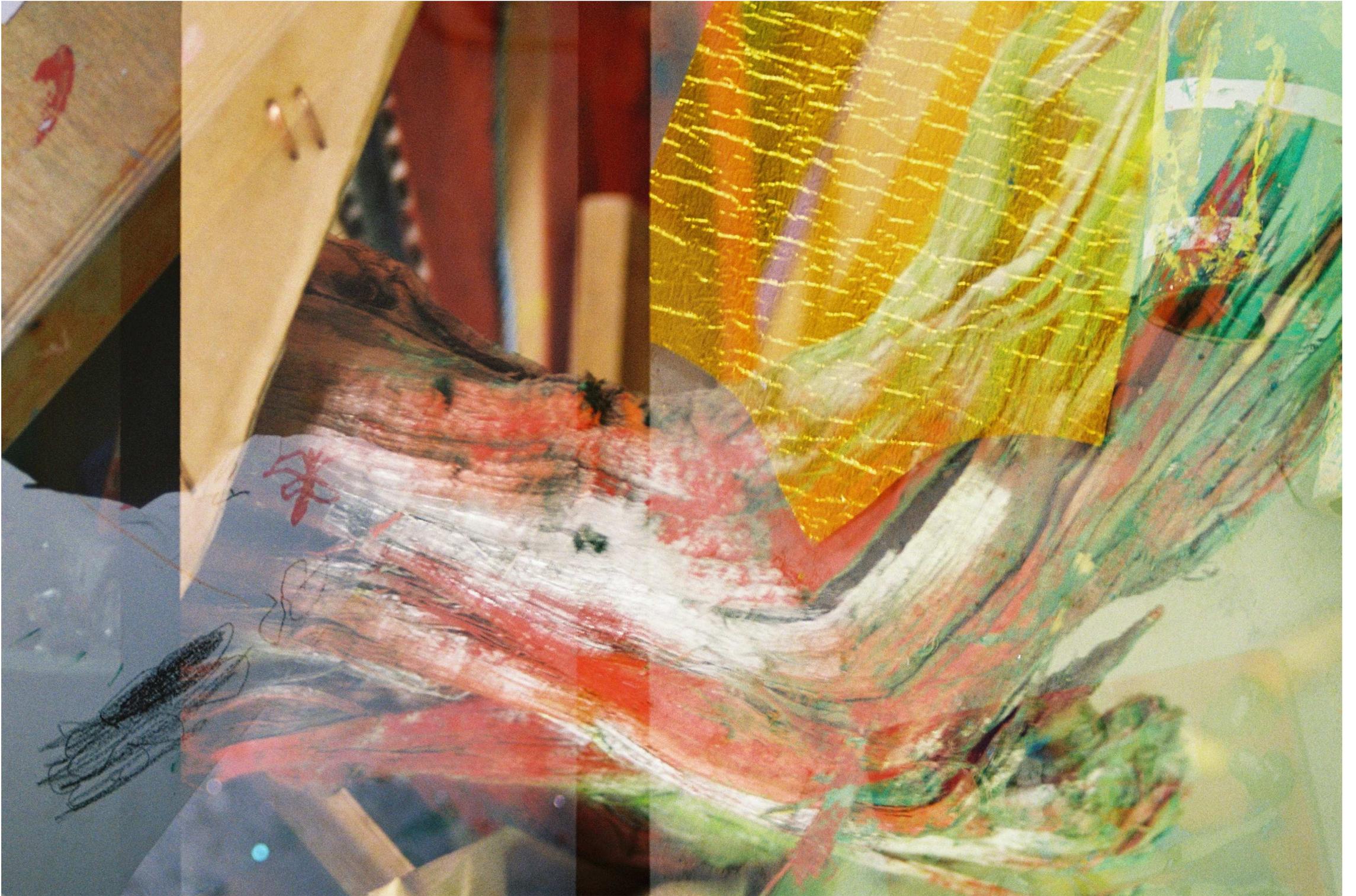


































INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL DELFT

An international primary school classroom in Delft.







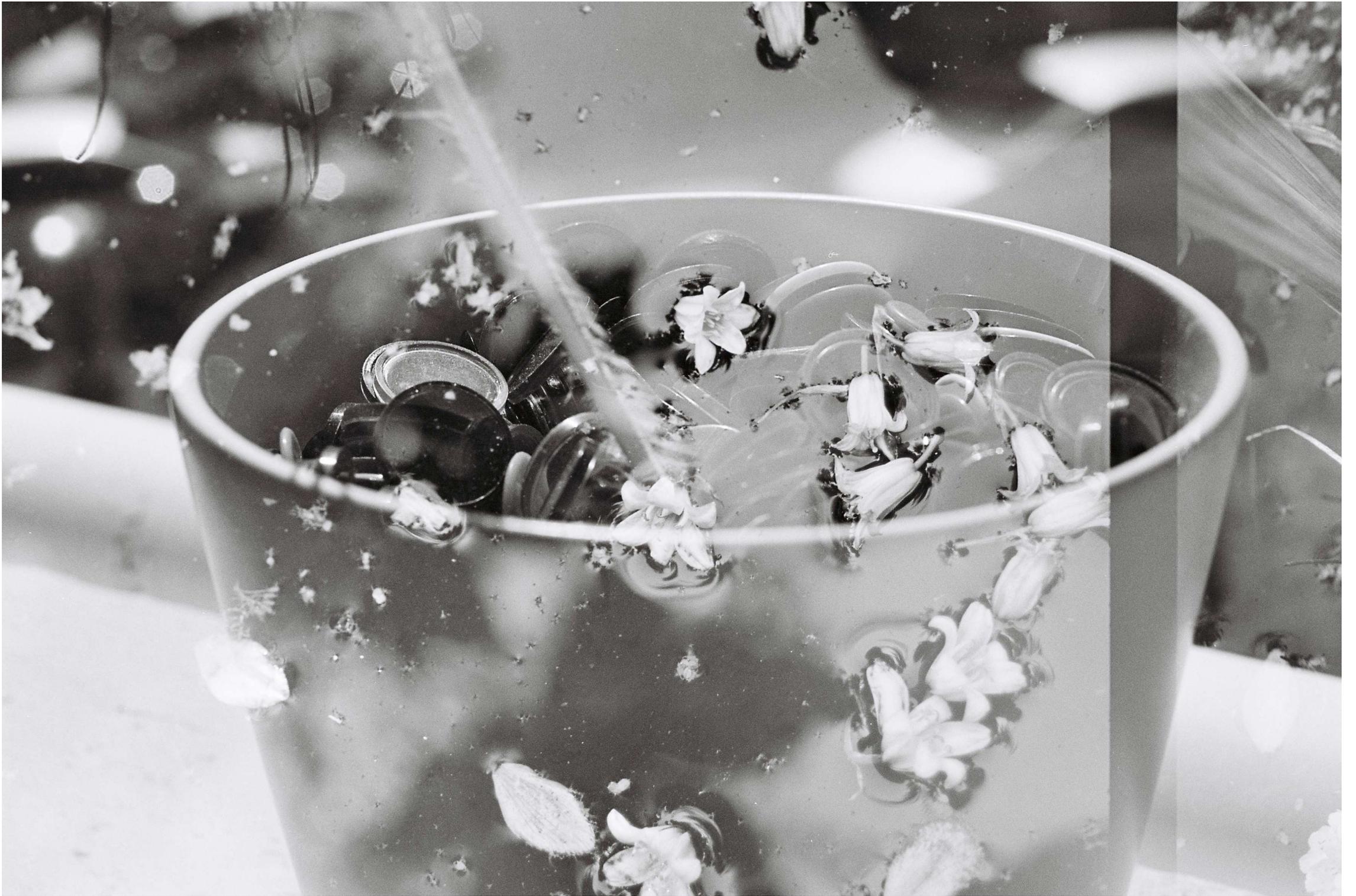










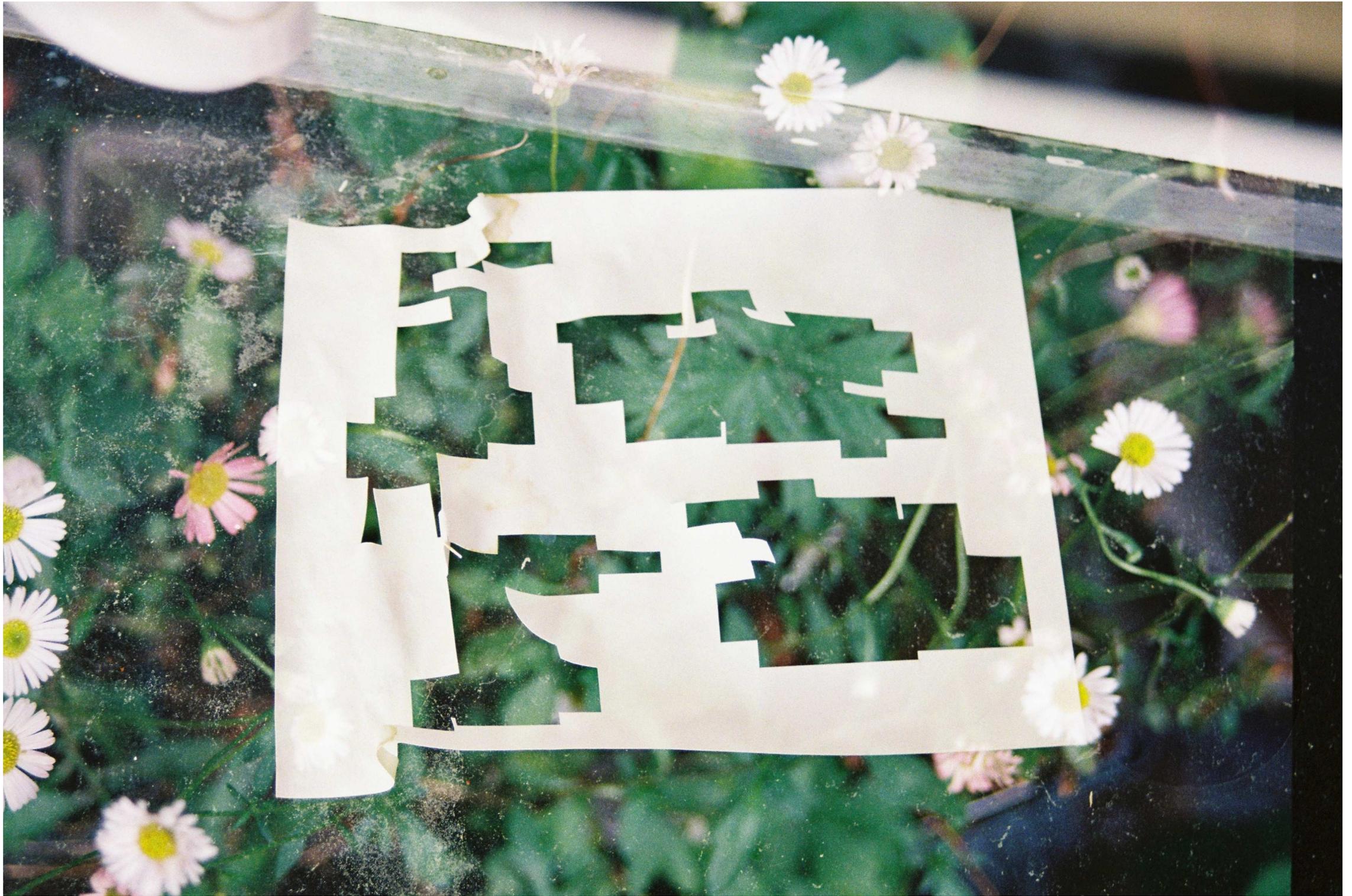




PIET ZWART INSTITUTE

A post-graduate institute for study and research in art, media and design in Rotterdam.











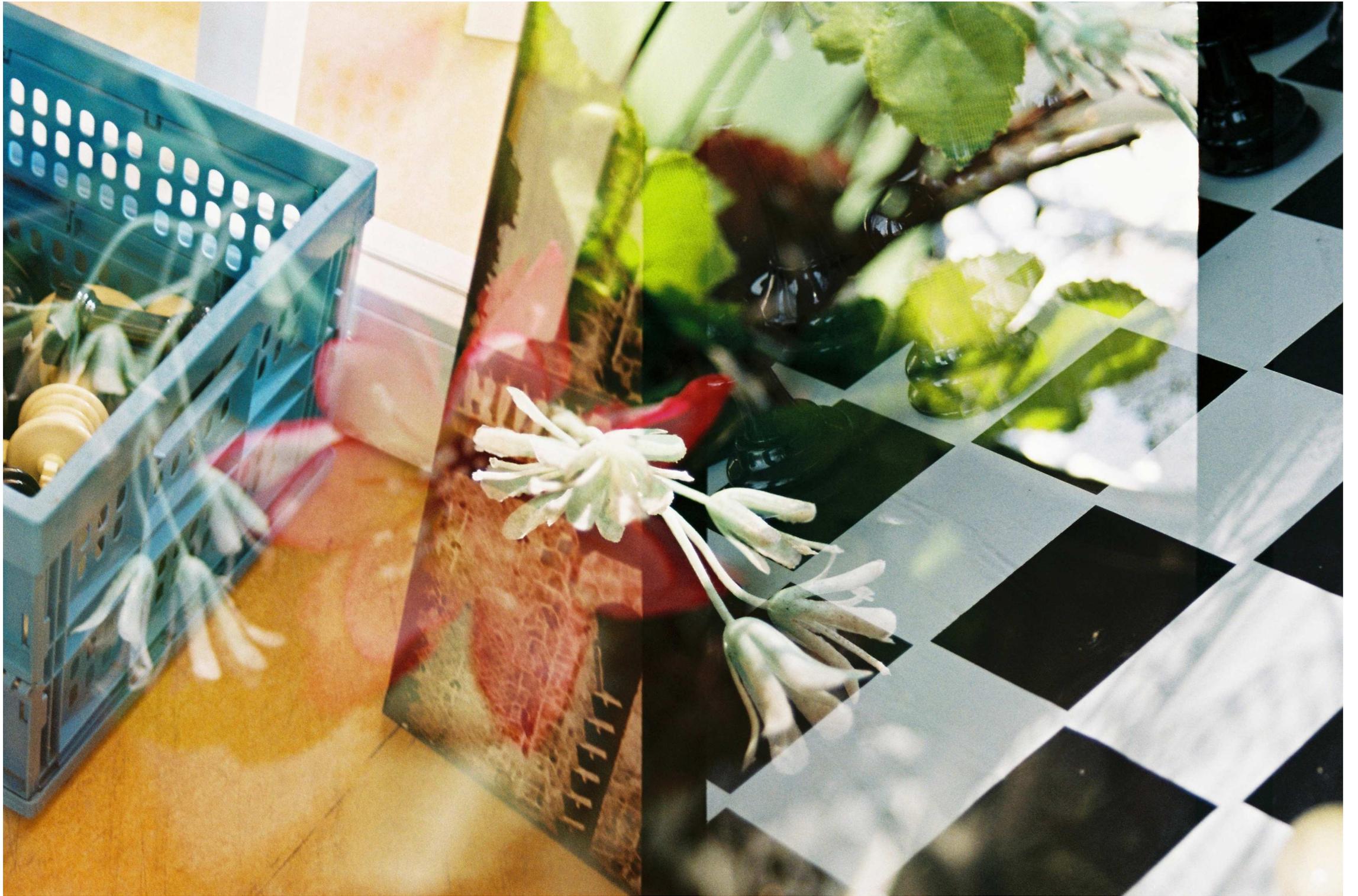






ACATO

An education centre for young adults in Rotterdam.



























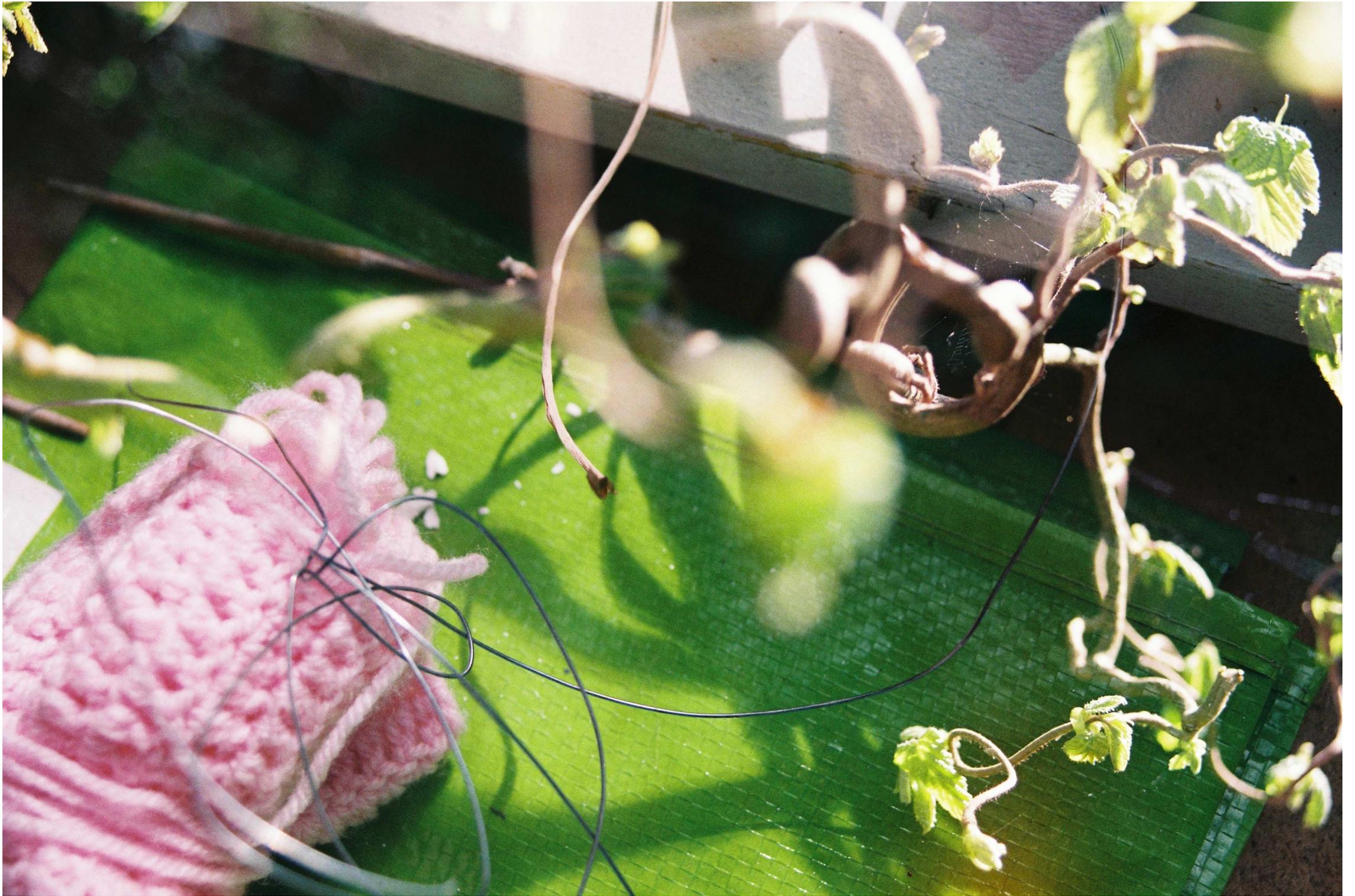




Empathie
Contexte blindé









IJZERBLOK STUDIOS

Artists' studios in Rotterdam.



