

# Infernal learning and the class clash

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## Biography

**Anniina Suominen** (b. 1973) is a Professor of Art Pedagogy. Her experiences of practicing and living in two different academic systems and cultures (Finland and the U.S.) provided a perspective that influences her scholarship and assessment of the state of democracy and solidarity in contemporary Finnish arts education at different levels.

**Tiina Pusa** (b. 1972) is Head of Art Education Degree Programme at Aalto University. Her tasks include teaching, developing curriculum, and conducting research. Her present research interests consider queer issues in the context of art education and the societal and political role of a teacher.

**Minna Suoniemi** (b. 1972) is a University Lecturer of Art Education at Aalto University and artist working with lens-based practices. Her artistic work focuses on subjects such as gender roles, motherhood, family and micro histories. She's interested in how disruption and failure can make societal structures visible.

**Elina Julin** (b. 1979) is a teaching artist and Art Education MA student at Aalto University. She has experience in the field of art both as a student, a teacher and an artist. She's interested in the questions of class from the perspectives of generation and societal structures.

**Eljas Suvanto** (b. 1990) is currently a MA-student of Art History at the University of Helsinki. He has also studied adult education, communication and museology, and has a growing interest towards feminist theories and intersectional approaches. Suvanto also works as a museum guide and has experience of public programmes.

## **Abstract**

**This article is part of a larger artistic and arts-based research project carried out by a group of artists, educators and academics with the intent to explore the notions of class that have influenced our stories of growing into academic lives and finding our ways in the competitive art worlds. Our broader aim is to bring forward problematic and challenging aspects of research, education, arts and society and through our explorations that engage others, jointly generate collective, alternative solutions to current academic and education practices. We do not have the space within this text to explore all the themes that currently inform our ongoing collaborative and collective research processes. Instead, we elaborate on chosen themes of *materiality, embodied and emotional responses to experiences of class, and exclusion.***

## **Research orientation**

Our research aligns with more global movements that aim to combat existing inequality and unjust structures and actively call for action and activism towards building more open, ethical and sensible learning commons, to increase solidarity between people, and to generate more profound understandings of possible sustainable futures as well as the changes that are mandatory if we are to achieve these futures.

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Figure 1. Image is created by one of the authors and presented here as part of the research material.

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We align with activist research (Suoranta and Ryyänen, 2014) based on critical theory. Research to us is deeply political and demands action: it calls us to initiate or support changes that demolish existing unfair and unjust structures. Research is also deeply intertwined with various aspects of life: it is emotional, political, embodied, believed, magical, disruptive, destructive and empowering, and deeply personal. Research, for us, does not occur in isolation from learning and education theories and praxis; rather, research begins, involves and entails questioning the essential notions and traditions of pedagogy and epistemology. Further, research entails questioning, reformulating and engaging with education in all its contexts and locations. Research is also artistic: research is art and / or art is research, depending on who is discussing it and when our research and arts orientations are contemplated.

The conversations referred to in this text began during the Toisinkatsottu Museo seminar (part of our *Queering the Museum* initiative in collaboration with Finnish National Gallery and Aalto University Department of Art) in the fall of 2019. This seminar and the preceding inter-institutional work brought together museum professionals, art and art education pedagogues and other professionals and created a fruitful space and platform for these discussions to be initiated. For this reason, although not academic per se, the context of this paper is enlarged to acknowledge museums as part of the academic context. It is also acknowledged that museums have had a significant role in establishing class structures and normative assumptions of (un)belonging and (dis)placement. Hence, our perspective and sense of knowledge commons is also inclusive of museum educators and other museum professionals.

### **Aims of the research, artistic and educational project**

Our research project focuses on critical explorations of class and how experiences of class have influenced our experiences of education, academia and the arts. Bourdieu (1979) explored how we create differences and divisions between classes through art. Whilst art generates cul-



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Figure 2. Research material.

tural and educational capital, which according to democratic principles should then be made accessible to many, we bring forth our experiential and research-based understandings and assert that academia and the arts are not equally accessible to all (Pusa, 2012; Suominen et al., in press).

The authors of this text have all obtained or are in the process of earning graduate degrees in art, art education and art related fields. Although our presented perspectives are embedded in conflicting, troubling and contradictory cultures for learning and professional opportunities, art and academic careers have enabled us to build somewhat safe cocoons from which we operate. In these safe environments we have been able to gradually explore and reveal more private and personal aspects of who we have been and who we are becoming. Gradually, it has become possible for us to ask ourselves how these broader life experiences have shaped our scholarship and art. Within this collaborative research process, we generate knowledge and create further

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understandings drawing from shared experiences and from intersectional feminism, and we write respectful of artistic, embodied and non-linguistic and linear modes of knowing.

The current political and academic climate, as we have experienced it, supports initiatives that aim to make various forms of cultural, artistic and educational opportunities available throughout a person's life. Also desirable and supported, at least in principle, are aims to make higher education institutions more accessible and welcoming to diverse people. We believe that much more could be done and that systemic changes are required to obtain this goal. Through our collective work, we aim to initiate broader meaningful debate and discussions concerning the experiences of children and young people who desire academic and artistic careers, but who come from economically disadvantaged or otherwise unstable backgrounds or whose families for various reasons do not participate in cultural events and dialogues valued by academia. In a sense, we aim to present a counter-narrative to the previously dominant presentations of academia as a community of independent intellectuals engaged in critical enquiries. Our sense of academic, educational and artistic community is based on the general ideology of commons, according to which people participate in various local and / or broader collective, mutual and respectful engagements of sharing and exchange based on their interests and abilities.

In this text and in our work, we are highly critical of the metanarratives that frame our coming-of-age academic narratives, and we intentionally approach the discussed topics through perspectives that are often silenced and concealed from broader inspection. However, we do not claim to bring up true oppression and devastating injustice. Rather, we share the journeys of becoming, initiation and acceptance into the academic community that have been made possible by the Finnish social and legal justice system that aims to support a fair and democratic educational system. On a global perspective, we are tremendously privileged and we recognise that we would not be holding our current positions nor would we most likely have achieved the academic degrees we collectively possess, had it not been for our semi-fair and equalising

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institutional systems. However, these journeys have not been painless but required the ability to adapt to values and speech often previously strange to us, mandated hiding aspects of ourselves and our families, and demanded us to become somewhat different people.

Another commonality amongst us is that we, and our families, have climbed the cultural ladder and some of us have obtained financial security for our families through our academic successes. However, our aim is not to dive into the characteristics of what predicaments, factors or elements might help one succeed in obtaining advanced academic degrees as we have successfully done, but to explore the less glorified, murkier sides of this path: in many ways, the price that one pays for this desired inclusion.

### **Remarks on chosen language and pronoun**



Figure 3. Minna Suoniemi, *Second Waltz*, 2-Channel Video Installation, 2013.

Although we do not have the space to further elaborate on the notions of language and colonisation in this paper, we perceive there to be an over-emphasis in the contemporary university rhetoric to underline how “international” our faculty and student body is. This rhetoric

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partially hides the fact that only a marginal portion of Finnish children and young people are actively encouraged to pursue careers in academia and in the arts. On the other hand, language is used to colonise knowledge, as we have somewhat superficially become part of structures and institutions that operate using the English language, specific to cultures and contexts that are not specific to Finland and the contexts of our experiences. For us, it would have been impossible to achieve an academic position solely utilizing our native language for communication and writing. We have had to learn both academic discourse and English. Based on linguistic populations, English cannot be justified as an official language of the European Union, yet we perceive it to be the commonly shared language that enables communication. English is also not the language of students who are assumed to be the primary readers of our scholarship. We hardly ever publish our most advanced texts using the official and operational languages of Finland. This and other forms of colonisation by language are seldom criticised. Within our project, considering language for its use in reinforcing notions of belonging and/or exclusion is of importance. The following is an excerpt from the research material:

In the academic community, I feel the urge to say things as they are, to speak directly, and to verbalise difficult terms, to speak in common language, and to unpack normative structures by asking the “the stupid questions”. I often think this urgency emerges from my class background. I speak as if I were speaking to my father who possesses the wisdom and education of the heart, and whom I know would understand, but not within these discourses. (quote from the research material)

Our collective research material consists of shorter and longer stories written by all the authors of this article. We made the decision to refer to our stories with the expression, ‘excerpt/quote from the research material’. Amongst our research group, we feel comfortable and safe when sharing our personal stories. Still, we hesitate to frame our narratives as personalised,

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singular experiences. In this text, rather than identifying persons, we utilise a common voice as ‘we’, as we speak and write from the perspective of resonance and relatability. Many of the artwork created in relation to this project has been created by one of us, not collectively. One could see this decision of relating knowledge as a collective-we as contradictory to our philosophy of and aims for creating more equitable learning and knowledge commons, which entails valuing and respecting diverse contributions based on the interests, needs and abilities of the community members. We see the use of ‘we’ as essential for our epistemological understanding. The ‘we’ does not always include all of us, but is rather flexible, like a common body of water. Sometimes it includes all of us, sometimes it speaks for one.

### **Brief description of the Finnish context**

Finland’s reputation as a country providing high-quality education has been presented as unquestionable in many contexts. The historical narrative attests that Finland rose from WWII, paid its war reparations and became one of the leading educational countries known for students’ high-performance levels in comparative international tests, a country and its educational system where equal opportunities are secured. Finland established a welfare system, founded high-quality childcare facilities to enable women to become active participants in the workforce and became a beacon of democratic educational systems that are fair and accessible to all.

To understand the Finnish schooling system and politics of education, we have to look at the information proceeding WWII. Since the Finnish Civil war that took place in the early 20th century (January 27 – May 15, 1918), the educational system has been built on the values of the ‘white party’ that fought against the ‘reds’ in this war. The reds were mostly people who worked in factories or farms, whereas the whites belonged to the class of owners of the lands and factories. Teachers, for the most part, belonged to the supporters of the white party, although their ‘ownership’ was often limited to cultural and social capital. The reds were supported by



Figure 4. Research material.

socialist Russia, whereas the whites received support and ideologies from Germany and for this reason, the matters that were fought over were beyond the small, young nation's internal politics. Altogether, this struggle for power and access generated a system of invisible and silenced power structures and classes (Rantala, 2002; 2005; 2010).

Despite the relatively democratic actions and policies established since these wars, the system has continued to maintain the privileged ideology and, for the most part, failed to make

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academic careers equally accessible to all. We have been educated to think that to be a valued member of society a person takes their schooling seriously, watches the news, reads the newspaper and other literature, engages in culture (at least to appreciate it) and contributes to society by paying taxes, and finally, in this way protects the communities' most vulnerable populations.

Recently, socio-economic class has been reintroduced to the policy discussion forums. On October 30th, 2019, the main Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published an article titled 'Rakkauden Luokkaerot'—"love and class differences" (Sjöholm, 2019, p. n.a.) that drew connections between romantic partnerships and socio-economic class. In December 2019, a monthly additional publication to the same newspaper published a lengthy article portraying the Finnish Minister of Internal Affairs, Maria Ohisalo, in which the focus was on their upbringing in a traditionally working class, lower economic level neighbourhood and non-academic family background (Saarikoski, 2019). Similar publicity has been associated in relation to the Prime Minister, Sanna Marin, especially after the Estonian Minister of Internal Affairs called her a sales clerk girl (Koskinen, 2019). This consequently brought on broader media discussions and additional visibility to the topic of class and family backgrounds influencing career choices and consequently, the importance of higher education institutions role in creating more inclusive academic cultures and institutions.

The relevance of socio-economic and family backgrounds have, once again, been brought to the media forefront as the current government political party leaders in Finland are presented to the world audiences as young females who beat the odds and broke the glass ceiling of the male-dominated culture of politics (despite the odds of their backgrounds). These stories might be seen as examples of two different equity laws in Finnish legislation: the equity law from 1986 aiming to create equity between two binary genders and the equity law from 2008 aiming to prevent discrimination according to race, ethnicity or sexual orientation (Harjunen, 2010). Class is not mentioned in the 2008 equity law, but the spirit of the law could also be



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understood to cover that. Nonetheless, Finnish society is quickly becoming more divided by 'class' and children's success in life becoming more predictably dependent on their family's access to education, culture and more economically privileged lives. We claim that this division of access and class-based thinking and systems has always been in place (Melin, 2019), albeit its presence is once again more pronounced and visible in the contemporary educational policy rhetoric.

### **Class, intersectional feminism and being**



Figure 5. Minna Suoniemi, *Big Bad*, 2008, 16 mm Film transferred to HD Video.

Societal and cultural class hierarchies have traditionally been perceived as one of the socio-economic categories that separate an elitist upper class from a working class with further sub-categories, identifiers and distinctions of classifications of people into certain hierarchical structures. The most commonly used, and perhaps the most disguised, class invention has been the naming of the so-called middle class, which is often perceived as a falsely neutral, acceptable categorisation to most, and accessible to the majority of people (Anttila, 2016; Erola,

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2012). Distinctions between classes are then made understandable by identifiers of economic resources. We are particularly interested in how academic and art cultures contribute to these distinctions and, on the other hand, their potential in dismantling these structures.

Our project draws from intersectional feminism (Cho et al., 2013; Valovirta, 2017) to explore art and education cultures, institutions and educational accessibility, paying specific attention to normative notions of societal and cultural class. We claim that “notions of class, regardless of their common use as part of rhetoric and reference point, are hushed and silenced in the context of education in the arts and art education” (Suominen, Pusa, Suoniemi, Suvanto and Julin, in press). Intersectional feminist theory and research recognise class as one of the aspects that generate and maintain structures of injustice and inequality (Suoranta and Ryyänen, 2014). Our understanding of power leans on theories by Hannah Arendt (1970) and Michel Foucault (1975) in the sense that we believe there are always power structures when people come together and not all power is simply ‘bad’ (Kantola, 2017).

The authors’ personal and academic backgrounds are not alike. However, there are commonalities and obvious common identifiers in our narrated stories and the vignettes we have shared with one another. One of them is the notion of being: being entails activity and action, a person is by doing. Merged with academic theories and epistemologies, this active notion of being becomes an ontology of active agency. Thus, theory and practice are not isolated or oppositional, but their merging within art and arts education has generated an environment that has enabled us to become active agents and proponents for various agendas. Hannah Arendt (2018) explored this theme in their work, *Human Condition* by arguing that Western cultures lost their direction when theory (thinking) and practice (doing) became separated. This divide meant that ethical responsibility dropped into the cracks between it. The following excerpt from a narrative included in the shared research materials elaborates this perspective:

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My artistic work has always evolved around the embodiment and the presentations of feelings associated with shame and control. I used to think that these themes emerge from my rebellion against the roles set for women, but I have recently come to understand that the themes prevalent in my artistic work are also tied to notions of class. My non-academic background is seen and felt in my embodied ways of being in-excess and in excessiveness but also in the directness and bluntness of being embodied. (quote from the research material)

In discussing the making of class as an active process, Skeggs (2004) emphasised embodied, skilled and sensuous dimensions. As disciplines, art and art education accentuate practice within environments and conditions of physical engagement that rely on embodied, sensuous and aesthetic modes of being. Skeggs brings forward the intertwining of embodiment with class notions in the making. Contemporary dancers Laura Lehtinen and Elsa Heikkilä have elaborated on excessiveness in being and gestures as signifiers or expressions of class (Luoma-aho, 2019). Roiha (2017) claims that class positions are felt through emotions and through affect in our bodies, regardless of our professional standings. This also intersects with Foucault's (1975) biopower theory, which explains how people observe themselves; how they implement norms through their lifestyle (Kantola, 2017). In our research group's narratives, class is present in our embodied ways of being through movement and gestures that either imply withdrawal or on the other hand excessive talk and pronounced being in the space that is found to be unrestrained or imprudent.

### **Development of method, process and building learning commons**

Our main research material is narratives and artwork that are analysed in dialogue and through informal sharing. We write and discuss the texts and the issues that are brought up. We interpret, connect, find resonances and look for emerging themes. All along, we pay at-

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Figure 6. Research material.

tention to bodily and emotional affect as we show empathy within the group and beyond the immediate members. Unconventional in qualitative research methodologies, we do not aim to find similarities and emerging themes per se, but rather, we look for resonance and relatability. A theme might only appear once in the stories we share with one another, but it may have the emotional power or appeal to speak to us on a level of cognitive relatability, through feelings,

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emotions or other reactions that can or cannot be verbalised, or it may initiate an artistic or another kind of process to begin within our group or for one of us.

Our stories begin with recalled childhood memories and initial experiences of class. These memory recollections and autobiographical vignettes depict fractions of and glimpses into our journeys of growing up, becoming more independent, taking charge of our educational paths and being initiated into the arts and academic worlds. In another research text we describe these as

[...] stories of claiming, questioning, naming and renaming. They are also stories of loss and denial as gaining access to something that is highly desirable has meant distancing oneself from ways of being, speaking, believing and thinking that do not fit if one desires to be part of academia and the art world. Our stories speak of liminal learning in between and in the shadows of educational and welfare institutions. (Suominen et al., 2021, p. n.a.)

As artists, educators and researchers, we did not begin this process with a particular goal or a specific plan for the process. Throughout the process, the method of narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) has informed our interpretations and analysis. The initial material of narrated memories and experiences was framed by either autobiographical or autoethnographic storytelling frameworks. The knowledge that these narrations communicate is situated in time (1970s onwards), place and social context. Interpretations and meanings have been generated collectively by all five members in all stages of analysis. The analysis continues to be performed formally and systematically in relation to broader socio-cultural and theoretical frameworks as we actively look for emerging themes that are either common or uncommon and have the potential for taking our understanding of the shared experiences and knowledge further. Based on the first stage (layer) of writing, sharing, meetings, interpretations and analysis, we organised

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our written experiences of class and academic communities into chronological order: a) *early childhood and teenage years*; b) *initiations into the art world and academic circles*; and c) *continued experiences while being part of “professional” worlds*. However, the chronology is less important than the themes that emerged thereafter. More important were the emerging themes that began to formulate, such as *shame and pain, feeling guilty, overachieving and emotional disingenuity*. We experienced these as we wrote our narratives, created art and related to our personal stories and the stories of our peers. Through these experiences, we felt as we were again moving within the liminalities of spaces and places, gaining a partial sense of access and belonging but remaining on the verges and fringes.

The structure of the thematic analysis describes how our journeys have been bi-directional, or simultaneous paths towards and away. These choices and sacrifices have brought many joys and experiences otherwise inaccessible to us but also caused shame and guilt as we have parted with friends and ways of being to adapt to the norms of academia, education and the art world. Once we recognised the similarities and resonances between our stories, we began to share, reveal and unfurl experiences that felt urgent to share.

As we became initiated into academic communities through various rites of passage, these passages have influenced how we have been able to contribute to the shared knowledge and wisdom. As is foundational to the commons thinking that each person contributes based on their interests, abilities and special skills, we felt it urgent to explore how these initiations of felt and embodied experiences and processes had shaped and defined our participation and contribution to the commons of learning.

Although it is uncommon for us to be directed to be silent, numerous structures are in place to ensure that we hush ourselves into silence and that make sure our more painful and haunting stories are nothing but a faint whisper or a drunken confession.

(quote from the research material)

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Through this process we have begun to find words for experiences and perspectives that are typically silenced in academic contexts. While silencing might be too strong of a term to explain our prior experiences, we have found the art world and academic culture to be embedded in mechanisms and structures that allow for only a narrow scope of experiences to be shared (e.g. Foucault, 1966). These mechanisms, like class and power structures in general, are subtle and intangible. They elude concretisation and in their perhaps most dangerous form are internalised so that a person feels they have chosen to exclude, silence or oppress themselves. We began the process of narrating our stories feeling tremendously guilty and ashamed of the experiences of class, non-academic backgrounds, family instability and economic challenges, thinking that this might have been by choice. In this way, our project is directly tied not only to activist research and art but to the traditions and newer articulations of critical pedagogy (e.g. Freire, 1970, 1998; Gershon, 2019; hooks, 1994, 2004; Kumashiro, 2000; Suominen, 2019).

### **Materiality, embodied and emotional responses to experiences of class and exclusion**

In our stories, many deeply emotional memories or fragments of broader stories were told through materiality, material signifiers and branding. On a deeper thematic level, these memories were emotionally charged, even after several decades. The following three quotes from our research material represent how a child saw situations in their families in the 1970s and 1980s:

One year, right when the fall was turning into a winter, and I was maybe in the second grade, my family received coupons from the social services office that allowed us to go pick up new mattresses and clothes from the central distribution office. Although the options were very few, these winter jackets, boots, and pants weren't old but actually quite stylish and seasonal. Whereas I often wore hand-me-downs from my brother and boy cousins, I now had a whole new outfit and I couldn't wait





Figure 7. Research material.

to show my friend. When I arrived at her house in the morning to walk to school, her parents admired my clothes and asked me where we bought them. Flustered by their curiosity, I felt shame and fear, I didn't want to get caught and I struggled to form answers. They knew my know-it-all tendencies and were equally confused by my inability to respond. I eventually gave them a location where department stores commonly existed. A few weeks later, my best friend's mother found her the same

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jacket from a department store close to the location I had provided and I wasn't caught being poor. (quote from the research material)

My mother sewed all our clothes. I was the oldest, so I received them brand new. When I was a teenager, I really wanted to buy specific kinds of clothes from stores and I saved my summer job earnings for this purpose. Painful experiences are also associated with clothes. My mother sewed fashionable and desired clothing items to give us as Christmas presents, and often these gifts were successful and welcomed. Still, these items weren't the same as a college shirt by Impazzivo from Seppälä worn by all my peers. Upon opening the gift, I aimed to express honest gratitude even though I felt a nagging feeling of disappointment. Nowadays, I don't want to buy any clothes. As a child, we were aware of the invisible boundaries, even if we knew nothing about class. These boundaries were present as feelings and glimpses that had no names. (quote from the research material)

Our father had a habit of switching cars often. Probably because they were mostly old and cheap junk, but also because he got easily bored with things. We were ashamed by these mainly Eastern European cars and we insisted on walking, even when he would have driven us to school or to our hobbies. (quote from the research material)

Shame created desire: we would have liked to be like these people we were compared to. As we grew into adulthood and into our professional roles, our relationship with material things and consumer choices remained influential in our choices and identities. Later on, we found emotional release but also ethical and political justification and argumentation and social acceptance for our material status: not using a car or buying new clothes was an investment in the climate and the environment.

## Experiences of places, cultures, manners, class and belonging



Figure 8. Minna Suoniemi: *Little Red Riding Hood and Wolf*, 2012, HD Video.

Place-based specificity indicates each writer's contextual and historical subjectivities and points of orientation. At this point, it may not be important what the geographical locations or physical communities were, but rather the customs, words, manners and feelings associated with these places and spaces were specific and of significance to us. In many of our stories, customs and our families' ways of living conflicted with the ideals of the cultured and educated class.

In my childhood, people had regular jobs. My mother's commute to work was 30km. My father worked day, night and Saturday shifts. Due to the long distances, people helped one another. In many ways, people were self-sufficient and many things were self-made rather than bought. As a child, I didn't experience class, or perhaps I couldn't name it as such. (quote from the research material)

During secondary school, teenage years and early adulthood we faced initiations and rites of passage which provoked experiences of displacement. Art came into our lives and the battle to

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find one's place in the new educational and cultural class identified by Bourdieu evoked internal combats of conflicting experiences:

I felt that I possessed none of the knowledge I should have obtained. Museums, culturally significant places, books and artists that were central and essential to others from childhood and youth were unknown to me. I felt clumsy, I felt country rural, but my pride did not allow me to apologise. I learnt fast how to be, how to communicate with student peers, and I made friends who are still some of the most important people in my life. (quote from the research material)

Our vulnerable status has challenged our morality and integrity in many ways. In some stories, our habits or the directness relating and communicating appealed to people as something amusing and exotic, and at times, we were the game for powerful, wealthy, upper class hunters who possessed precise senses for tracing and tracking vulnerability:

I had a boyfriend whose family had obtained a significant amount of wealth. His mother once threw a lavish party for which I struggled to find a dress. I was an art student and I had no money or access to designer clothing. Fortunately, my friend is a seamstress and she modified one of my boyfriend's mother's gowns for me. Wearing the dress at the party, I felt I was okay, I felt pretty. Or that was until my boyfriend's godfather, a wealthy European banker, asked me if I wanted to become his private secretary. This request, of course, meant that I would become his mistress. Unfortunately, this was not the only time my education, intellect and smart mouth was seen as an amusing commodity on sale for a relatively cheap price. (quote from the research material)

These kinds of experiences hurt like a double-edged sword: Our assumed unprivileged gender made us the prey and the subtle indicators of our behaviour and manners exposed our lower-

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class standing, which was seen as an indication of a person who is quick to prostitute their integrity to further their career and status in life. For some of us, the change took place when we began our studies at an art high school which, as a consequence, rather radically changed our personal positionings and our social and cultural frames of reference.

The following two quotes are examples of how new worlds opened up. Whereas the first excerpt speaks of adaptation and about camouflaging into the new environments, the second excerpt reveals how experiences of exclusive and hard top grasp rules of an environment pre-shaped the ideas for necessary changes our group wishes to initiate and implemented as now professionals.

I learned to order in fancy restaurants, ignoring surly waiters, to make a remark on a dish that was short on salt, to use the forks in the proper order, to order white wine based on my preference rather than recommendation (red wine with red meat). I learnt to browse through clothes in expensive stores and enjoy art in fancy galleries unfazed by the presence of the people who worked in those places. I became good at presenting my views in the presence of more powerful people. (quote from the research material)

From my childhood I can vividly recall the feeling of the museum as being a somewhat strange place. It was full of incomprehensible rules and unspoken conventions that were mysterious to me but not to others. I am aware that this is how it still seems to many. (quote from the research material)

### **Conclusion and asking more**

In our analysis, a central theme was movement between spaces and places, and on the other hand the burden and toxicity of being and existing within the liminal, in-between spaces. Other

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Figure 9. Research material.

themes that emerged and continue to guide our processes were related to educational systems and education in the arts: specifically, *the ability to relate to and feel empathy through pedagogical practices and research*. However, this sense of empathy and ability to relate also exhibited its darker side as our high expectations and relentless demands for ourselves to continue to evolve, improve and influence change for the benefit of others.

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Other emergent themes indicated *excessive and imprudent behaviours and intolerance for unjust structures and behaviours*. We characterise our internalised becoming stories as infernal for the emotional burden that is carried, by large, in silence and for the behaviour that these suppressed experiences cause and that is consequently considered disruptive. As the combination of the numerous themes and issues were united in their somewhat taxing presence that has persistently coloured our experiences and growth theories, we found it more than appropriate to name these processes infernal, which we hope communicates the high demands they place on learners dreaming of becoming part of academic and arts communities, the processes they have to undergo to become initiated and accepted as well as the urgency of the collective work we need to undertake to build more sensible, ethical, accepting and diversified learning and creation commons.

Being an underdog and showing vulnerability does not easily fit into a culture and career paths that favour competitive notions of intellect and analytical ability and demand a level of achievement that separates off a small percentage of young people to continue at the highest levels of training and education. Very few people feel comfortable sharing their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, even after they have established themselves. People's varied backgrounds are discussed mainly when these relate to their artworks presented in notable galleries or through other acceptable venues. Through this process, we have been able to confess to ourselves and to each other how we have silenced and patched up painful experiences and sacrifices on this path and invented ways and modes of belonging that have disguised our more holistic beings. Our primary goal is not to ask for compassion for ourselves, but rather to pave the way for people coming after us.

Although I've learned to be persistent, I'm still worried, if not only for myself, but about the kids and youngsters of the future who want to go into this field. Can they afford it? Do the school system and university prune straight away when you



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are applying or in an early stage of your studies if your possible insufficient life expectancy or financial support makes studying impossible or unsustainable. Or do we change the structures to be such that background or class does not define a kid's or youngster's future and that everyone could still have somewhat equal opportunities to learn and study? (quote from the research material)

In our work as educators and artists, we are witnessing the partial crumbling of the welfare society. Built within the myth of the artist is an idealisation of an artist who feels a calling to pursue higher purposes. This perception resonates with neoliberalist idealism. An artist's work is perceived as similar to the ideals of creativity, freedom, flexibility and crossing of existing boundaries to innovate and renew (e.g. Roiha, 2017). The ideals of continuous, progressive development and growth generate destruction to the previously existing, healthier cultures now also visible in the cultural field.

The outcomes of our research project are descriptions of five single but overlapping transformation narratives and further questions. What made us endeavour and combat an infernal class transformation process? Nobody asked us to do so. Are we just an incarnation of biopower, persons who still try to fulfil all the norms, norms which call to us, are imposed by, and that maintain the upper class? We could contemplate if we merely allow the global capitalist system run through our eagerness (Mohanty, 2003; Valovirta, 2017)? Are we guilty of this continuation or do we represent or champion the many who could have been like us? Perhaps the point is not to ask for guiltiness or about sacrifices but to avoid further pain caused by class transforming and conforming. To make the fields of academia and the arts more inclusive does not mean only class awareness. We have to aim and collectively work beyond this to create class-permissive cultures and practices.

We claim that the significance of this work for our fields is that we can collectively learn to encourage, understand and support diverse applicants and novice academics as well as actively

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seek to ensure their inclusion. We can also advance our shared understanding of the silenced learning processes that are related to the gradual initiation, so that we can begin to reduce and eventually dismantle the oppressive processes one undergoes to attach onto and to which one eventually hopes to belong to. We find it especially meaningful to explore these experiences in relation to art and art education for the additional dimensions brought forth by experiences that accentuate non-verbal and embodied experiences. The arts can function like welcomed cracks or fractures amongst academic communities and their stubbornly persistent normative formations. The arts can become our Trojan horses for crashing into the academic community.

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