Better Practices for Safer Spaces

Below you can read a full transcription of the interview by [Olave Nduwanje](#) with Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Jacopo Buccini of Engagement about safer spaces.

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Olave: Welcome, very dear listeners, to the podcast series with the longest name in podcast history. It's called **Better Practices for Safer Spaces**. My name is Olave and you are listening to the outcome of my research residency at Kaaitheater. The theme of this research residency, and the subject of this podcast, is very near and dear to me. About seven years ago, I had a very severe burn-out and I ended up involuntarily committed in a psychiatric hospital in the Netherlands. This difficult period, and I'm not going to get into the details of everything that happened around that time, turned out to become a major sort of turning point in my life. It marked the beginning of **a journey towards finding alternatives to the neoliberal, racist, ableist, classist, transphobic and patriarchal contexts, relationships and beliefs I had internalized**. And trust me, I had internalized them in a very big way. These contacts, these relationships and beliefs that were oppressive, were making me sick and tired. So you could say that my journey has been in large part, actually I think for the largest part, about **finding communities and groups in which I can feel and be safe**. And to be very honest, it has been a journey with many false starts and disappointments, but also joy and a sense of belonging at times.

This research residency is an attempt to improve my learning on **what communities and groups are doing to offer safer spaces**. It's an attempt to improve my learning. I'm not coming here as an expert, an authority, or trying to convince anyone of anything.

I want to learn more and be better at it. And I'm hoping in that way to also encourage **open and vulnerable conversations about the strategies, the ambitions, and the visions** that we have, as individuals or as collectives, communities or groups. The visions we have of safety, care, and creating alternatives to the oppressive contexts, relationships and outcomes that live in society at large. And I feel like these conversations are important because it is often very difficult or rare to find people who publicly talk about it, in the European context anyways, and more specifically the Dutch and the Belgian context that I know of. Or even within organizations [it is rare] that people really engage and talk about it. There is a lot at stake and maybe we'll get into that as part of this podcast series. But for now, you will bear witness to a number of in-depth discussions with people who are or were affiliated with organizations aspiring to organize or become safer spaces.

We tried to get a big range of different kinds of individuals and organizations. So not just organizations who have been doing it for a very long time, but also organizations that may be just starting right now, so that we get a full range of things. The purpose is to investigate practice. **How do you ensure a safer space and what do you do as quickly as possible, what is a challenge for this**? I have asked my guests to reflect on their actions and lived experiences during the conversation. And this way we get to zoom in on a personal and strongly embodied image of the practice of organizing such spaces. In this, we want to distinguish ourselves from abstract ideas and hollow phrases which we encounter so often in the field of the subject today. This conversation is **by no means intended to criticize** organizations or individuals, but to think together and ultimately **jointly arrive at a more concrete and better practice of organizing safer spaces**. The reflections that take place in and during the interview are therefore judgment-free observations. Listeners, please: judgment-free observations of actions and experiences, used as a starting point for making analysis and positively influencing practice. We definitely **encourage you as a listener to embark on your own analysis and create your own sense of what you've understood, what you've heard.**

So, again, I want to talk about care just to really make sure that we have a good basis on which we're engaged in this. The topics and insights that we will be touching upon have the potential to stir up **uneasiness, doubt, anger,** and perhaps also maybe despair or a sense of: OK we can't, we will fail. **We will ultimately always fail at creating safer spaces**. And knowing that I want to suggest a strategy for **sitting with**

all of what may arise, because I think it is important to sit with things that are intuitive, that are emotional and not just intellectual. So I want to invite you as a listener to commit to the intention and also to the guests. I want you to commit to the intention of care. I believe that intentional care can help us shape the tone, nature and perhaps the beauty of our encounter right now for our current context. I believe that the intention of care holds three distinct but interrelated dimensions. First, I want to invite you to be **caring towards the speakers** who we have invited to share their ideas, their insights, their knowledge, their perspectives, their ambitions and stories with us. I hope we can offer them the space to think out loud, be vulnerable with us, to make mistakes, to disagree with me or with you who's listening, to change their mind today or tomorrow or in the year, to choose not to answer questions, to perhaps not always use the most edgy and radical language, to not know certain things.

Second, I want you to listen, to be caring towards one another. As things go in this day and age, you can say anything to each other about this podcast all over the interweb. And I want to ask you to be full of care. In doing so, I invite all of us **to assume that we are all sincere and respect each other's dignity and eagerness to learn, to presume that we have good intentions and to respect the pedagogical context** of this particular research residency and the outcomes of it. Be kind and caring to one another. Third, I hope you can exercise self-care, in listening and processing our upcoming conversations. **I invite you in the face of uncomfortable insights, unexpected facts, painful sensations, to be caring for yourself**. And I'm talking about **a particular kind of caring that is more inward**, right? So a caring that is based on the cultivation of a **curiosity**, for what brings discomfort, for what brings pain, perhaps a curiosity, for example, if you hear something, to reflect on: what is this particular statement or this particular fact? How is that entangled with my worldview or my view of myself? And how did I get that world view or that view of myself? And why am I experiencing pain when this thing is questioned or put in doubt? Why do I feel in danger? Does this world view feel in danger, and is it actually in danger? And so on.

So it is an invitation not necessarily to project pain and to externalize it and be like, oh Olave and her guests have made me feel really bad, but to really kind of reflect upon yourself: what's happening here? And to be curious about that. So in summary, I invite you to be caring towards yourself, towards each other, but also towards our beautiful, valuable and awesome guests, which is what we're going to get to now. So it's a very

long introduction. It's very, very large and I'm loving it. Thank you so much for your patience listening to this. Every single podcast I will start with that. So for the listeners it's going to be something that they're going to hear many, many times.

Sirah Foighel Brutmann: I mean, you can't hear it enough.

Olave: Thank you. I want to invite you to introduce yourselves, and the organizations that you are involved in.

Sirah: Ok, I am Sirah, pronouns she/her. I have been living in Belgium for 18 years. I originally come from the unfortunately still kind of colonizing country of Israel. I started my journey in Belgium as a dancer, as a student, but shifted away from dance in the last, let's say, almost 10 years, mostly working now as an audio visual artist and an activist, trying to combine these two things. And the last three years, or a little longer, I've been collaborating to establish the thing which we will refer to as Engagement, which is engagementarts.be, if you want to look up information online.

Olave: Yeah, go ahead and look that up, because it's really awesome.

Sirah: And I will just start by saying a big thank you for inviting us to this conversation, I'm very thankful for this introduction, I find it very rare to be able to speak openly about the difficulty in the creation of not only safe space, but safe community. And, yes, I really appreciate **the nonjudgmental starting point, which, when you're trying to do radical work, is becoming unfortunately more and more rare** as a starting point. I find.

Olave: And our next guest is?

Jacopo Buccini: My name is Jacopo. I arrived in Belgium I think five years ago. I also arrived as a dance student. As a student I was mainly living in Antwerp, and I moved to Brussels less than a year ago. I started to relate to Engagement during my studies. So at the beginning of the organization, as a student, I was trying to organize meetings within the school about what Engagement was doing, about what was happening in the arts field and specifically in the dance field in that moment. And somehow this also was one of the few things in which I felt I really could... I don't know, with dance, I always felt

kind of in a difficult position, there were many things that I never really understood or that I don't share. And then when I discovered feminist and queer theories, anti-racist theories and practices, I was like: this, these are words are what I want to give myself to. It was such an amazing discovery. And with Engagement, I started to collaborate and work after my graduation. And I specifically work with colleagues such as Anneleen Lemmens and Anna Muchin in the education group.

Jacopo: We are a group. It's a lot of work and also a lot of joy because I relate a lot, a lot of the knowledge that I acquire from feminist and queer theories, to my experience in education. For some reason or another I always go back to my experiences there, experiences that I had, witnessed, heard. I think it was three years of my life which were very intense. And I feel I'm still processing a lot of that.

I use the pronouns he/they, it gives a sense of relief also in writing, to have the freedom to choose between those pronouns. I don't necessarily define myself as non-binary or fluid, but I find relief in the fluidity of not choosing yet stating. The possibility to choose.

Olave: I love this. I'm trans myself. I know there's a very strong narrative of transness as some kind of "born this way" type of thing. And I know there's a lot of people who struggle with: "hey, am I trans, am I not trans"? I personally encourage everybody in my life to, you know, play with their gender and to think that whether it's "born this way" or not, whether it's a political sort of ideological ambition or not... I think there's so much to be learned and so much growth possible when we just open it up for everyone to try things out.

Jacopo: I love it. I love the fluidity.

Olave: But for the listener: who founded or co-founded Engagement?

Sirah: I wouldn't necessarily call it that because it's something that started in a very natural way. So we started right around the explosion of the me too moment and there were a lot of stories coming up. And I think it's important to say that with Engagement throughout this entire time, we have been focusing on something rather small: experiences of people within the arts community. Including all the different variations that the arts have, from dance to visual arts, cinema, but still within the arts community,

which is in a way already a narrowing down of people's experiences in the world, as just people. So it started around the me too movement. And a lot of stories came out where people just wanted to share their experiences. People didn't know where it was safe to share their experience. There wasn't actually anywhere safe to share experiences, not publicly, not privately. And it felt as if something had to be organized rather quickly for people to be able to contain this flow. That was certainly coming up, like the need to talk, the need to express, the need to say "I've experienced this and that throughout my time in the world or my time working within the arts". And we first had just a quite big closed group on Facebook. Corporate Facebook, yes. That was the option available to us at the moment. There were a few administrators of the group and people would send us a testimony that they would want to publish and we would anonymize it.

Sirah: So we both exclude the name of the perpetrator and the name of the the survivor or victim, but publish it in the thread, and there were a lot of comments, people would recognize behaviors just through reading other people's testimonies. And quite soon we came to realize that **there was a need for people to meet in person to be able to say the name of their perpetrators without being threatened with lawsuits or defamation, or just any other kind of threat that you might have when you call out someone**. And so we started facilitating these meetings and they used to happen very close by at RoSa, the Dutch speaking gender and feminist library just around the corner, which is an office space. So the space was really basic, and it was spontaneous. A lot of people would come in the beginning and just listen to each other, and the need for guidelines or codes of conduct within these meetings grew out of their organic needs. And organic needs also have blind spots. And so I think over time we had to constantly rethink, what is it that we proposed to the people that come together?

Olave: When you say organic, what do you mean? Is it that during every meeting, for example, there would be a time allocated in the start or end or in the middle to talk about what people's needs were in terms of code of conduct? Or as in people letting the organization know privately or otherwise: "hey, I'm struggling with this. Could you please make sure for this or that or some combination thereof?"

Sirah: Yeah, but at the time there was not really an organization. There were the people who were administering the Facebook group, and then there were the people taking a little bit more responsibility on hosting. And so these meetings - and actually it's not very

far from how meetings still take place today - had two basic rules about communication. One was that we all introduce ourselves in the beginning, you can introduce yourself as not yourself if you feel that is necessary, but we want to hear everyone's voice and we normally ask the question "why are you here today?" And that can either be the beginning of someone telling whatever they need to tell, or they can just say "I just needed to come here." There's no judgment on, like what people say in this beginning and towards the end. We tried to frame it within two hours because it also gets heavy. And at the end of a meeting, we'll always do a check-out round. So even if you haven't said anything since the introduction, you would still be asked "how do you feel now? What are you going home with and is there anything else you still need to say?" This was in terms of structure. And then of course, we learned to say that **whatever is talked about within a meeting has to stay with the people who were there at the meeting**. So there's a need to build a temporary trust with the people who are there so that the hearts of people won't, like, suddenly be spilled out in a way that they don't have agency over it anymore. Yes, and in the beginning, we would meet every week and new people kept joining all the time. Some people would come back every week and sometimes just listen, sometimes update on how they felt...

Olave: How many people?

Sirah: It would be anything from five to thirty.

Olave: Wow.

Jacopo: Yeah, some meetings were really full

Olave: And then I'm wondering a little bit, did people have to refer to one another? Or how did people find out there were meetings, how did you make sure that they weren't - because the arts is not a very big community - that people know each other and stuff. I can imagine that you might think that maybe you shouldn't have powerful people in the sector... Was there any kind of selection or procedures for people to come in?

Sirah: That is this organic thing that can also turn into a blind spot. In the beginning there were a lot of people from the performing arts. It seemed like there was a readiness to speak in the performing arts that wasn't there, and maybe I think

sometimes it's still not there, within the visual arts. We announced it on Facebook, email...

Jacopo: And in the beginning it was only for women. So I think this was also a way to create a safer space. And I remember it because I was in school at the time and I remember reading and I was like, oh, but why?

Jacopo: I remember talking to Ilse and she was saying, you know, it was good to have something which felt a bit more peer to peer somehow.

Sirah: But it's true. I mean, people who were more in power positions, they didn't show up to these meetings. It was the flex workers, as they're called here in Belgium, people who work on short contracts, people who experienced some kind of precarity within their working conditions.

Olave: Yeah, and so that was an organic sort of demographics, not necessarily a selective procedure.

Sirah: Exactly. There were always more people joining from the Flemish cultural field. At some point, there were more French speakers joining, then like meetings went on with translation happening simultaneously. There were also issues about language, but mostly these meetings were in English, and then we set up the website. The website has a statement and people started signing the statement and that's where I think the work towards organizations also started, or at least that's how I perceive it. Maybe there's a different timeline. I don't have access to it right now. So the statement, you have the possibility to sign it as an artist, as an educator, as an institution or as an audience member, as a spectator. And so a lot of individual people signed that statement. But then people who were working for an institution, but were not sure they were representing the institution, wanted to sign and weren't really sure how to do that. Could they sign in the name of the institution? What would it mean to sign in the name of the institution? And that evolved together with these conversations, more spontaneous meetings that were still ongoing, where people really started to say, OK, **how do we approach institutions for them to give us a little bit more safety within our working spaces**, whether it is, a place where you maybe only come to perform three days, or maybe you end up being here in residency (for longer), **what can we**

demand from the institutions to to be a little bit more conscious about our well-being while we are hosted in these places?

Olave: Can I just ask a little bit about the architecture of the statement? Like, how did that go about like who, what, when? Because it's a really full statement.

Sirah: It's interesting, we just had a meeting yesterday with a group of us. And I think there's more of us that feel like, wow, if we had written this now, we would have articulated so many things differently. And it has come up again and again that actually we can change it. Of course we can change information, but it's also weird to change a statement that people have signed. So we've never changed our original statement.

Olave: So you don't unilaterally change it.

Sirah: If you sign the statement and later you want to review it and you notice we changed it into something else completely... so no, we haven't changed the statement since it was published.

Olave: Who wrote it and how?

Sirah: It was a collaboration. Ilse (Ghekiere), myself and Gala (Moody) and Rósa (Omarsdóttir) who were both not so involved with Engagement anymore. And then we also worked with, Just For The Record, which is an artists and designers collective. We worked with two of them, Loraine Furter and Sarah Magnan, who are wonderful. But they were also very much part of the discussion on the content. So we were six who were editing it for quite a long time, but it was also efficient because it was like "we need to get this out!"

Olave: It's a very full statement, there's a lot in it. And I'm a little bit curious, the architects involved, would you say that you had a very strong theoretical knowledge about, say, safer spaces, or about the arts or, did you study all this or, did it come from personal experiences? Like how did you develop the material that got you to make such a really complete and I think also really critical statement? Where does all this come from?

Sirah: That's a really good question. For me personally, I had no experience working within feminist activism before. I've been more involved with Israel Palestine politics kind of activism. I had read a lot of feminism even then, but I did not have the practice. But this very intense period, like from when Me Too broke out and all these stories came, and we had to manage them and contain some of them and explode some others of them. It was a very quick learning experience. And then, of course, your own experiences. I've experienced discrimination living in Belgium, living in the Netherlands as well, within the education I went through, within my working experience as both an artist and a dancer, and I just felt like all of this needed to be addressed. So I think the statement is actually quite personal in the sense that it comes out of the people who wrote it, their experiences and concerns.

Olave: Would you say that in doing so, the personal is political? It's very difficult living in this society where expertise is very much considered to be a neutral, observational and sort of objective and so on. I think it's still very difficult and scary to use your own personal life and your insights to come out in the open and be like: "we think things should be like this and like that". Would you say that you were confident like that? Was it based on the confidence that "we know what we're talking about, we know what's wrong?"

Sirah: I think the coming together really offered an opportunity for us to speak in a collective voice without being singled out. And that was what was urgent for me. And it still is, I think. What I benefit the most from with Engagement is that when something needs to be said, and then no one dares to say it, we can sign it with the collective name and not one of us would be put up against the wall for having done this or said that. People were afraid of anything from like losing funding to having defamation cases run against them to, you know, or just losing themselves, you know, **it seemed like everything could be potentially at stake and using the collective and creating a sense of anonymity, safety through the anonymity** so that, the fact that you can disappear in a group was very, very powerful. And I think to a certain degree, especially when we are now sitting at tables and it is more like political, like the fact we are addressed as individuals, I'm speaking now as an individual… but the fact that we can also disappear within a collective and that anyone can come and say, "hey, we need no help to address this problem and we can't do it on our own". I've just been experiencing that within the film sector where, like, people don't have the safety to speak out yet, but

they can use the structure or just like this name to publish an article or to address a funding body or even address a perpetrator.

Olave: Wow, amazing. I have so many questions right now, I don't know where to start. At some point as an organization, you decided to start creating, to sort of reach out to creating demand through the statement and through specific projects. You would also perhaps consult with organizations and institutions. And if I understand correctly, you would help them formulate strategies towards more safety. How has that been going?

Sirah: There's two things that happen with institutions and it's different work, I find. One is, you **try to create alliances with institutions that have knowledge or resources or frameworks, data**, you know, anything that can be useful for the people who come to us, because **these alliances are crucial, because we don't know anything, we still don't know everything**. We also know we can't help anyone that comes to us and needs, say, legal help. Or some people need to be referred to a good psychologist who has the expertise they need. Some people need just a sense of community, so the needs are all so different. And it's not all narratives that we know how we can help the best. So we really need the alliances of other support groups. And then **the work with institutions is really about reviewing how people work on their code of conduct, not necessarily the written form of it, but what do they do in order to prevent sexual harassment** of course but also **racist aggression, sexist comments, or power abuse**. Power abuse happens everywhere.

Olave: We live in a society that individualizes that kind of incidents of violence. And it's also considered incidental, and personal. So even sexual harassment within the context of, perhaps a teacher with a student, or between a boss and worker, are very much, sort of, about the individuals. How many, in your experience, organizations have the awareness to say like: "OK, this isn't just an interpersonal individual conduct or moment or incident, but this is something that we are kind of responsible for in the ways in which we regulate relationships, regulate conduct". How much "awareness" is there?

Sirah: Well, there's as much range as there are organizations, right? The moments where I have felt really frustrated, were when I saw the structural issues so clearly, but people are just being judged on their individual, I'm tempted to say "crime", because I have a very specific case in mind. But it's not always like "criminal", but... And when I

can see the privilege running through, and the kind of entitlement it gives to people, and how they just abuse that, and... destroy people. It is sometimes such hard work to show the politics, how it is constructed in our social construct. Because to go back to your introduction, we have all internalized this so strongly, so that it is hard even for us as individuals to judge ourselves, our own experiences only based on our own experience.

Olave: I guess it's very hard to sort of create a vacuum of "just me and my behavior, my beliefs and ideas", when it's so interwoven with everything, all the baggage and all the inheritance that we carry with us.

[Sirah has to leave to pick up her children. Goodbyes]

Olave: Thank you, Sarah. Hi, Jacopo, I have not asked you many questions so far because I time with Sirah was limited.

Jacopo: Yeah. I love to support by listening. I think there is also a lot in there.

Olave: That's a really good observation.

Jacopo: And I think this links to what we were talking about. With institutions I always find a lack of will to listen. I found this both in my own experience in the institution and the people who know me, where I went to school. A lack of will to listen without having to answer immediately. This was also discussed with people within the Education Working Group. When you talk to someone in a higher power position than yours, there is always this knowledge and dialectic, and it's sort of about how to phrase an argument, and debate, and be right. There is a lack of sincerely listening to what the other person is saying. And this was, I think, also the work with Engagement, with testimonies and the sharing of testimonies, this sort of brought knowledge: "OK, now we shut up and listen". I grew up in a family where people talk a lot, and listening was a great practice, which is something so practical and so effective that we can all benefit from.

Olave: You're in the education workgroup, so you must think about the conditions necessary to sort of cultivate and stimulate this listening that you're talking about. So there's a lot of static that people have within them when they're listening to others,

things like "I have to be right". Wanting the best arguments or listening to protect yourself. So especially I think in this kind of conversations about when harm has been done, and how other people may be complicit or have enabled certain things, there's this sort of personal static happening at the same time, which makes it very hard to listen to what the person or the people are saying about what happened and so on. And I'm wondering whether as an organization, as a working group, what are your reflections on how to reduce that kind of static, how to create optimal conditions for listening, whether you're moving forward towards an organization and saying, "hey, this thing happened, somebody told us this thing" - I don't know if you do that at all - or when people invite you in to talk and think through, or review, codes of conduct and what not, is there any kind of strategies that you employ?

Jacopo: I haven't been in Engagement for a long time, but I sort of followed the idea of an organic way of working, which of course has its blind spots, as Sirah said. But also I think first of all, if you go to an institution and whether you're being invited or not, you cannot arrive with the request to be listened to if you're not listening. As you said in the introduction, in my thinking people are genuine and I don't think that is being naive, I imagine that everybody is doing the best they can. Some people are not doing the best they can though. And some people are. I think it is also interesting that visiting different institutions, you see when, for example, you meet new directors or new coordinators who have just stepped into a position which is so intricate and they have to deal with the body of students that demand certain things, with teachers that come in and out. So I think it's always good to sort of frame the situation you're in. So perhaps you are meeting a director, who has been there for like a year, so surely they have some type of knowledge, but also it's a relative knowledge about that specific space. And you as an outsider have a relative knowledge about that specific space. So I don't have tips and tricks. And it's funny because with Anneleen Lemmens, who are also in the education group, we wrote an article about tips and tricks about when dealing with power.

Jacopo: Based on our own experience and that of people around us talking with teachers or educators, when you present some kind of issue around harassment, racism, ableism, the kind of usual answers you get are like: "oh, we don't have time for this" or "we really hear you..." But it's a very difficult conversation. **It's very easy for the people on the other side to set the time and the pace at which you're going to talk about things. And therefore, you are asked to prepare for this meeting for free**

most of the time, and your students, and then they set the pace. So I think it's also interesting to connect with your peers. I think when you go with a group to have this conversation, if you have the privilege to be around the group, a friendly community which supports this, **it really changes a lot** because it's not about being five people against one. But there is often this one person that holds a lot of power over the students, there may be consequences they might have to face.

Olave: This process of finding other students and connecting with them, and thinking about how to be strategic, and how you're going to approach the organisation... Thinking about my students at the School of Arts in Ghent I wonder, where would they have the time? The workload is so intense right now. Also nobody's seeing each other at the moment, they can't go to school. And what are your experiences like? What do you see happening? Do students do stuff to try to come together to talk about these things, come up with strategies?

Jacopo: I would say hardly. In my experience and that of other people in intense institutions, but also other kinds of institutions, for example, performance or many dance institutions, right now it's a full schedule from nine to five.

Olave: Nine to five?

Jacopo: Yeah, nine to five. This is every day. Every day, like Monday to Friday. And I know people in the U.S. sometimes do Monday to Saturday. The amount of information... and of course, certain schools are about provoking thoughts and creating a space for students to elaborate themselves and reflect on their artistic practices. But other institutions, that are perhaps more keen into training performers or even choreographers or creators, are also still more attached to a way of teaching which is more about skill sharing. There, there is not much time for it. I remember when in school we were sort of organizing meetings around sexual harassment and the problems we possibly would have had in school. This meeting would have happened like from six to eight. I remember the first meeting was around 30 people. And it was still quite amazing to see how students had found the energy to come and talk about this a whole night. And it's not as if coordinators have purposely invented this full schedule. I mean, this is something that comes from years of dancers having to sort of delete habits of their bodies to sort of fit into what is a specific aesthetic.

Jacopo: And this is as physical as it is theoretical. It goes both from eliminating traces of what is not the canon and not giving you the time to think. And I think for staff it is also this in a different way because many art schools function with freelancers. And then they come in, they have to do the job and then they leave. So on one side, the students feel like certain teachers come in, drop their practice there, and you have to sort of drown in it and understand how to do it. And if you have problems, if you feel unsafe in such a space, do you have like I, to give back the question, how do you find the time to go back to whoever is holding the space and be like, hey, I don't feel safe in this. Before you manage to do that, if you feel safe to say that you are unsafe, the more we ask ourselves for strategies the more questions we find. I find if I had really had the luck to be surrounded by and to surround people in my class that were generally very critical...

Olave: What do you mean? You must have had at the very least basic notions of what these people who are critical in my life, like students, what they have to say is true and valuable?

Jacopo: I think sometimes when you enter an arts education programme, you are just there for it. I don't know how much time you have to be questioning around. When a practice is proposed and especially after practice, it is sort of intense. I remember my first year of dance education, I would do anything that was thrown at me. But then after that overload, I think many people start to be like: wait a second, how do we feel about this? How do we feel about being asked every day to do such and such?

Jacopo: Sometimes it is hard finding peers that look at each other in a way of like: hey, don't you also feel this is sort of funny? Because sometimes people are so focused on succeeding. I find great relief in reading *The Queer Art of Failure* by Judith Halberstam. I wish this would have been there during my education.

Olave: So you come into these spaces and encourage people to come together and talk, and it's mostly testimony, sort of the same methodology that we spoke about earlier. Thirty students or sometimes less, from six to eight. They're tired. They've had a very long day. They come and... do you do this only once or do you do this regularly?

Jacopo: The idea was to have this as a sort of attempt, on a regular basis. And for example, I remember in the year we did it, we managed to do three encounters in about six months, the second semester. The format was that we would come into the space, hand a piece of paper prepared by other students. There was some vocabulary that was given. How how do we define sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention, rape? And then we had questions. For example, have you ever witnessed something that's made you feel uncomfortable? These questions were not to bring out testimonies, but to make people reflect on their own experience. I think also in an institution that was predominantly white, there were very blind spots around race. At the time we were not talking about race. It would be nice to go back in time to address this, it was a very white space.

Olave: So people would come in and would have a conversation, talk guidelines, structure, questions that can help them reflect. And they would be doing so in their institution and with their fellow students. Were there any staff present sometimes?

Jacopo: No. We were trying to more or less follow the format of Engagement. We didn't do a women-only meetings because I and the other students were the main organizers. At the time it felt like it was good to involve everyone in the student body. So only students were allowed, in order to maintain this attempt at a safer space. And people were invited to listen. To not jump at the throat of other people for sharing their experience. Because if you would talk openly about a teacher, who perhaps was a beloved teacher, we were asking people to respect whatever opinion or experience people had.

Jacopo: We were doing this with very, very few tools. Looking back, I think now we would have at least the knowledge to state some guidelines and rules. But we were playing with five different elements we had. And I think it was really something already that this was happening because schools are not necessarily keen on, you know, stopping the thousand hours of training. We have to sort of talk about something that is there because there is an urge to produce a concern to give students education.

Olave: I can imagine it must have been very scary to be organizing this at your own school, these spaces where teachers could be perhaps criticized, I mean, you agree on

confidentiality but things could leak out. What made you "brave", you and the person doing it with you?

Jacopo: We had a specific case in the school, something that happened with a teacher, a few things happened and then this person was invited back to teach. So some of us were like, this is weird. So I went to talk to the coordinators at the time. And there was an exchange about why this person was coming back. I'm not going to talk about the exchange because… too many references. Then there was sort of an explanation. And I was like, OK, I think that there is a need for people to group. Also pointing out the work of Engagement and of Sarah Ahmed who states so clearly that **there is such amazing power when people group to talk about their experiences, because you find out that you're not the only one**.

Olave: But in the history of unionizing, institutions know how dangerous it is when people come together. I know you said earlier, they don't really have the intention to keep us so busy that we don't have time to come together. But the reality of it is **it certainly does not hurt the stability of the status quo when people are overworked and have no time or possibilities to come together.** So you propose at some point: "let's have meetings with groups". Have you ever, from that moment on when that was possible, experienced the negative consequences for having done so, for the disruptive potential of coming together in these collective moments? Was it ever something that, you know, you had to pay for in some way or another?

Jacopo: Maybe not necessarily for these meetings. I think for some reason, we managed to keep this quiet. At first I remember we didn't want the institution to know. But then a certain point I wanted them to know,

Jacopo: Two days before the meeting I was speaking with colleagues and I was like, maybe we should tell them that. And I mean, how can they stop us? Maybe we don't meet in the room like in one of the studios, maybe we meet outside. But this is still a school meeting. So I talked to them and they were actually very supportive. They were actually very touched that we had told them this was happening. So on one side, this was also a bit more encouraging. But then I think I faced some backlash, or I don't know, for being as outspoken on my own, for pointing out teachers in front of everyone and telling them what you're doing is not OK. And then having representatives of staff

coming to tell them that you don't do this in the open. In Italian we say we wash our dirty clothes at home. And it's funny because then "in the open" means the classroom, so but where is the place where me and my peers are allowed to point things out?

Olave: Were there alternatives at your school, procedures for pointing out things?

Jacopo: Not really at the time. Right now there are.

Olave: So they were like, oh this is not the right way, but they had no way?

Jacopo: Exactly, or it was really hard to find the right way, this is **the endless story of complaint procedures, either they don't necessarily work, and if they do, where do they end up, and how do you find them and how do you know** their path around the institution? And at the time, I honestly didn't know of any sort of procedure.

Olave: Which is also a failure of the procedure, if you don't even know about it. I think a lot of students don't know. In general, especially higher learning, the academic side of things, they do procedures not only on behavior, but also oftentimes on content. So for example, if you're writing a Ph.D., there are procedures for when you don't agree with your supervisor, that kind of thing. But the reality is most people who are either working or students don't know what those procedures are. Which is a failing of the organization. And of the procedure, if it's not known. But I'm wondering, are there specific things that, looking back, you think went wrong? Or things that people told you went wrong, moments or incidents where people would be like, this is actually not OK? This doesn't make me feel safe with this, you know, has harmed me or somehow?

Jacopo: I think there was an episode of a student pointed out for having behavior which by the institution was called unsettling somehow. And it was really about appearance. I remember promising that we would talk about this and then the conversation slipped into a completely different direction. And I always felt so bad for not sticking to this, sticking a bit more strictly to what the urgent matters are that we are facing today. I wish I would have had more rigor to be like, OK, this has to be addressed and not just, although this organic way of working is great. **How to find a balance between a sort of rigor to say "we have to pass through these three topics", and at the same time allowing for spontaneous conversation to happen.** And also I think I wish maybe I

would have let women-only meetings happen. I mean, it's not like I sort of refused this. But I sort of went in and we suddenly decided: OK, it's going to be a mixed group of students, which I think on one side was great, but on the other side, we could have created more sort of satellite experiences around that group.

Olave: What you're saying here is you're taking note, saying "It might have been good to have a sort of a space for people who identify as women". I think you're acknowledging the fact that there are sort of horizontal relationships going on. So not only in relation to the institutions and the teachers, but also to each other. And some of those relationships, those dynamics can be "abusive" or harmful. And I'm a little bit curious about creating a space, whether it's mixing gender or otherwise, where people can come in who have a complicated position, narratives where, for example, they might have been the victim or may have been witnesses of abusive behavior, or might be holding space for someone that is going through something really bad at school or whatever... but also amongst themselves, having done things that may be harmful towards people in the same room, perhaps. Because this idea of victim and perpetrator is not that clean now. We know that a lot of people who "perpetuate" abuse also may be or have been abused. Ongoing or otherwise. I'm wondering what was your experience in that complexity, where people get in a room and might be like: "actually, the person that I wanted to talk about is in the room"

Jacopo: We tended to think about an abusive relationship as between a student and a teacher, we were not considering the complexity of already a group of perhaps 15 people who come from different backgrounds and have different ways to relate to each other. To relate to their own bodies, especially if the body is the center of the practice which we are dealing with. The more we talk now, the more I wish I could go back in time and bring this conversation there.

Olave: If you've gone through a learning curve - because you're talking about this now very eloquently, and you're kind of indicating if I could go back, I would do things differently. Are you doing things differently now? In the education work group, are there more guidelines or tools now, and what do they look like? And how do you develop them?

Jacopo: First of all being surrounded by the people of Engagement and the knowledge that is present there, both in a collective and an individual way. This already is a great way to establish new ways - or not new because there is very little that is new - Sarah Ahmed says that feminist are very rarely innovative, they are always repeating the same thing. It's just that there is a need for this to be heard.

Speaker3: And for example, also the work that with the education group we have been doing in Kaaitheater, we had a residency here and were trying to develop a format, a program for staff and teachers to go through before they're hired. When you look at a specific demographic, let's say teachers. We've been an institution for a long time. Of course, as the next students, you are pissed at the ones who do not see the need for progress. Of course you are. But you also have to go there with a sort of "peace", or willingness to listen. And this I find to be a very good way of starting such guidelines. But then it's also really hard to know how to point out things. This is something I still struggle with. And I feel I've been acquiring a lot of knowledge and have had very little space to practice because of the pandemic. I was developing a sort of workshop on code of conduct, then I was about to do the first one in the university and then it happened. And one of the biggest frustrations is to have all this knowledge and these thoughts and connections, and then not being able to put them into practice because the space in which you can do it right now is not accessible.

Olave: It's good that you're talking about codes of conduct and the practice of it. The thing is that when the code of conduct fails, if there are oversights or mistakes or failures in the code of conduct, the ways that we know this is when often the harm is not acknowledged or is reproduced. And I can imagine that it's very scary knowing that coming forward to people and saying, hey, here is a template for a code of conduct. Here's a format for a code of conduct development process. Here is a methodology for hiring good teachers, or teachers that, you know... I can imagine that, whether it's Engagement or you personally coming into spaces and be like, we've thought about this and this is what we have to offer, that you're kind of scared because if it's not perfect, you're only going to find out about it because...

Jacopo: And this was my first approach when proposing this code of conduct workshop to a school. **One of the first statements is that there are no golden rules for constructing any code of conduct**. This is an attempt. I think many people do not

want attempts anymore. They want results. And this is understandable. Yet often it is not the reality, **the machinery of the institution is so complex that when we focus on something like code of conduct,** they are such a liminal part of what we're doing. **They are very practical in a way, but they are also very abstract** because groups that whether they are mixed (students and teachers) or not on them, they spend hours formulating. But then **you can test-drive it only when you put it to work. In the meanwhile, the only way you can see if it's working is whether people come back to you with trauma or not. This is one of the most disarming things about this kind of work**. I think when there is a clear path to follow if something happens, if teachers come and create more space where they're teaching, if they say " this is what I propose, but let's see together which way to go"... I have always felt quite safe in spaces where whoever was holding the space felt they were proposing and served as accountable...

Speaker1: I think I'm hearing something that I want to test it by you, are you suggesting that codes of conduct (given the fact that people don't have the time, but let's say they do), could be something that within institutions could be regularly updated, reframed, reformulated? Perhaps on a class level every year, every semester, so that teachers take the time and space to sit with their students and be like, how are we going to do this? Or perhaps when there are new hirees, that there are ongoing working groups within institutions to talk about codes of conduct and make them better or change them or, you know, start over again and so on. Instead of a code of conduct that you put on the website and that's it. Is that what you are saying?

Jacopo: I think so. And then I also remember someone telling me: "but not every department can become a gender studies department". But I think in an ideal world or an advanced institution, teachers or whoever comes to the space takes a fraction of the time to devote it to assuring or questioning the space. And this sounds very abstract, but it is very practical because let's say if we start a class or a practice with everybody introducing themselves, with people perhaps stating - if we talk about physically related practices - if there are certain things they have to watch out for, or if the teacher acknowledges their positions. This is already a step and this could be also a very informal code of conduct that we started. I started classes where teachers were just assuming that we knew who they were and they did not care who we were. Instead of

sort of like "OK, we we're going to spend two or three weeks together. So how do we do this? How do I bring my thing to you?"

Olave: That is a very strong signal when somebody does even ask, doesn't create that space a teacher. "I'm here to teach you something and I just want to make sure that you and get it. And I'm going to fail you if you don't get it. And that's it. I don't care anything at all."

Olave: Which is interesting, because I've always learned or noticed that the people involved in making a code of conduct are the ones who benefit from it the most. Being part of it, I've been in rooms where you see people thinking about the things that they've experienced, making that into an analysis and into concrete proposals. You see them really sort of heal from things they have gone through. By doing so, by going through that process, you see people negotiate and be like, "do we need to put a comma there? And is this really a problem?" They kind of negotiate with people in power, especially when their position is an antiracist one. And then in a lot of mixed groups where you have white people and people of color, they are forced to negotiate: when is cultural appropriation an issue in this, in our particular relationship, right now? When are certain words or questions... or you know, I have learned that the people who benefit the most from a code of conduct aren't necessarily the victims of inappropriate conduct, but people who are actually involved in the process of creating a code of conduct. But the problem is we think of it as something static. You come up with it and that's it. It's another thing to have new people come into the organization that can somehow be invested in it, get involved with it.

Jacopo: I think "code of conduct" relates to this idea of a manifesto, but less static, and there is more movement in the sense that, you lay down the values or the ideas that we think we should pay attention to "right now". The making of a code of conduct is a very unsafe space. Because as you said, either the code of conduct is made by one person in a room who has very little knowledge about or is very detached from what is happening in classrooms, or creative spaces, or any kind of space… Perhaps **one of the best options is a mixed group of people with different knowledge, different backgrounds. And this is, as you said, very tricky. This is a continuing negotiation.** This is really reaffirming trauma, reaffirming sorrow, reaffirming many

things, going over wounds again and again, and also having to step back and saying: OK, now I have to put them on paper and write them really nicely.

Jacopo: So there is some harm in those documents, there is the harm to exclude people, the harm to make something personal, an emotional standard. There is harm, but also potential in a sort of attempt. I wish universities or institutions would attempt more, and fail more. I think we should all start this. Whenever you start a school, to say like "we are here and we are all failing at what we're doing." I feel that in creative process, any kind of process, is about making something, there is so much failing into it.

Olave: I have to come back to the question of failure, because when it fails, it fails dramatically.

Jacopo: Yes.

Olave: And I'm wondering whether, there is a context or ways in which repair can become part of that practice, so that if you acknowledge that you will fail, how do you strategize for repairing that, the harm that you inevitably as an institution or as individuals or as a group that you will inevitably perpetuate? Is that something you've come across in negotiating with institutions: **ways in which harm that has been done can be repaired, that healing can be encouraged, nurtured and so on?**

Jacopo: Not necessarily within the institution, but there was a case where the perpetrator offered, first of all, a very long letter, like a sincere love letter, most people said, of apologies and sort of acknowledging the harm that had been done. And the mediator was also proposing whoever needed or wanted meetings with this person to talk about it. And this was something, I was not satisfied with the outcome of it. I thought something more had to happen. But I know some people were involved in this that were OK with it. What was healing somehow, reading this, was that the person acknowledged the harm that they had done. I don't know. Honestly, so far I haven't really come across - and this is not because it hasn't happened, but because my experiences are so limited - moments of collective healing. I think a lot of healing happens peer to peer, I haven't really seen an institution so far where it was collectively decided to go through a healing process.

Olave: When you were having those sessions, when you would be done and people would have reflected, perhaps even shared certain things they had gone through... I don't know if you also attended the other Engagement sessions as well, outside institutions... Where people are talking about the things that they have been through, and there is no judgement... would you say that people walk away from that healed, or not at all? Art is therapeutic?

Jacopo: I think there is a therapeutical aspect: the possibility to again, and maybe I am being very repetitive, talk and be listened to. And people confirming what you've been through, perhaps also relating this to their own experience, and I think there is healing in that, not feeling alone. I think this has been a big part of my limited experience as a sort of diversity practitioner, as I would say. I don't know if I would call myself this, but I find it a very beautiful word. There is an aspect of healing which is about sharing and being listened to. But then, of course, there is the part of what happens between me, between you and the perpetrator, which can be an individual or perhaps an institution. I remember talking about the specific case and the mediator being like: b"ut why do you want the institution to admit their wrongdoing in the past? And why are we not concentrating on the future?" Because there is no "how do we", how are we supposed to work together from now on if we don't settle what has happened before? And this for me would have been a moment of healing for the institution and for whoever was involved, being like: "OK, we have looked back and this is what we have missed in doing and in listening and other sort of actions. How do we go from now on" for me, this is something I haven't really experienced because I think some institutions are really busy with the imago, with their image.

Olave: And this is also a liability: admitting we were wrong. America is different, Europe is definitely not as litigious as people think it is. But America is highly, highly litigious, organisations and institutions can never in any way even be involved in the mediation because that would also be construed as sort of an acceptance of liability. In Europe it's a little bit less. But generally there's indeed the image, but also certain levels of legal liability.
We don't have much time left but I wanted to touch upon two things. The limitations of the safer space sessions that you've had as therapeutic. And you talked about making codes of conduct. There is certain harm, and that is sort of embedded in the process of reliving, or perhaps not reliving but definitely thinking about how could this happen to

me and how do I translate that into safety standards, and so on. But you're sitting in this room, people are talking about things. People are hearing terrible things that have happened to other people, and people are telling these things...

Olave: And how do you know as facilitators where the line is between "this is healing to me, this is helpful to me" and "this is actually a kind of traumatic experience again". And how do you help people protect themselves? Because I've been in support groups, and I've facilitated support groups - which is perhaps something different than what Engagement does - but where I really worried about whether this was helpful to this person at that moment. And whether they wouldn't benefit more from like a really constructed therapeutic relationship with the therapist, constructed safely, instead of just... Have you ever had those moments, and have you ever seen any kind of interventions or strategies that you thought of that were really nice in that respect?

Jacopo: I would have to pass, I wish Sirah was still here because she would have experiences that I don't.

Olave: My other question was: obviously a lot of these institutions have mediation when things happen, does somebody get fired or not. Does somebody stay in the organization or.. You said earlier, so there was also violence, and harm in excluding people. And I'm wondering, because this is tricky stuff, so what do you do? Do we identify perpetrators and then be like "OK, they need to leave, to be fired. The police need to be called"? Or are there other ways, knowing that obviously not every case is the same? What are your thoughts, as Engagement and as you personally?

Jacopo: From what I've seen and experienced, I think there are moments when it is necessary that the person is removed from the position. And in many cases, what the institution does, is put them in a different space in the institution. Or they put them in early retirement, like staff that has been there for a long time, older generation teachers. There is a moment where a teacher has to be fired, and there is a moment where maybe there is a healing process that has to happen. But where is the line? In the case where a teacher has heavily harassed someone, is physical harm the line? And when the harm is psychological, can you say "OK no you're fine, you can stay"? I wonder where the line is.

Olave: Does it have to be a crime? The Dutch law is not necessarily the best law in terms of rape, in the way that they define rape. It leaves a lot of things out that are really wrong.

Jacopo: Yes, where is the line then. But then something that I feel very strongly about is that when a case arises... and it is surely not going to be the first case, let's say the case makes it to the high points of the institutions, because somehow the complaint procedure has worked, has not failed. Then the institution has to take responsibility to look at the whole structure. And they say: "I think we're talking about an individual." It is very tricky. But then we have to talk about: "this person was enabled to do that. Why? In which way is our institution enabling this? And of course, this is not like a ten minutes answer.

Olave: That's something that the people who complain want to hear or talk about. Do they want to? Because that shifts the focus away from "this person did something wrong." And if that person ends up sort of embroidled in these long conversations about structures, I can imagine these are not very satisfying sometimes... they may just think "I want that person fired. I don't want to talk about any responsibility."

Jacopo: And these are perhaps two different moments. What is triggered doesn't necessarily have to happen in the same line with the same people in the same space. But when a complaint has been made, first of all, the person who has made the complaint does not have to become the hero or heroin of the story, or become the diversity face of the school. **This is what happens most of the time, that if you're complaining, you are asked to bring solutions and proposals. But this person was just complaining and they need their resolution**. They need something to be done. And then on the other side, in the next room, let's say the institution has to ask themselves these questions, but not in the same space. There was a case somewhere, where a teacher was sort of abusive, not in a physical but in a psychological way, towards students. And after many years, he was invited to leave, which is interesting, or rather not invited to leave... but the conversation was made in terms of: "your values and the value of the institutions are diverging right now. So are we a good match?" And either this is diplomatic or radical; I don't know what is the best way to do it. I know that whoever was involved in that case was very satisfied about that person leaving. It's clear if a person is not interested in reworking on themselves with their students...

Olave: But what if somebody says, I really want to change? And I need your help as an organization as an institution to help me get there, to not be abusive anymore... but this person has done something really serious… What do you do?

Jacopo: I don't know. With Engagement there were people, "perpetrators" who came forward and said "I have been doing this and I hold responsibility and I would like to receive documents and things that I can use.

Olave: These people have come to you saying, "I think I'm fucking up here".

Jacopo: Well, people have come to us after they were pointed out.. but still I think there is something there, and every story has nuances. And of course we can always be a bit more dubious about why someone is doing something and if it is genuine or not. But this has a repercussion anyway. The fact that certain knowledge is shared directly with someone holding a space, they sort of take responsibility and says, OK I would like to know more about this way of doing, because clearly what I was doing was not...

Olave: You had these people come and say: "but what do I have to do then?" And Engagement said "OK, these are the tools you could use. This is the documentation."

Jacopo: I can only speak about that specific case, but yes, we forwarded information and there were spaces in which certain things were talked about. As in "I've done something wrong". With the mic.

Olave: Oh wow. That's amazing.

Jacopo: Yeah. This was cool

Olave: Because I myself have a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. And I know from the moment I was diagnosed, I took a very hard look at my past relationships. And I came to an understanding with my therapist that a lot of the things I thought I had done, even though coming from a particular pathology of trauma, a developmental pathology of intense and, a lot of trauma in my childhood and in my life... even though there were mechanisms and strategies and behaviors that were, you know,

developed as a way to help me survive a rather violent world and life.. I had to look back on it and realize that I was extremely abusive towards people that were very close to me. Very, very abusive, and I connected back to some of those people told them "I've been going to therapy. And I discovered that I was very abusive towards you." And the reactions were really interesting. I had somebody tell me "what you did to me made me not trust people anymore." And the person started crying: "I thought I was crazy. Because you were also always so nice with everyone. I really liked you. And I thought that I was the one that was crazy, to think this was harmful, what you were doing or what you were saying to me." And it's not just one, it is a bunch of people. Some of these people don't want to talk to me again, so I send them emails saying "hey, things happen. I'm very sorry", but they never responded. And it's their complete right, because I did really terrible things. And to be very honest, I had no idea. And I still struggle with, how do I make sure this never happens again, and where are the tools, how do I learn. When it's so deeply... obviously therapy helps, but I think it's really good that people who come to that consciousness, whether it is people calling them out, whether it's through therapy or the light shines on them... to realize "wait a minute, I'm doing terrible things."... I think it's nice if they can find resources.

Jacopo: And I think this is definitely a way to proceed, coming to a point of acknowledgement of what has been done and what have you been doing to other people or to yourself. We all grew up in different ways and we all have trauma and shame from the past, and mechanisms. So many mechanisms around harm that we think are just normal, so many ways to relate to people.

Olave: We're tired because we've been doing this for two hours and I think we have to stop, we're not supposed to make you work for so long. I want to thank you.

Jacopo: Thank you for inviting us and sharing your personal things with us.

Olave: I'm asking so much of you guys. I have to.

Jacopo: And I also have to state that I speak for myself and not for Engagement. It's a very limited perspective of having been in this context for a short time.

Olave: I really hope people get in touch with Engagement, whether institutionally, personally, as victims or as perpetrators as well, get in touch with the good work y'all are doing and learn from it.

Jacopo: And we are very happy to branch out to other people and to make collective work because this is the hard work that has to be done.

Olave: And I'm really happy. One of the things that I enjoyed the most straight out from this conversation in the very beginning, was the way that you - Engagement and both of you - situated the **safer spaces as instruments for collective action**. That's really important because I think sometimes we forget how incredibly powerful we become when we have a context in which we are nurtured, where space is held for us to be vulnerable, to have had pain and to talk about it. There's is incredible strength that can come from that, that isn't just... **I think a lot of people think of safe spaces as places where people are just being snowflakes**, but **I believe safe spaces are where people become heroes,** and change their lives, and the world. It's really great and we thank you so much. For your patience.
For the listeners, we've got a whole bunch of more conversations coming up. I don't know in which order we're going to publish them.

Olave: I want to thank you for your patience, for listening to us for so long and for being vulnerable with us. Again: **be care-ful. Be full of care for yourself, for others.** As for me, I want to thank the incredible team here helping us in the relative chaos. And my partner in crime, Non Sense, an activist from Rotterdam. They really helped me through this process a lot. Thank you all. Have a very nice day or evening or I don't know when you're listening to this. Have a Kiki, have fun. And again, thank you.