***Willem de Kooning Academy, Rotterdam***

*Jury Report, Drempelprijs, Social Practices, 2018*

The ‘Drempelprijs’ (Threshold Award) has been awarded since 1962 on behalf of the municipal government of Rotterdam to the most promising graduates of the Willem de Kooning Academy. This award aims to encourage these young talents as they officially begin their careers as ‘creating pioneers’. In recent years there have been three such awards, one for each of the WdKA’s graduation profiles: Autonomous Practices, Commercial Practices, and Social Practices.

**WdKA: Social Practices**

The Willem de Kooning Academy defines Social Practices as artistic practices related to complex (‘wicked’) social or environmental issues. Social artists/designers are not only concerned with the aesthetics, functionality and conceptual meaning of their work, but also aim to radically design (and redesign) the encompassing systems and interactions in relation to political factors.

The projects of the WdKA’s Social Practices are thus direct interventions in society and politics, going beyond the notion of art as a means for conventional pedagogy and social work. These projects do not merely or compliantly visualise, aestheticise or assist social struggles, but also aim to introduce true and radical innovations by redesigning the underlying processes of design, production and interaction.

**The jury**

This year’s jury consisted of:

* Tabo Goudswaard, artist, researcher and social designer. Tabo manages the *Social Design Studio Goudswaard*, which designs new ways of approaching social issues. He has also served as chairman of the jury for *The Art of Impact*.
* Sabrina Lindemann works as ‘urban catalyzer’ for the project agency *OpTrek* in The Hague, where she plays a game-changing role in the redevelopment of the former Binckhorst industrial area, aiming to interactively include citizens in the planning process of urban planners and commercial developers.
* Anne van der Zwaag, owner/director of the design fairs *OBJECT* and *BIG ART*, and author of ‘Looks Good, Feels Good, Is Good’ (2014).
* Boo van der Vlist, artist, political scientist and tutor at the WdKA and the Erasmus University (nonvoting secretary).

**Criteria and procedure**

The jury met on Thursday, July 5, in the temporarily quiet entrance hall of the Blaak building of the Willem de Kooning Academy, which had celebrated the opening of its graduation show the evening before. Though the space at this moment was not filled with people, the sense of excitement and relief of finishing the graduation show on time and presenting it to friends, family and the general public was still tangible in the building hosting the show. It was in this atmosphere that the jury met and spoke to all of the candidates selected for the Drempelprijs. This selection had been made in advance by the WdKA’s teaching staff (department coordinators), which had chosen eleven candidates according to the following criteria:

* The issue/theme of the student’s graduation project has been developed in an innovative way.
* The student’s graduation project is a good example of the WdKA’s goals for its Social Practices profile.
* The student has generated through this project opportunities for further professional development after their graduation. The project shows potential for further development in the long term.
* The project demonstrates a general high quality level (theoretical framework, research, relevance, visual aspects, final execution and detail work).
* The graduation project has been assessed with a mark of at least 8.
* The student must be fully graduated by July of this year.

The jury saw and heard the presentations of eleven nominees, listed here in no particular order: Moniek Lankhuizen (Illustration), Nash Caldera (Fine Art), Marieke Widlak (Spatial Design / Audio-Visual Design), Julia Alvares (Fine Art & Design Teacher Training), Rümeysa Önal (Animation), Jasmijn Hoekman (Graphic Design), Perrine van Uden (Fashion Design), Marijn van der Ploeg (Audio-Visual Design), Guido van Werkhoven (Advertising), Nienke Galjaard (Product Design) and Sofie van der Eijk (Product Design).

**General impressions:**

The jury truly enjoyed the projects and the narratives of all nominees. The presentations were well-prepared, well-articulated and confident, and demonstrated a high degree of professional quality. The projects addressed a broad range of themes, from difficult subjects such as mourning and loss, to rethinking educational methodologies and what it means to feel at home. Two recurring themes this year were cultural identity and social inclusion, which the jury sees as especially relevant for the context and challenges facing the city of Rotterdam, and particularly the Willem de Kooning Academy’s Social Practices.

This contextual embeddedness was clearly visible not only in themes addressed, but also in how the candidates related to their projects. The jury also noticed that several projects were based on personal narratives and relationships. All of the projects were clearly founded on thorough research, either through researching professional literature or through more embedded research strategies such as observations, interviews and active interventions. The jury also felt that the projects would benefit from a more detailed plan for implementation in a relevant context.

The jury noted the broad variety of disciplines involved, and the fact that most projects were based on interdisciplinary collaborations or on working with relevant external partners. This was a powerful quality of all of the projects, leaving the jury confident that most of these projects will continue to grow and become the starting point of long-term creative careers with a positive social impact. The jury wishes to thank all candidates for sharing their narratives and projects, which deeply inspired and touched the jury members. Eventually, our discussions focused on three candidates: Jasmijn Hoekman, Rümeysa Önal and Marieke Widlak.

**Jasmijn Hoekman (Graphic Design & Gamification)**

Through her project ‘I’m caring, not sharing’, Jasmijn Hoekman provided an innovative and refreshing approach to the very contemporary and socially relevant issue of ‘sexting’. Jasmijn researched this phenomenon and discovered that sexting can in fact be an important and healthy aspect of sexual exploration by young people. By conducting thorough research and talking to several victims, Jasmijn discovered that most of these victims did not really mind the fact that their bodies were on display; what mostly affected them was being bullied by their friends. Thus, according to Jasmijn, the true problem is not the actual making of the images, but the complications that arise through violations of trust: when the footage is widely shared or used for purposes of blackmail. However, most official agencies dealing with this issue tend to emphasise the prevention of producing nude and sexually oriented material.

Jasmijn Hoekman proposes a different approach to this problem, based on her understanding that current prevention strategies do not seem to be working. She instead emphasises the ‘shamers’, and aims to increase awareness among young people so that they will refrain from violating trust and sharing pictures. Without the ‘spreaders’, there would be no such thing as shame-sexting.

Through her use of visual language, she is able to appeal to her target group. Her installation suggests a potentially more promising approach for schools in engaging with young people, and provides concrete tools for starting a conversation on this difficult subject.

The jury sees much potential for further developing this concept into a full-blown ‘I’m caring, not sharing’ campaign, which would also engage various stakeholders such as government agencies and parents in how to address and frame this problem. Jasmijn says that a next step for her project would be to work together with ‘influencers’ on social media, in raising awareness through the example of role models. The jury believes this to be a very promising next step.

**Rümeysa Önal** **(Animation & Cultural Diversity)**

The work of Rümeysa left a poetic and alienating impression on the jury after the first viewing. In her animation ‘Hayat’, Rümeysa relates an ancient Turkish myth, in which a mighty sultan is ultimately unable to protect his daughter from death. This is a story which, unlike most Western fairy tales, ends in a way that is not particularly satisfactory.

With the story of ‘Hayat’, Rümeysa invites the viewer to embrace human mortality, something that is much more embedded in Arabic culture as a philosophy of life than it is here in the West. In the stories and myths of (Middle-) Eastern cultures, she sees wisdom and knowledge that are often unknown, forgotten, or even suppressed. Her intelligent and accessible animated visual language is appealing to a broad audience, allowing her to highlight a universally relevant and tangible subject that cannot always be expressed in words.

The animation ‘Hayat’ may be described as visual poetry with an underlying activist dimension. Through contemporary and innovative animation – in terms of narrative as well as visual language – Rümeysa indirectly questions and enriches the dominant Western narrative. Through a powerful use of imagination, and inspired by neuropsychology and social sciences, Rümeysa wishes to actively change how non-Western cultures are perceived. At the same time, she also wishes to increase within these cultures a sense of pride of one’s identity, and of the related stories and symbols.

Rümeysa is a convincing researcher and maker, demonstrating wisdom, decisiveness, curiosity and craftsmanship in the way she presents herself and her work. The jury sees much potential in her work, which features storytelling based on a different cultural narrative, something that is tremendously important in today’s society. The jury is convinced that ‘Hayat’ is only the beginning of what will eventually become a very special animation series.

**Marieke Widlak (Spatial Design / Audio-Visual Design & Cultural Diversity)**

After her sister chose to end her life, Marieke Widlak was left with a feeling of helplessness. Did she ever actively express her love and appreciation to her sister while she was still alive? And why is this so important? ‘Now or Never Again’ is a tribute to such declarations of love and appreciation.

This personal story, told by Marieke in an original and very professionally realised documentary, deeply touched the jury. The film intimately involves the viewer in seemingly mundane conversations with Marieke’s father, mother and sister. The universal value and quality of the film is defined by the intimate and personal way in which Marieke tells her story. The richly layered film not only encourages reflection and discussion, but also action with regard to this difficult but relevant subject.

For Marieke, making a film was a far from obvious choice. Though she studied as a spatial designer, Marieke chose to follow her own path by making a film for her graduation project. In this way, Marieke demonstrated that she is able to look beyond the boundaries of disciplines, and to take as a starting point the story she wishes to tell. Marieke had previously demonstrated this transcending quality in her earlier work, in which she used audio to discuss the politically charged theme of feeling at home.

Here, Marieke chose a storyline that is far from obvious and is intelligently constructed. Due to the exceptional quality of the documentary, the jury did not at first realise that this was the first film production Marieke had ever made. This demonstrates her organisational strength, in her ability to surround herself with the right people and work together in order to arrive at such a professional end product.

The impact of her film was clearly visible in the emotional reactions of the viewers. The stories that people shared with her after seeing her movie were touching and often even overwhelming. About this Marieke says: *‘It seems to be beyond me, it transcends my original intentions*.’

This quality was recognised by the jury, which wishes to encourage Marieke to consider where else the film could be shown, and how the responses generated by the film could become part of the design. Though the film certainly stands on its own, it could also function as a starting point for a broader conversation about the importance of expressing appreciation and love for people while it is still possible to do so. Also, the jury looks forward to her next production, and advises her to continue applying this personal approach in her way of storytelling.

**Conclusion**

Thus, after a thorough and constructive debate, the jury was unanimous in its decision to award the 2018 Drempelprijs for Social Practices to Marieke Widlak.