Institutional Ambiguity... A Prelude, Maybe | Academic Feelings

Host Rosa Marie Frang :
MODIFIED LOW PITCH VOICE:
Modifies high pitch voice:
A Faiytale:
Messages from the podcast answering machine:
Artist Joen Vedel:

Way back in time, I decided that I would never ever again work a longer period of time for any kinds of art or media institutions, big or small. And now, here I am, working for an institution, doing this podcast as an artwork, hired as an artist by an arts center called PASS at the University of Copenhagen.

Most of my life, I've felt like I've been falling between two chairs, being too much or too little of one thing or another, never really fitting in. But when it comes to talking about institutions, it feels more like I'm stuck in a huge stack of chairs, towering over me in a big interlocked mess. And note, when I say institutions, I primarily mean educational art and media institutions.

So on one hand, I'm dependent on these institutions to give me assignments and money, but on the other hand there is also a questionable expectation to the person invited or granted access to be forever grateful.

But then again, the state-funded art and media institutions are working for good cause, to enhance art knowledge and a democratic mindset. At the same time, they also preserve an inequality between those who have the privileges of being permanently paid, the many, many who desperately hope to get invited inside, and those who are temporarily on the inside.

But the institutions give space to create important thinking and relevant art and important knowledge. When that's said, I think it's relevant to take a critical look at the infrastructure behind what and who blossoms, and what and who gets knocked to the floor inside these places.

So I think most of us could easily find something to critique, but we also mostly keep silent, because we don't want to risk any future possibilities by getting in a bad standing with the

gatekeepers, afraid of getting a reputation of being somewhat troublesome.

And of course there's a lot of anger towards these places, from all the people who keeps getting rejections when knocking on the doors. But at the same time, there is also a lot of bullshit jobs in these places, and a lot of money and time and resources are spent on ridiculous stuff. And then again, there is also fantastic work being done.

But the institutions are more often than not the ones who make sure we keep status quo, who stands in the way of making changes, like real changes, and who benefit from having an unlimited access to desperate people hoping to get their foot inside.

To add a little extra complexity to the whole equation, there is the political rising right-wing who wants to dismantle the autonomy of all the state-supported institutions, making us stay silent, afraid any critique could be used by a political opponent.
So at the moment I am wondering, how are the institutions feeling today?

Why do I almost never hear any institution leadership talk out loud defending their core values?

Is it maybe because they feel powerless and weak?

Or is it because they are conveniently hiding behind the perception of doing very important stuff, so they can't be bothered with banal questions of whether they have power or not, whether they should use it, and in what manner?

Or maybe they don't have any core values?

Maybe it's just a job they're doing, while for most of the people standing on the outside it's a matter of life or death? Note, money stress are major factors in long-term illness.

This is the big mountain of chairs I find myself entangled in when trying to talk of institutions.

And also I'm wondering, what chair is the artist expected to sit on?

What is the artist's role when entering the big institutions?

One thing I've learned, I'm a soft, mouldable thing. I get influenced, and I believe we all are. Institutions shape us, whether we like it or not.

Here's a little fairy tale about an artist who decided to never ever work for any art or media institutions again.

And yes, it's my story, but since most people don't take a woman's experience serious, I've changed the gender. But first, let's turn on some easy listening music.

Welcome to Academic Feelings, my name is Rosa Marie Frang.

You'll also hear some of the voices from the podcast Answering Machine.

She really wants to thank all the people who called in.

No, she's just sharing the Answering Machine messages to show how cool she is.

I think it's because she wants to show all the diversity of voices and realities.

Well, I don't care. I think she's just doing it to show off.

She wants to break the story. Haven't you ever heard of how you can like work with circular storytelling versus through linear stories, and like how you can make a parallel….

BULLSHIT!!!... Typical artists.

Once upon a time, there was a contemporary artist who decided that he would never ever again work for any institutions.

He was educated from art academies in Denmark and Sweden, and loved art, but was at the same time frustrated. No one came to the exhibitions he had spent months on doing, and at the same

time, public media wasn't giving voice or attention to artists and art. It all seemed like a waste of energy.

So he applied for a talent program at the Danish Public Service Broadcasting Corporation. A talent program that was hard to get into, and who educated young people to do media production. And he was accepted, with a video documenting an illegal performance he did in an upper-class warehouse in the center of Copenhagen, where he was shouting brand slogans into a megaphone, internalizing them by putting an eye in front of the slogans, and where the video ended with him being dragged out by security guards.

As the jury from the talent program said, it really has a lot of nerve. You have a lot of energy, but you are a little bit out of place coming as an artist. But if you can deal with this, you are more than welcome to join us.

Hello, Rosas Academic Feelings.

I'm just out here biking in Malmö, where I live, and wanted to leave a small message. Because when I listened to the episode, Eagles and Seagulls, I was sitting and working with a lot of emails and applications.

I'm an artist myself.
And yeah, I mean, it just felt all of a sudden as if I was not alone anymore. And that's a part of a bigger picture.

And that's still amazing. And in a weird way, I could relate to all the things. And yeah, in a feeling way, I could relate.

I got a lot out of it in my feelings.
So yeah, I don't really know how to explain it, but it felt really good to listening to some of the topics or non-topics in the podcast. And I'm really looking forward to listening to it a lot more, especially working at the office, the continuously office work with good stuff of art production or artwork production.

So thank you, Rosa. Bye-bye.

See what I mean? That was just some dude calling in, just like to give her praise or whatever.

That's not true. Today's society is just making the artist into one man, entrepreneur,

commercializing everything.
80% of artists' work is
actually just like boring office
work.

They might as well just be
administrators or project
managers or whatever.
There's no free art anymore.

He accepted, happy to get a foot inside the big public media institution. Soon he learned that the media production was the exact opposite of art production. Media was all about producing stuff from the broadest common denominator, to create TV and radio programs with the primary aim to get as many viewers and listeners as possible, and then afterwards hope that someone would end up admiring you so much that they would consider you to be just like an artist.

Coming from the art academy, he had been educated in the exact opposite, to refine his specific way of making art from his unique perspective, and then afterwards hope that enough people would find him so interesting that he could make a career out of it.

His solution to this problem was to dive into the field of doing radio documentaries, a place right in between art and media. He became part of a national public radio documentary group and started doing radio documentaries as his artworks being broadcast to the whole of Denmark.

Hey, I'm calling from Sweden.

Feels really weird to leave a voicemail.
I haven't done that in a long time, especially like a one-sided voicemail. And I was thinking I would like take notes and try to formulate something really perfect and smart to say in terms of my reflections and stuff.

But then I thought the whole point of this podcast for me, what I've gotten out of it is like, yeah, just like, you can hear me sighing, like a sense of relief listening to these feelings and like, yeah, shared feelings of confusion and anxiety. For context, I'm a PhD in art history. I don't want to like, summarize my research here, as that's annoying.

I write about artists who become academics or artists that

utilize academic or scientific strategies. And I've had that topic for a long time, but over time, I've become really fatigued with that topic. I've become really fatigued overall.

I've been on sick leave for a year and a half due to like, like from a burnout. And I feel like I had so many, you know, I had so many good like reflections, like I was just having a dialogue in my head as I was listening to the last episode. But something that struck me in the last episode was you were talking about that you feel like you're boxed in, and that there's so many spaces popping up, but that they're up in your face, and it like creates this, like a vertigo or something.

And I laughed because I'm sorry, but I laughed out loud at the last episode because the interview, I'm sorry, I forgot her name, she was saying she feels overwhelmed because the university has so many resources, and so much money, when in Sweden, that's the opposite of the case.
We have so few resources, and so little money, especially within the past two years, because we've been massively defunded by the government. And for me, that caused, I also feel boxed in, and I feel like I have nowhere to turn because we have lost so much funding.

And then I feel a lot of jealousy when I hear, like, especially Danish academics, because of Novo Nordisk funding. And as I started doing my research about artists using scientific methods, and I focus on one particular artist group, and I found that so many roads led to Novo Nordisk. And I know you're also funded by Novo Nordisk, this amazing podcast.

And I get this like jealousy, and then I start to feel like, almost like conspiratorial and paranoid, thinking about Novo Nordisk funding, we're going to get all this money, and all roads lead to Novo Nordisk. And then I see people, the same group of people referencing each other.
And anyway, another thing I think about and write about in my work is people, how artists, I have a lot of artists friends who are like, I would say, migrating to academia for the financial support, and that's just shown up.

That's changed the way that they feel like they have to speak and express themselves. And they express a lot of feelings of stupidity, and they're not feeling good enough.
And then, and as I'm talking now, and as I'm writing, I constantly have a critical voice in my head that I'm also stupid, and I'm also not good enough.

And also, I don't fit in or I'm not the right type of researcher, because I'm not a curator. I don't have any practical experience. I have very little cultural capital, as you talked about in the last episode.

I don't know if I've been talking for four minutes, I have no idea how long voice messages are.
Hopefully, I didn't get cut off.
Yeah.

And I know I sound like really manic, but I just felt like I will have, I will listen to the episode and I will finally call the hotline, which I was like, I won't call them.
I have nothing to talk about. You know what, I will let my emotions respond as they do.

I don't want to think I have to say a certain thing to sound interesting. Just that, yeah, thank you so much for this podcast. It's been such a relief to listen to and sometimes frustrating and also just sometimes makes me sad because I don't like that everyone feels the same feelings when... (beep)

See what I mean? People are breaking down, they're getting burnout, they're stressed out, like nobody's functioning in these institutions anymore, not the least the arts is like, we're all just breaking down.

Oh, feel so sorry for yourself. Oh, you got all this money from the PhD and oh, you're in the Scandinavian countries. Whiney, whiney, whiney.

You have all this wealth for the state and oh, whiney, whiney, whiney.

This is like a real person calling you.

I don't think I can talk with you anymore.

His first documentary, he approached as a five days performance recorded on sound, testing if he could survive only on the mercy of rich people living on the most expensive addresses in Denmark,

knocking on the doors to ask for food, borrow the toilet, charge batteries for the recorder and finding a place to sleep.

The problem? He was the only one who knew it was art he was doing. The listeners just heard yet another program in the long stream of programs coming out of the radio.

But he reasoned with himself that maybe it was better to do art that someone actually heard, even though they did not know it was art, than not do art at all. But the following years, he still struggled with the feeling of falling between these two chairs, being too media mainstream for the art world and too artistic for the media world.

And he was just barely making a living, hustling between doing small sound art pieces for contemporary group shows, the radio documentaries for the public radio and going on paid residencies.

Hi,

I have a feeling that the arts world is mostly an extremely alienating and inaccessible place. So the feelings of stupidity and self-doubt can easily overwhelm what you're actually trying to do or share.
So I want to thank you for creating a platform to talk and share and relate to these topics.

Yep.

If you don't like the art scene, then why are you doing art? And why do you want to be part of it? I mean, go somewhere else, do something else.

You are so narrow minded.

This is a structural issue. In Denmark, society was changed from a welfare state to competition state, and we're living under capitalism. There's no borders and what's being exploited. Come on!

Slowly, he began being fed up with spending endless time on developing concepts and preparing pictures, writing lengthy applications. He also tried to get a PhD position.

And most of all, trying again and again and again to persuade different types of bosses, always women, why radio documentaries and experimenting radio and podcast formats should be considered not only as art, but also be part of the contemporary art scene and the public radio. In other words, why they should be given money to be made.

Most of all, he felt lost.

Or maybe not lost, but as if he'd lost himself, realizing how every little tiny encounter had an impact on him.

I think this story is really boring.

One time when he had a pitch meeting with a slick woman in a slick gray suit, sitting in a big glass screen office in an even bigger National Public Radio glass building.

And while he was trying to pitch an experimental sound art documentary series, the gatekeeping media woman looked overbearingly at him, as if she was listening to a sweet but very naive child. 'Oh, let the dear little one speak out', was sort of her face expression. While she explained that there unfortunately wasn't money to that kind of experiments, he couldn't help thinking for himself that just a couple of the designer chairs they were sitting on could probably support the salary for the project he was trying to pitch.

For a moment he considered asking if they couldn't sell a couple of them. Of course he didn't ask. Of course he didn't succeed selling the concept.

And of course the whole situation had just felt humiliating. As if he was stupid not understanding that this was a serious grown-up corporation, and that no one cared about this silly contemporary art thing.

It was the total sum of every pitch, every meeting, every email, every hastily given feedback, every skeptical question asked by gatekeepers with secure incomes, while he literally sat with a feeling of this being a matter of life or death since he needed to survive.

It was the totality of all these big and small encounters. The feeling of being worthless and invisible. All this made him change himself.

Hello, Rosa Marie.
I am a PhD in Artistic Research in Theatre and Sustainability, and I've been listening to this podcast on academic feelings. And I want to first to congratulate you for such a dense and important work.

I myself deal with feelings all the time as any other human being. And now, after 6 years of my PhD, I still continue to deal with these feelings. But year after year, I just feel that it becomes

more and more impossible to at least address or acknowledge that we are human beings made out of feelings.

And that influences on the way that I make research. So to start listening to these conversations that you are having with other artists and curators have been incredibly important to me.

I also would love to meet you because I feel that it's easier to deal with feelings when you are in person, in contact with flesh and bones and eyes and hair.

So thank you. And keep on doing what you're doing. It's just amazing. It’s incredibly refreshing. It feels incredibly new. That's what academia is.

Have a nice day.

This is what I mean.
Here's a really nice person
calling in and saying that it's
very difficult to be a human
being in institutions today.

It's relevant to talk about.
You need to be human beings.

Okay, sounds like a nice guy… Whatever.

He started self-censoring more and more, changing the ideas he got, the way he formulated himself, hoping that if he could cut off his most rough edges, try to be less critical, not to be too creative, too experimental, not to be too provocative, not to be too political, not to be too weird, not to have too many opinions. And if he stopped swearing so much, if he adopted a more sophisticated, higher middle class way of talking and behaving, he would eventually be able to sell one of his long-term projects to a big institution.

But instead, he collapsed with burnout, depression, and ended up on social welfare. The horror, oh my god, the fucking horror, how the whole system is built to put as much shame and guilt as possible on the individual.

Before all this, he had thought that he could somehow outsmart the system. Meaning that if he could just get a permanent foot inside a big institution, then he could do his own thing, and if only he could get a solid foothold, then he could change things from the inside.

But now he had learned the hard way that he was a soft and mouldable thing, that he was not untouchable, that every little experience had an impact on him and the art he made.

Once he had been proud of being accepted into the art academies, admiring the special sensitivity and way of living and thinking and being when working as an artist. Once he had been proud of doing radio documentaries and being part of the national public radio, believing that this was where the most up-to-date and relevant issues were communicated.

And he used to be starstruck by the big art institutions, believing they were bringing forward the most cutting-edge important art. Worn out, now he was doubting. Doubting it all.

He felt like all these institutions were only empty boxes, and the brick walls merely backdrops to something that once was. As if they were theatre, performing something he couldn't get his head around what was. In his darkest hours he couldn't help wondering if these places were mostly closed circuits.

Producing, educating, forming people with the main purpose of getting them to fit back into the institutional loop, so these people could shape the next group of people, and so on and so on. While everyone seemed conveniently silent and ignoring the fact that they're in this closed loop is a 99% waste of human beings.

He found it harder and harder to recognize the values that the state-funded institutions were initially built on. Solidarity, formation, equality, probably because the institutions had been defunded and under attack from right-wing and neoliberal politicians for so many years.

Maybe he had these feelings because the institutions had deployed the strategy that the one who doesn't draw attention is the one who will survive. Maybe the institutions were just like him when he was trying to sell himself, and before he collapsed. Maybe they were also desperately trying to soften their rough edges, trying not to be too outspokenly or critical of anything potentially controversial and not, god forsake it, be associated with any kinds of political standpoints whatsoever.

But, at the same time conveniently hiding behind the temporarily invited or hired artists, academics or journalists, to do the dirty work of trying to fix the problem of not daring to have any

outspoken values. Since creativity, pedagogics and good journalism is somehow associated with socialism.

No matter what, his conclusion was that he was basically fucked.

And this was when he decided to never ever work for any institutions again. If he was to make art, he goddammit had to do it on his own and with no encounters whatsoever with any institutions or any of the people working inside of them.

The following year he somehow managed to find a couple of jobs, stepping in as a temporary radio teacher and being some kind of editor for a podcast about sound art.

He got a little funding from an artist union and spent almost two years working on and off on his own project, a radio documentary series about Danish artist working conditions, about class, gender, precarity and all the unspoken gatekeeping mechanisms.

He thought of it as a silent microphone drop that he was sure no one would hear and if anyone did listen, he was also pretty sure that he would hereafter and forever be silently ignored. But he had kind of come to terms with that, being so worn out that he didn't even want to be part of any art scene, media loop or attention play game or anything else.

He just wanted to get the fuck out!

Hi Rosa,
oh well maybe I should do it in English, I'll try. I'm really excited about your project ever since I heard Rosa's reality radio.

And yeah, I'm so excited that you address what is really going on in the art scene, power structures and economics and stuff like that. And I am excited about you being so honest about your insecurities. It's really refreshing the way you just talk without any filters or editing it too much.

And it's really what we need. We don't need all this polished surface that we see everywhere in the world. We need something that comes more from the soul to the other souls, as I see it.

And yeah, that's just what I wanted to say. Just keep going and I'll follow you.

Okay, bye bye.

I'm speechless. I'm just simply speechless. This is so ridiculous.

I think you should try and get out into the world and interact a little bit more with maybe also artists.

No comment.

Do you know any artists, like personally?

No comment.

But to his bewilderment, the opposite happened. People listened and replied. Art critics found him cool.

The media embraced him as a radio personality, giving him prizes for his innovation. The art world gave him major money prizes. And the art institutions invited him in.

Eventually, he ended up.

I ended up.

She ended up.

I ended up.

They.

He ended up.

> *I ended up doing a podcast called Academic Feelings for Nonsense, a called pass at the University of Copenhagen. I just have to interrupt because, ah, you know, this story is not really telling the whole story. Because I left out why I even said yes to doing this podcast.*
>
> *So it's many reasons. First of all, of course, money. I primarily do podcast documentary sound pieces that I put out into the world for free.*
>
> *So, of course, I need some money to pay my rent and my food and all of this. Secondly, I was very curious about this whole university world and the PhDs and their artists. Like, who are they? What? What? What? Thirdly, I am super obsessed with*

figuring out how is it possible to make a podcast? Podcast sound art piece about this field.

It's a totally ridiculously difficult thing to do, I think, because most people don't give a fuck. So how to talk with people, how to communicate, how to make this world come alive. Fourthly, something's called fourthly.

I do get really, really high on new knowledge. So, eventually, he, she, I ended up doing this. The irony being that the only reason I dared to do the radio documentary that changed my life was because I, at that point, had nothing left to lose.

So now I wonder if I once again have lost my autonomy, well aware of the psychological mechanisms of people living precarious and as disposables. That is only the ones who has nothing left to lose, or the ones who can afford losing, having a secure income or enough capital, who are willing to truly experiment, taking chances, gamble and risk losing. It's just like doing the same academic thing as everybody else.

It's just like talking.
Go out and get a job.

Are the institutions the last frontier and safe space for saving the arts? Or are they part of the problem? Supporting a status quo and a system of inequality and divide between those sitting on permanent contracts on the inside, those standing anxiously on the outside, and the ones temporarily invited in as the disposables.

Is it only when the institutions feel like they have nothing left to lose that they will be willing to truly experiment and take chances and change their infrastructure from being extractivist to sustainable? This is where the story ends. I'll keep an open ending, not as a poetic gap of unresolved open things, but as something uncomfortable and uncertain.

You can listen to the upcoming episodes where I talk with artist, filmmaker, activist and organizer, who, after doing his practice-based PhD at a Norwegian art academy, asked if we could talk about the feeling of institutional ambiguity:

"…It is crucial that you don't identify yourself with the institution. And I think that's where this ambivalence is important to hold on to, in a way. Why should you not identify yourself with the institution? Because don't you think many people do that? I think so.

But the institution will let you down. It will fail you. It's like a parent that will kick you out at some point.

You have to reckon with it. You have to understand that the institution is a resource, it's an infrastructure, and it's an employee. Therefore, I would say it's also perhaps your enemy…”

A big thank you to the people who have been so generous to call the podcast Answering Machine.

“…I could relate to all the things in a feeling way…”.

“…Because the university has so many resources and so much money…”.

“…The feeling of insecurity…”.

“…I myself deal with things all the time as a normal human being…”.

“…It's really refreshing the way you just talk…”.

Whoop, whoop, thank you.

Here's a number, a listener calling herself Inga Spell, shared in, and remember the number is in the podcast description. Give it a call.

Yours,
Rosa.