Interview with Caroline Pauwels

BLOWING OFF SOME STEAM

by Marleen Wynants

Since Caroline Pauwels became rector at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in September 2016, she has been trying to break down silos wherever she can: between the departments at her own university, between the university and the city of Brussels, on gender and any other front where inequality continues to rule. How technology affects our personal, cultural and social life has always been on her agenda. Until 2016 she was director of the SMIT research center at VUB, specializing in Media, Technology and Innovation. SMIT would become part of iMinds, the digital research and incubation center in 2004. The merge of iMinds with imec, the nanoelectronics research center, took place before she took office as university rector.
Access to sciences and arts at any level of education is another of her driving forces. During the summer of 2020 she will be guest curator at the prominent festival Theater Aan Zee – TAZ – in Ostend. The first time a rector of a university takes up that challenge. All the above-mentioned issues she defends with blazing energy, and without hesitation she propels new ideas and plans in every conversation or meeting she participates in.

Marleen Wynants: STAL was one of the projects funded by the university's future oriented General Strategic Plan (ASP). As you know, the idea was to explore collaborations between

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the arts and the sciences in Brussels and between the privileged partners Bozar, ULB and VUB. The aim is to continue the set-in interactions from within the institutions themselves. A big question: What is for you the main value of arts and sciences interactions?

Caroline Pauwels: Big indeed. The value articulates itself at different levels. The starting point for me is the method, since for the arts and the sciences the process is comparable, namely you're searching deeper for something that you want to understand but you don't know where it's leading. You don't know what the result will be. Let me state it differently: You continue digging into something that intrigues you, that captures your attention totally, but there is no clear answer in sight. The question befalls you and the answer is pretty unpredictable. Methodologically the art and science practices are quite close. And then when they interact, they might even come to a more unpredictable result, different from what they a priori might expect or what they could imagine. Of course, the search is different whether we consider fundamental or applied research, but in both cases, the system in the arts and the sciences is comparable.

MW: Working across the disciplines, in the arts and sciences, and the interaction between them, has been cheered on since decades. Yet, the funding mechanisms tend to favor the applied research, especially when technology is involved.

CP: Right. But for me the interaction is also about very societal topics with no technology involved at all. We could make a difference with the PHD's in the arts, but we do not have that many examples yet where the fundamental thinking emerged. Quite often the research is very applied work while it should be a license to do something very fundamental. I don't have an overview of the different kind of PHD's that are obtained in the arts and there might be a large difference between Belgium and what happens on an international level, in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In that sense I think it's good that researchers keep looking for what could be interesting, what could be distinctive. And both the fundamental and applied research have their own worth. I think that there is a whole range, a whole portfolio of possibilities. One of my main questions remains: How do you bring people, researchers, closer to the kind of art/science interactions we talk about? To get

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at least an appreciation of what's going on there. We do have to consider easier steppingstones since it's very important to become drawn to these interactions and it's not for everybody an evident choice or option. There are different levels and where do you start?
You know that one of my favorite topics is the introduction of children into the arts and sciences from a very early age. It's not always easy, but if we agree on the fact that both disciplines start from an inquiry and not aiming directly for an answer, I think that in education these interactions should be pursued, in a formal and informal way. If STEAM – science technology arts mathematics – is realized in a good way at different levels of education, it could work. We need that large portfolio of possible interactions and cross-pollinating samples since you cannot predict which one of them will be a trigger for someone to come to an insight or understanding. Whether the triggers are good art or good science or of a lesser kind, that's even secondary. In a way all these interactions are walks or strolls that stimulate wonderment.

MW: Wonderment is also the theme of the next TAZ Festival of which you are the guest curator in 2020.

CP: Wonderment means different things to different people.

MW: But without it, you stop looking, you stop being open to things that happen, that present themselves. Which would be a pity since as you stated, you never know where or from which side, something pops up and opens up your thinking, your imagination.

CP: Absolutely! You need to have the space and the time to explore this.

MW: Can you remember a particular moment that was very insightful for you?

CP: When working at iMinds, we tried to link technological research to the humanities, and there were a couple of projects that intrigued me like the experimental company Crew, where Eric Joris and his team brought VR into the theater context. The interaction of the artists, the scientists and technologists really worked in the sense that they came up with fascinating performances. You could feel that they had been

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playing around, literally. The playfulness manifested itself onto the scene. Even if you couldn't grasp everything about the technology, the playfulness was very compelling and enjoyable, and that's also part of the game. You can have a pretty boring content but if the joy of playing is tangible, you have my attention...

Then there was a photographer who made people dance with cameras attached to their bodies, taking pictures during the performance. As such it doesn't sound or seemed complicated, yet the effect it produced on the scene was amazing. Not that the iMinds projects were that challenging, since they were situated in an applied context, but they captured the attention, they were intriguing. Later when the PHD's in the arts were introduced, I was lucky to participate in the initial conversation with the artist Ann Veronica Janssens. This and other research projects seemed to have a lot of potential, yet, they wavered and stopped.

Very encouraging at this moment is the transversal course 'Reason and Engage: Critical reflections on humanity and society'. Students are stimulated to reflect on urgent social challenges and also act and engage themselves in multidisciplinary teams with socio and/or artistic organizations in Brussels. Likewise, the exhibition JRSLM during the fall of 2019, encouraged students and VUB community members to reflect on religion. The exhibition was campus wide and celebrated the launch of our new cultural hotspot Pilar. We are a freethinking university but at the same time we cannot ignore the fact that religion is still a very influential social factor. This kind of exhibitions could also become a transversal part of the curriculum, just like 'Reason and Engage'.

MW: It's a matter of interconnecting, pinching people to really look and listen and to enable conversations. I think that's the first step and from there on things become possible. You can disagree on whether you think a work of art, a performance is good or not, but afterwards you can go and have a drink together. But you need that initial conversation.

CP: Conversations are crucial. They are important to understand how other people, be it artists or scientists, work, what their outset is. Thus, if you ask me what VUB can do, then I think we should really work on a STEAM Academy and that's what we are doing at this moment. It will have a particular interpretation and implementation, depending on the persons involved, but

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as we said already the arts&sciences can be many things, from STEAM, weKONEKT, Pilar, Crosstalks, the Mindblowers, the expos to what happens in the faculties or a thinktank like Poincaré. All of them bring people together that would otherwise not meet, or not go to an exhibition or not go to a concert. Giving them a glimpse of what happens elsewhere is very important. Part of our mission is accomplished but it's not enough. We have to present and show what is already existing at the university, of what other people do whether it's an exhibition by artists or the artistic work of a scientist, like the Fausto performance realized by computer scientist Luc Steels.

MW: The common aim of a lot of VUB projects you support and initiate is to stimulate people to be curious, to have an openness to listen to or look at something they usually wouldn't pay attention to. To leave the door ajar, if you want, and initiate the wonderment that you talk about.

CP: VUB could be a pioneer at this level, in an unexpected and not classical way but still, the fascination for arts & sciences has to start from the kindergarten. If a university is the first place where you experience this, the arts may again seem as elite, highbrow and the threshold is higher. I think it's an impoverishment that in primary and certainly in secondary schools the art practices disappear. Albert Einstein himself pointed at the fact that society will not advance only because educational systems deal well with periodic systems and arithmetic here but rather because of the stimulation of imagination and creativity: 'Overemphasis on the competitive system and premature specialization on the ground of immediate usefulness kill the spirit on which all cultural life depends, specialized knowledge included'. The transfer of knowledge, something like mathematics should be a wrestling exercise and is important, but giving no place to the development of imagination and creativity is a major mistake. Of course this goes completely against the content of the current government coalition agreement.

MW: We talked about the existing organizations and initiatives within VUB, but what is the ultimate goal? Arts and sciences as part of the DNA of the university?

CP: Totally. If students decide to come to VUB, the fact that the arts and sciences are interwoven at many levels should

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be part of their reason to register. We open the academic year with a ceremonial celebration and with Mindblowers as the first official course for all the students. Mindblowers is about giving a platform to scientists and to artists and performers. But in the first place it is a mind opener for all the students who are present, and they all should. If there is one official event where you have to be as part of the VUB community, well, that's the one you can't miss out on. Like other universities open with a famous keynote speaker, VUB opens with Mindblowers. At this moment not all the professors really embrace the idea and students have not found their way to KVS yet and tend to circle closely around the campus, but we'll get there. What are the big themes that VUB stands for? And let's bring in the best of the arts and sciences that we can offer. Let's make this resound at any level of the university, in the curriculum, in the communication, in the exhibitions and off programs we do, in the transversal initiatives... It's like with gender, if we can stop raising the issue, if we can stop pointing at it as being arts & sciences, then we've succeeded. It's not so much about living up to our expectations, it's rather not to give up searching, exploring, trying out different things at different levels and continue with what works best.

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