

Intercultural collection policies in Dutch art museums

The demographics of the Dutch society are changing, this requires changes in the policies of those institutions that represent our culture. In order for Dutch citizens with a different cultural background to get an increased sense of entitlement to the exhibited culture, the story that Dutch art museums tell through their collections needs to become more inclusive.ⁱ To achieve this more inclusive situation the Dutch as well as the European government proscribes an intercultural policy. What is understood as 'diversity policy' by Dutch art museums does in many occasions not collide with the proscribed interculturalism. The Canadian sociologist Gerard Bouchard gives a clear definition of the theoretical term interculturalism that can be used as a guideline by formulating an intercultural collection. An important feature is that interculturalism strives to preserve the dominant culture as well as the minority cultures.

The diversity debate in the visual arts focuses on the autonomous role of art within society.ⁱⁱ Sadly, the motive that cultural diversity might enrich our art museums is rarely brought up. This might correlate to the feeling that the prevailing artistic notions are being threatened, while only the existence of those institutions that serve a privileged minority is being challenged. Left wing critics claim that cultural institutions are instruments of the elite to defend the arguments for the preservation of 'high culture', while right wing critics claim that the democratisation of the museum affects the value of the museums masterpieces.ⁱⁱⁱ Others think diversity policies will distract museums from their original goals as they are being used for goals of the government.

Interculturalism

In many occasions interculturalism gets confused with the dated and different term multiculturalism. At the end of the nineties the term multiculturalism was associated with fragmentation and regarded as a threat to society's social cohesion.^{iv} A good example of the degradation of multiculturalism is the article Paul Scheffer published in the NRC Handelsblad on the 29th of Januari 2000. In *Het multiculturele drama* Scheffer claims that multiculturalism failed to protect it's own boundaries and therefore does not respect the dominant or original culture.^v Bouchard points out that interculturalism respects the boundaries of the dominant culture. The minority culture and the dominant culture have a shared responsibility within interculturalism, and the dominant culture should initiate new conditions because it controls the art museums. So Dutch art museums should design a policy that is more suitable for our demographically changing society.

Interculturalism preserves western masterpieces in the art museum, so the Western art historical concept and the canon will stay. According to Bouchard's definition, the dominant culture has ad hoc priority. This priority can guide museums in the formulation of their policies. Within this framework there is room for a vivacious discussion that resembles Mouffe's agonistic politics. Mouffe argues that our contemporary post-political situation needs constant debate and conflict.^{vi} Art museums should reconsider their assessment criteria, as intercultural criteria are pluriform and require space for different interpretations to clash.

A new paradigm

The approaches of our art museums do not suit an intercultural policy. The conservative museums should open up to social issues by programming social topics, reflecting on their own practice and by providing a platform for those artworks that require a different appreciation than the Kantian notion. Museums that advocate the heteronomous paradigm, which has a strong focus on context and has a versatile art concept, should take care of protecting the boundaries of the prevailing western art concept. Whilst the heteronomous paradigm strives at the destruction of the autonomous art concept, should this concept be respected within an intercultural policy. Interculturalism strives for the conservation of both the culture of people with a different cultural background as well as of the dominant culture. Since the autonomous paradigm is part of the dominant culture the heteronomous paradigm conflicts with the definition of interculturalism by Bouchard.

Assessment criteria

A critical reflection on the practice and the role of the museum within our contemporary society is necessary for an intercultural policy. As part of this critical reflection, assessment criteria should be reconsidered. The concept of quality plays an important role in the exclusion of certain cultural expressions. Nowadays different parties are looking for new ways of understanding the notion of quality to conduct a more inclusive policy. I question if the assessment criteria our main art museums use, proof against diversity.

Whilst the dominant culture is responsible for making adjustments in the policies of cultural institutions, many directors and curators in Dutch art museums prove to conduct a quite conservative policy, with barely any reflection on their collection policy or accompanying criteria. Sjarel Ex, the director of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, describes what he regards as the quality of a work of art as an intangible

and almost mystic phenomenon: 'A truly good art work is unmistakable. The energy an artist puts into his work, comes out again – at least, if you have learned how to watch. How it works exactly, I do not know. It is a bit mystic and I do not know anything about that. But that's the way it is.'^{vii} This quote is a perfect example of the prevailing Kantian conception of quality: art is a matter of sensation and not of reason.

Some people use the concept of 'quality' in the Kantian way and ignore the critique on such a universalist art notion. Others reflect on their own practise and reconsider their criteria. The latter progressive voices are mainly from the Van Abbemuseum, Museum Arnhem and Museum Het Domein. The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam conducted a number of more progressive projects in their project space Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, but these activities seem to have a secondary priority within the museum.

Knowledge and critical reflection

Lack of knowledge is an important factor in the choice for quite conservative policies and the confirmation of the canon over and over. This implies the need to adjust the curriculum of our universities, as well as the encouragement of exchange projects through which new knowledge can enter the museum. While anthropologist are used to crossing borders between discipline and region, art historians are mainly focussed on the West.^{viii} Dutch master studies Art History still focus on the history of Western art, except for Leiden University.

Many museums have a very out dated interpretation of diversity policy by conducting it mainly through the education department. To educate the outsiders, means that the outsider should adjust to the criteria of the insiders, whilst a critical reflection of the museum practice fails to occur. In this situation there is no exchange and interaction on an equal basis.

Implementing an intercultural policy

Dutch art museums can learn a lot from the progressive critical debates in which Framers Framed plays an important role. To make the intercultural collection policy work, the progressive initiatives of museums should not be restricted to limited experiments, but should be incorporated in the main activities of the museum. Within intercultural policy the heteronomous paradigm gives room to the autonomous art concept as one of the approaches within this versatile paradigm.

The ethnocentric view of the Dutch art museum complicates the application of an intercultural collection policy. Since modernist concepts of art dominate many art

museums, they will have to reflect on their practice in order to make the intercultural policy work. In this way an intercultural collection could emerge, in which people with different cultural backgrounds can recognize themselves and which will provide a richer representation of art today. In different contexts the value and meaning of criteria of quality differ, so museums should determine their priorities based on their own history and field of expertise.

The main challenge for art museums lies in the reconsideration of their valuation criteria, through which they might demonstrate a new sensitivity and prove to be even more relevant to a society that consists of people with different cultural backgrounds. Remember it is not just society, but also the art world that is changing. Dutch art museums have to make sure they do not stay behind.

This article is based on the author's master thesis 'Intercultureel beleid in het kunstmuseum. Blanke monocultuur en interculturele beoordelingscriteria in Nederlandse kunstmusea.' (University of Amsterdam, 2015).

ⁱ Gaither, Edmund Barry. 'Hey! That's mine: Thoughts on pluralism and American Museums.' In: Karp, Ivan, e.a., red. *Museums and communities. The politics of public culture*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1992: 64.

ⁱⁱ Top, Bart. *Het geheim van de diversiteit. Kunst vieren, delen en beleven*. 2008. 1 mei 2014 <<http://binoq.nl/lib/Documenten/best%20diversiteit%20&%20atana/geheim%20van%20diversiteit.pdf>>: 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Karp, Ivan. 'Introduction: Museums and communities: the politics of public space.' In: Karp, Ivan, e.a., red. *Museums and communities. The politics of public culture*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1992a: 8.

^{iv} Bouchard, Gérard. 'What is interculturalism?' *McGill Law Journal*, nr. 56 (2011): 468.

^v Scheffer, Paul. 'Het multiculturele drama.' *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 januari 2000. 15 mei 2014 <<http://retro.nrc.nl/W2/Lab/Multicultureel/scheffer.html>>.

^{vi} Mouffe, Chantal. *On the political*. New York: Routledge, 2005: p. 6-7.

^{vii} Ex, Sjarel en Marjan Slob. 'Je oog ontwikkelen.' *Marjan Slob*, 2000. 30 oktober 2014 <www.marjanslob.nl/wp-content/uploads/Sjarel_Ex-interview.pdf>.

^{viii} Framer Framed. *Expertmeeting Onbegrensd Verzamelen: workshop Collectiebeleid*. Verslaglegging Caro Verbeek. 22 oktober 2009a.