

# DEVIANT PRACTICE

Research Programme  
2016-17

VAN  
ABBE



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# Off-The-Way

## Deviant Practice: An Introduction

Nick Aikens

**“A museum properly understood is not a dumping place. It is not a place where we recycle history’s waste. It is first and foremost an epistemic space.”**

Achille Mbembe

I have turned to this quote by political theorist Achille Mbembe a number of times recently.<sup>1</sup> In his concise proclamation he asks that museums consider what constitutes the ‘waste’ of history – to stop reproducing what should have been called into question long ago. In a Western art museum like the Van Abbemuseum, formed within the matrix of modernism and colonialism, understanding, naming and challenging ‘history’s waste’ is a necessary and ongoing task. Mbembe’s call is also an invitation to stop regurgitating patterns and processes under different guises. Within a cultural field that often feels hard-wired to duplicate and reconstitute, Mbembe is asking those museums to think reflexively about what they put into the world and how, and demands that we claim the museum as an ‘epistemic place’ – a place of knowledge and for knowledge.

In her landmark essay “Who Claims Alterity”, post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak considers the political significance for reading and writing in the constructions of history. She asks, “How are historical narratives put together?” and continues with:



In order to get to something like an answer to that question, I will make use of the notions of writing and reading in the most general sense. We produce historical narratives and historical explanations by transforming the socius, upon which our production is written into more or less continuous and controllable bits that are readable. How these readings emerge and which ones get sanctioned have political implications on every possible level. (Spivak 2012, p. 57)

Modes of reading and writing, Spivak argues, are integral to the construction, 'sanctioning' and questioning of historical narratives. Within the Western museum, or what Spivak would call the 'old institutions, the old politics', it should be a constant undertaking to think critically about how it reads and writes, what it sanctions and the effects that has.

It is with Mbembe's call for an 'epistemic space' and Spivak's notions of reading and writing in mind that I am delighted to introduce this publication, which is the culmination of the Van Abbemuseum's research programme titled 'Deviant Practice'. Nine papers bring together reflections and findings from a series of projects carried out at the museum by artists, archivists, curators and art historians throughout 2016-17. The impulse to initiate this research programme came nearly three years ago. It was part of a long-term recognition of the need to reorient our work, away from the endless cycle of exhibitions, events and programmes that we are often quick to criticise but to which many, including myself, continue to conform. Secondly it was driven by a wish to understand how a museum produces knowledge, by whom and on what terms. In this sense, we could say we wanted to understand the museum both as an epistemic, as well as

an epistemological space – a space that not only produces knowledge but strives to think how knowledge is read and written.

Those invested in processes of knowledge production within art institutions, whether museums or educational institutes, have been wary of the creeping push to both quantify and capitalise on what it produces. Tom Holert's essay "Art in the Knowledge Based Polis" outlines these concerns succinctly, staking a convincing claim that the specific nature of the type of knowledge produced within the field of art (Holert 2009) is recognised and that artistic research is kept safe from the neoliberal urge to produce quantifiable outputs. The initiative to instigate a research programme is made in affinity with Holert and others' position. It is interested in discovering the particularities of the types of knowledge that can be generated in the field of art.<sup>2</sup> It also welcomes the fact that the word 'research' means different things to different people. Conservationists, archivists, curators and artists will have very different ways of practicing their research.

If museums, as civic institutes, are to make a serious claim to be epistemic spaces their resources must be available to more than just their trusted gatekeepers. Their knowledge in the form of their collections, archives and the people who work there is a public resource, even if this often feels out of reach to many. Likewise, if a fundamental understanding of research means bringing new knowledge into an area of study then it seems incumbent on museums to be open to people who can read it in ways that people who work there can't. As the Van Abbemuseum's Director Charles Esche said in his opening remarks at the Deviant Practice Symposium, producing new knowledge surely means being able to constantly recognise



one's blind spots and try to find new perspectives from which to see and understand what is around us. It also means creating the conditions to make that possible: an epistemic space needs to be open and hospitable.

## DEVIANT PRACTICE

The question arises then regarding what types of knowledge and practices a Western art museum in the twenty-first century wants to produce? If it is not going to recycle, how is to understand its epistemic possibilities and responsibilities? The first task would be to acknowledge the path on which the museum as institution has navigated its journey. The road on which the genealogy of the modern art museum can be traced back emerges from Europe's – and the West's – understanding of itself and by inference its relationship to others. As I have written elsewhere, this derives from “a self-understanding that was born by the white Enlightenment male and a relationship to others that was defined through power (either military or economic)” (Aikens 2017). As we know, its modernist history is deeply intertwined with that of colonialism and the formation of the nation state which would have profound ramifications for the type of art that was collected, the manner in which it was categorised and the histories that were told.

Similarly, the path that has defined the modern art museum leads us back to outdated notions of artistic autonomy – the separation of art from the political, economic, cultural context out of which it arose. It speaks to the entrenched protocols of expert culture within the museum and its methods of acquiring objects and narrating history, processes that are often exclusionary and opaque. If, as the Van Abbemuseum has attempted over a number of years, we would like to

move off this path, one option might be to consider the notion of 'deviance'.

The Van Abbemuseum has been exploring the terms deviant and deviance for some time. Esche's paper “The Deviant Art Institution” introduced the terms asking: “the most pertinent question for a European art institution today is not ‘what art to show’ but ‘what kind of politics to stand behind’” (Esche 2011). Etymologically deviance, means moving off – ‘de’ – the worn path or way – ‘via’. Deviating implies straying from the road, detouring from a set route, deciding that the straight line that takes you from A to B might force you to overlook that which falls outside your immediate field of vision. It implies a willful resistance to being told how to get somewhere, what to see on the way, how to record it and how quickly to get there. Deviance means going to look for something without knowing what you might find. It means taking the time to look further. Within the epistemic space of the modern museum, the wish to deviate should be seen as a reflexive and political move to unravel entrenched cultural and political formations. Furthermore to embed deviance within a *practice* – a way of working and thinking for the museum and those it works with – is both a proposition for, and a challenge to, the institution itself. It insists on different temporalities that deliberately obfuscate the goal and project-oriented approach. It asks it to consider and question the choices it makes: the way, as Spivak tells us, it reads and writes.

In the open call for this research programme, we elaborated on the notion of deviant practice as follows: “An understanding of deviant practice necessarily involves undoing long-held institutional, racial, geo and biopolitical formations. In this sense we might understand the prefix ‘de’ (‘off’) in deviance in relation to notions such as demodernising, decolonising, decentralizing,



deprivileging or deneoliberalising, key threads which have emerged when conceptualizing and realizing the research programme”.<sup>3</sup> Whilst there is not the space here to unpick what each of those terms might mean, their implicit and explicit ramifications are felt within these projects in which the foundations of the museum’s epistemic and epistemological structure are examined and put under pressure. This, as the different forms of research either implicitly or explicitly reveal, is a structure that is modern, colonial, centralised, often run through systems of privilege and is often compromised by its complicity with the neo-liberal regime.

### TOOLS FOR READING AND WRITING

In order to further conceptualise and ground the notion of deviant practice within the museum we asked ourselves what tools might be most appropriate to research and explore. The Van Abbemuseum has long understood the archive as encompassing both the collection of artworks, the library’s collection and the museum’s archives. Archives are what defines a museum both in terms of the history it holds and the ideologies that have informed its construction. In this sense they appear to offer the framework from which to understand and institute deviance. Constituencies are thought of in relation to publics, visitors, users and partners. In political terms, constituents are voters, meaning that those who seek their vote must form arguments and positions that are relevant to their constituents, whilst involving them in the process. Deviance, as we shall see, necessarily involves collaboration and comradeship.

### THE PRACTICE

The following papers are the outcome of researchers mobilising, in different ways, the archives and constituencies of the museum and in so doing navigating the contours of what a deviant practice might entail. Each project began not knowing where it might end. Some of them manifested themselves in exhibitions, others workshops, conversations, or a video. The different registers of the papers, one of the few requested ‘outcomes’ of the research, speaks to the manner in which research in the field of art necessarily results in varied articulations and tonalities. This is its specificity and its richness.

Opening the publication is archive theorist Michael Karabinos’ paper “Here or There: Locating the Karel I Archive”. Karabinos’ work reveals how the founding of the Van Abbemuseum is indebted to the trade relations resulting from Dutch colonial history. Showing how Karel I, Eindhoven’s tobacco company run by Henri Van Abbe, the museum’s benefactor, acquired tobacco that was grown in the fields of Sumatra and East Java in Indonesia, is a significant step towards this museum understanding its formation in relation to that of Dutch imperialism. The fortunes made to acquire Van Abbe’s collection and the museum itself was made possible because of the trade links between ‘here’ and ‘there’. Karabinos’ research, which resulted in an archival display in the museum’s collection building, is significant also because it asks us to consider what is left out of archival histories – the gaps, as Karabinos infers, are often more instructive than what we find.

Curator and writer Petra Ponte’s exhaustive research on the exhibition project *Oost-Indonesische Kunst TISNA (East-Indonesian Art TISNA)*, which toured



the Netherlands and was presented at the Van Abbemuseum in 1949, reveals the extent to which imperial relations between coloniser and colonised were mediated and maintained through exhibitions and cultural initiatives. The exhibition which presented art and culture from Indonesia, Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean is, as Ponte's paper reveals, an object lesson in how colonialism reverberates: those in power (or recently out of power as was the case with Indonesian independence in 1945) attempt to maintain lines of domination and subordination. In Karabinos' and Ponte's research, deviance means exposing histories that we have chosen to be blind to.

In the next series of papers the manner in which museums collect, categorise and mediate their archives is put under scrutiny. Art historian Winnie Sze looks at the story of Ernest Mancoba. She attempts to answer the question of why Mancoba, a black South African painter, has been omitted from the dominant narratives of the CoBrA movement. Sze traces Mancoba's appearance and subsequent disappearance from the fledgling group of artists that presented their work in north western Europe, most famously at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1949. Having originally set out to proactively inquire whether Mancoba's art historical exclusion was on account of his skin colour, Sze concludes that we should instead be asking ourselves why we know so little about the work Mancoba made. Sze's deviations have led her to a renewed attention to the practice itself.

Arguably a similar pulse runs through curator Sara Giannini's text "No Opening No Closing. The Infinite Archive of René Daniëls". Giannini explains that her research first involved spending time with the hundreds of drawings by the Dutch artist and then, significantly, with the artist himself. Unfolding across

multiple registers, from close readings of Daniëls rich body of work, a series of workshops carried out with artists Mercedes Azpilicueta and Stav Yeini, as well as an exhibition, Giannini's research is deeply invested in what she describes as the 'taxonomy of the archive' and the urge to liberate Daniëls' works from the 'tyranny of historical time'. Giannini's thoughtful paper reminds us that understanding history as linear, or replete with moments of 'before' and 'after', restricts the way in which we engage with forms and ideas. In the case of Daniëls the writing and subsequent sanctioning of narratives has led to damaging limitations on how we read his work.

Brook Andrew's desire to break open the linear, historical narratives embedded within the Van Abbemuseum's collection was at the core of the artist's presentation *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik*. In his paper, Andrew reflects on the mechanisms within a museum that serve to push some histories to the fore, whilst concealing and excluding others. Building on his long-term interest in how cultures are represented and drawing on his own status as what he describes as a 'child of the colony', Andrew's presentation included a compilation of the museum's collection and archives, his own archives including exhaustive material on the representations of aboriginal cultures, amidst an expansive installation. At the heart of Andrew's project was an attempt, quite literally as we shall see, to turn the myths of Western art history on their side.

Artist susan pui san lok's paper and accompanying video "Through the Gate / an(g)archivery" details her navigations through the Gate Foundation's archive. Acquired by the Van Abbemuseum in 2006 the archive has only been partially dispersed and integrated into the museum's holdings. Lok initiated the research to investigate how Asian artists were present and presented





within the archive. Her wanderings amongst the disorganised boxes and folders of the archive yield fascinating, though fragmentary insights. Of equal, if not more, importance are lok's reflections on the status of what she finds. Or as she puts it: "If conflicting narratives raise questions of truth, of accounting and accountability, what is institutional truth? To whom does it belong? And to whom is it owed?"

Artist and curator Charl Langdvreud's *Notes on a Dictionary: a polemic approach* examines the language deployed within the context of the evolving debates around diversity in the Netherlands. Lamenting the fact that Dutch discourse often borrows words and ideas from their English counterparts, rather than engaging the specificities of the Dutch context, Langdvreud draws on the archive of the *Be[com]ing Dutch* project at the Van Abbemuseum (2006-08) as a major focal point of his work. Indicative of the manner in which Deviant Practice points towards both the unraveling of one set of histories in order to make way for a practice to come, Langdvreud's research, like others in this publication, is at once critical and propositional.

If the notion of the museum's constituencies has been present, if not directly addressed, in these research projects, the final two papers seek to draw on constituencies and constituent practice directly. Eimear Walshe's "Separatist Tendencies" comprised a series of reading groups and discussions within the museum with the aim to explore the complex terrain of separatism. Walshe's research reveals that what might seem an implicitly 'deviant' practice – separatism – is far more widespread than one might first acknowledge. Interestingly, the mode through which Walshe investigated queer separatism instituted a practice within the museum which was hospitable, collegial and collaborative; separatism in this instance, means thinking and working together.

In the final paper curators and theorists Sebastian Cichocki, Meagan Down and Kuba Szreder look at the case of the Bródno Sculpture Park in Warsaw as an example of how museums might institute a "Constituencies-Art-Nexus". This park "engenders the transformation of institutional procedures, which, in order to maintain relevancy, have to deviate from the normative routines of the white cube, embedded in the conventions of modernist art and late capitalist art markets alike". Using the specific example of Rasheed Araeen's *Arctic Circle* which was reconstructed in the park with the help of local constituents, "Constituencies-Art-Nexus" offers a prototype for how the constellation of museums, artworks and constituencies might be meaningfully recalibrated for the future.

Collectively, these nine papers and projects create a network of interlinking trajectories that traverse histories – from the museum's founding to propositions of how its collection might be mobilised in the future. Each necessarily begins by deviating from a well-trodden path – whether that is through the re-reading or writing of both histories and subject positions. As *research* they all bring fresh insights into their respective areas of knowledge, offering new narratives, insisting as Mbembe asks, that history's waste is not recycled. As practices, however, of reading and writing they act as prompts for the museum, inviting it to bend and rework its approach to knowledge.



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## NOTES

1. I used this quote as an epigraph to a recent text on the term 'deviant' for the Glossary of Common Knowledge, <http://glossary.mg-lj.si/referential-fields/deviant/deviant>.

2. I am grateful to Doreen Mende and my colleagues in the PhD forum at CCC, HEAD Geneva for making me aware of Holert's text and for the fruitful discussions we have had on this subject.

3. <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/research/research-programme/deviant-practice-2016-17/>



# Here or There:

## Locating the Karel I Archive<sup>1</sup>

### Michael Karabinos

It is easy to feel lulled into a false sense of security in an archive. Secure in the fact that you have, at your disposal, the evidence of a story. Archives are used to write history, they are the remnants of the past. They are unadulterated. It is only natural to feel confident that the archive is established in such a way to house what it is meant to house. But what do we really see in them?

On 15 and 16 October 1931, in Amsterdam, 22,124 packages of Javanese tobacco were auctioned. At that auction, Henri van Abbe purchased from the Koloniale Bank tobacco coming from the area of Tegalgondo in Java. This is historical fact. I saw the evidence at the Cigar Makers' Museum in Valkenswaard. But it is without context. It is hardly a story.

At the National Archives in The Hague, I found only one file of records that actually crossed the desk of Henri van Abbe. A 1936 labour law on the mechanisation of the cigar industry led to a series of letters between Van Abbe, his accountants and the Ministry of Economic Affairs detailing every time a new machine was requested for his factories.

So, this is how Henri van Abbe exists in the archive. Dry. Without context, without narrative. Archival records alone can't provide all the story, so I will fill in the gaps. As a born Amsterdammer, Henri always attended the Amsterdam tobacco auctions, never those in Rotterdam. Amsterdam tobacco auctions were held at the Frascati building on Nes around the



corner from the Dam. The 1936 law was passed in the midst of the great depression at the insistence of labour unions and meant to slow down the mechanisation of the cigar industry in order to preserve jobs.

None of this appears alongside the papers I saw. It is not at the Van Abbemuseum. These stories were formed by assembling bits and pieces here and there in the archive.

That is not to say that the museum tries to hide Henri van Abbe, the man. The museum's Karel I Café is named after his cigar company, and Karel I cigar boxes can be found throughout the museum. A bust of Henri greets you when you enter. His donated paintings are on display. This is the extent of what we are told by the museum: Henri van Abbe was a cigar manufacturer based in Eindhoven who donated this museum and its initial collection to the city of Eindhoven.

This is the story of van Abbe as he appears in the museum's archives as well. There is biographical information, along with the records related to the founding of the museum and the acquisition papers for his donated paintings. This brings me to the connection between archives, ownership, and heritage.

Maybe the way we speak about archives leads to our unrealistic expectations. They are emblematic of so much power... Perhaps a type of decolonisation can occur within them? But there is that nagging 'de' in decolonise that denotes undoing something, or turning it off. How can we un-colonise? How do we turn off the past? Independence may have been granted to Indonesia, but that should not be misconstrued as decolonisation. Colonial archives can change hands, become property of the formerly colonised, but that does not lift the psychological weight of colonialism present in

the records. Perhaps then decolonising is a mindset we must inhabit rather than anything concrete.

Better still, before we even begin to discuss decolonising the archive, we should demystify it. When you strip away all the talk of power and symbolism, an archive is simply the recorded information left in the day-to-day processes of an organisation. It is what people have chosen from within all the recorded information to retain for safekeeping in an archival repository. This is what South African archivist Verne Harris refers to as the archival sliver: we only see it through a sliver of a window, or, in fact, as he cautions us to remember, "a sliver of a sliver of a sliver" (Harris 2002, p. 65).

There is important information in the archive, but every archive was created by a person or an organisation with a specific agenda. Just as important as what is held in an archive is what is not. Decisions were made, choices. Why is this record here but this other one not? What was destroyed? What is still out there? Just as in a museum collection, an archive is curated.

My first inspiration for what to write as part of this Deviant Practice programme came from the call for proposals which stated "archives are what defines a museum. It is, for better or worse, the heritage we hold". Having spent the last decade studying the archive, I took this call as an opportunity to question the direct correlation between archives and heritage, especially as it relates to archival ownership. I have had a long interest in missing, lost or displaced archives, and part of this interest lies in who archives belong to. If we call archives heritage, and limit the idea of archives to ownership, to place, we allow ourselves to remove what we don't want, and remove it from our heritage.

By taking ownership of archives out of the equation the larger story can begin to unfold. Heritage is separate from ownership, and a single story cuts through multiple archives. More important than a single institution's collection is how it interacts and fits with other collections. What is relevant, what is our heritage, and what is part of a process is not limited to ownership or location.

I keep using this term, process, and in that I am going back to my archival theory roots. I am using Dutch archivist Theo Thomassen's definition of an archive as information bound to a process (Thomassen 2001, p. 374). In the natural workings of some process, information will be created. That information forms the archive of that process. In the traditional sense, the day-to-day working of a business, for instance Karel I, is a process, and the records it creates in that process are its archive. But I could not find such a traditional archive. So for this project I wanted to completely define, describe, and document the process, with Henri at its heart, from tobacco being grown to the foundation of the museum. To make an expanded vision of the process. Then to locate the various points in that process. With an expanded process I could expand the archive.

In my initial proposal for this project, I stated that before we could discuss decolonising the archive, the archive in question had to be defined. The archive I was referring to was the hypothetical Van Abbemuseum/ Karel I archive that I sought. I started with this photograph:



Examining tobacco from Trogo at Karel I factory in Eindhoven.  
Courtesy National Archives of the Netherlands, Spaarnestad collection.

I was intrigued by the word 'Trogo' and I wanted to know more. Through archival research, assistance from the Van Abbe family, following leads and seeking out the traces left behind, I have identified what I believe constitutes the historical record of Henri van Abbe and his business that works backwards from the creation of this museum to tobacco in Sumatra and Java. It all started with this one photograph. It expands beyond what the original call for deviant practice proposals stated, that "the Van Abbe understands the archive as encompassing the collection of art works, the library's collection and the museum's paper archives". I am enlarging what constitutes the Van Abbemuseum archive by placing the museum within a process that has Henri van Abbe as its nexus. The museum's "heritage", for lack of a better word, therefore, exists beyond this building. Its roots are in the factories of Karel I, in Frascati in Amsterdam, the fields of Sumatra and Central Java.

I began to find other photos that mimicked one another in subject matter and composition, creating a series of that would eventually form the basis of the exhibition *Here or There: Locating the Karel I Archive*<sup>2</sup>. The photographs in these diptychs are meant to represent the different points of the expanded process and define each actor.



Planting tobacco in Deli.  
Courtesy Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies.



Karel I factory in Eindhoven. Henri's son, Jan, standing in white coat.  
Courtesy National Archives of the Netherlands, Labor inspection photo collection.



Harvesting tobacco in Deli. Courtesy National Museum of World Cultures.



Examining tobacco from Trogo at Karel I factory in Eindhoven. Courtesy National Archives of the Netherlands, Spaarnestad collection.



Packing cigars into boxes at Karel I factory in Eindhoven.  
Courtesy National Archives of the Netherlands, Spaarnestad collection.



Sorting leaves in Tegalgondo. Courtesy Royal Netherlands Institute  
of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies.





Sorting tobacco in Tegalgondo. Courtesy Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies.



Jan van Abbe, Crown Prince Ottoman of Deli, Prince Amirouddi of Deli, Crown Prince Anwar of Serdang, Albert van Abbe, Henri van Abbe. Courtesy National Archives of the Netherlands, Spaarnestad collection.



Sorting tobacco in North Sumatra. Courtesy National Museum of World Cultures.



Breakroom at Karel I factory in Reusel. Courtesy National Archives of the Netherlands, Photo collection Labor inspection.



Marking a bale of tobacco in North Sumatra. Courtesy Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies.



Making cigars, presumably at the Karel I factory in Eindhoven. Courtesy National Archives of the Netherlands, Photo collection Labor inspection.



Batak men selling tobacco for the local market. Courtesy National Museum of World Cultures.



Henri van Abbe testing tobacco at Frascati in Amsterdam.  
From *De Sumatra Post*, 12 May 1934.



Loading a ship in Deli. Courtesy Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies.



Unloading tobacco at the Frascati auction house in Amsterdam. Courtesy National Archives of the Netherlands, Spaarnestad collection.



Samples of tobacco at a Frascati auction house. Courtesy Amsterdam City Archives.



Harvesting tobacco, Deli. Courtesy Leiden University.

My overarching question seemed simple. Is the Van Abbe museum archive here, or is it there? By that I meant where will I locate the record of Henri van Abbe and his Karel I cigar company? Is it in some archival institution in the Netherlands, or will there be some evidence that was left behind in Indonesia after independence? Where is the here? Is it always elsewhere, somewhere there?

I knew I had found a connection to Indonesia, so I wanted to make sure I also looked at archives there. I asked my friend Intan Lidwina Wibisono from the National Archives of Indonesia to look for Karel I and Henri van Abbe, but her work yielded nothing on the surface that was substantial. Could this be an example of what is not in the archive being just as important as what it does contain?

What I discovered was that van Abbe was only a spectre, existing in the shadows of the archive. A paper trail exists that leads to him, betraying his traces in the archive, but very rarely was his existence blatant. There are records like the auction results, and the mechanisation records, but otherwise he is hidden behind degrees of separation.

While Henri was not always visible, the answer to the question of “here or there” was beginning to come into focus. The diptychs I created form just a sliver of a sliver of what may be the answer. He is here and there. It is only in an expanded process that Henri starts to fit into place.

The strongest recorded link to Henri, however, came directly from his family, particularly his grandson Cis van Abbe, who helped me throughout my project. It is in his house that the closest thing to a Karel I or Henri

van Abbe archive exists. A strong reminder of how much is not in the official archive. Here is where I found my closest personal connection to Henri. The notebook that he took with him to Frascati, detailing how much tobacco to get from places like Deli in Sumatra; family photographs; records of his art collecting; memorabilia from his life and business; stories about Frascati and his partners in business and art.

In the course of my research I thought of the voices of each actor I came across. Even when he wasn't specifically referenced, the voice of Henri is heard throughout the archive. As are the voices of the plantation owning companies and their managers. In the letters regarding the mechanisation law of 1936 we can hear remnants of the labour voice. The colonised voices, however, remained silenced. I found photos of Indonesian and Chinese labourers working the tobacco fields, drying and sorting the leaves. But it was only through expanding the process that they link to Henri. Any access to the voices of Indonesian and Chinese labourers in this Karel I archive has to be developed, pieced together from any of the fragments and whispers that can be gathered. Their indispensable contribution to the process that went from Karel I to the Van Abbemuseum is otherwise invisible.

So, where is the Henri van Abbe and Karel I archive, in the end? The photographs in the diptychs are slivers of where the Van Abbemuseum archive may be. Other slivers of Henri are at the National Archives and the Regional Historic Centre Eindhoven. They are at the Cigar Maker's Museum in Valkenswaard, which gave me the list of tobacco purchased by Henri at Frascati auctions, including tobacco from Trogo, Java. Other slivers exist as tangential records across the Netherlands: at the KITLV collection in Leiden, the Tropenmuseum, the Stadsarchief/City Archives of Amster-

dam, and also at the National Archives in Indonesia. Lastly, traces are found in the museum, in records that complete the process and connect van Abbe to the Van Abbemuseum. While the outside archives do not mention Henri by name, they are part of this process, part of this story. They remind us that an archive's location is not what makes it part of our heritage or our historical foundation. Instead, it shows that an archive's location, rather than being concrete, can be here or there, everywhere, or nowhere. And just as the 'de' in decolonial is abstract and intangible, a mindset we inhabit, so to is the location of an archive.



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## NOTES

1. Aside from the Van Abbemuseum and its staff, thanks must also go to Intan Lidwina Wibisono of the National Archives of Indonesia, Jo Wilbers of the Valkerij and Sigarenmakerij Museum, Noah Angell for his help finding field recordings for the exhibition, Cis van Abbe and Ding Ren for her reading and editing of previous versions of this paper.

2. *Here or There? Locating the Karel I Archive*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, July 2017-February 2018, viewed 26 March 2018, <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/here-or-there-locating-the-karel-i-archive/>.





# Tisna Tells...

## Petra Ponte

Colonialism and imperialism are all too often considered as (distant) past, that is behind us, bygone, over, done, surpassed. But as James Baldwin reminds us: “If history were the past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present, the present. You and I are history. We carry our history. We act in our history. We act on it” (Baldwin 1971).

It is this way of thinking that motivated my research on *Tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname, Nederlandse Antillen* (TISNA). TISNA stopped marching in 1951, and it seems highly unlikely that it would be restaged as such today. However, it appears equally inconceivable to me that TISNA disappeared from direct view without leaving a mark. Centuries of normalising colonialist/imperialist thinking and doing made it possible for it to be produced and shown, and to be shown without ever being carefully critiqued for what it was and did, and that only seventy years ago.

### WHAT’S IN A NAME?

In 1949 one could visit the group exhibition *Oost-Indonesische Kunst TISNA* (East-Indonesian Art TISNA) at the Van Abbemuseum, or so it seems if one looks at the list of exhibitions held at the museum between 1936 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> The latter part of the exhibition title is missing on the cover of the catalogue that is kept in the museum library. When one opens this catalogue it becomes clear that only the cover was made for the Van Abbemuseum, the publication was made by the Indies



Institute (Indisch Instituut), as the Tropenmuseum was called between 1945 and 1950, for the *Tentoonstelling van Oost-Indonesische Kunst* (Exhibition of East-Indonesian Art) that was presented there from 25 August until 1 October 1948 on the occasion of the golden jubilee of Queen Wilhelmina. Although a part of this exhibition was on view at the Van Abbemuseum “so as to meet the wishes of the Director of the Stedelijk Van Abbe-Museum regarding ‘cultural level’”, TISNA had been the intended show and will be the focus of this paper.<sup>2</sup>

TISNA is the abbreviation of *Tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname, Nederlandse Antillen*, an object lesson about Indonesia, Suriname and the six islands forming the Dutch Caribbean that toured through the Netherlands between April 1948 and February 1951. The word *tisna* was not only a contraction of the first letters of each word in the title, but also expressed the goal of the display, since it meant affection (*genegenheid*) and connectedness/ kinship (*verbondenheid*) in old Javanese according to the organisers.<sup>3</sup> The show was thus supposed to stir up feelings of affinity for Indonesia, as well as Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean islands, although the latter were of secondary importance. The organisers considered this effect possible without acknowledging the perspectives of the people to whom these feelings were to be directed; that is to say that the Dutch were telling and the Dutch were the intended audience. They assembled and presented objects under the umbrella *TISNA* so as to have a cultural backdrop to mediate the legitimacy of the Dutch colonialist/ imperialist project and with that contributed to making human suffering involved in protecting the Empire, at that very moment and the preceding centuries of domination, invisible.

Through a reading of primary documents from various archives about this one-sided instruction march I aim

to sketch out how TISNA was set up, what it was set out to do for its visitors and indirect audiences, and how one of its contributors, the Indies Institute, and one of its hosts, the Van Abbemuseum, responded to this political endeavour dressed up as quasi-innocent education with ‘purely cultural’ means. In doing so, I hope to open up this hidden, or at least suppressed exhibition history, to further discussion.<sup>4</sup> My research is limited to revealing the one-sided colonialist/ imperialist perspective guiding TISNA, and how it was structurally and institutionally facilitated. In particular I hope to highlight the extent to which TISNA interfered or conflicted with the exhibition and education practices of the Indies Institute and the Van Abbemuseum. Yet it would be important to bring the show’s white Eurocentric single storyism together with historical documents about protest against colonial domination in Indonesia, Suriname and on the Dutch Caribbean islands at the time to show more directly the voices and stories this exhibition actively sought to silence in a future research project.

### THE EMPIRE IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE EMPIRE...

It is 1947. The Indonesian War of Independence rages and the calls for autonomy in Suriname and on the Dutch Caribbean islands are becoming louder. The dream of a slow movement towards a reconstructed Empire as envisaged by Queen Wilhelmina for the post-war period in her radio address on 6 December 1942, that is a commonwealth of ‘free and equal’ member states to which the TISNA logo appears to allude, is just that: a dream – unshared (H.R. Queen Wilhelmina 1943). Even so, or perhaps better, exactly because of that it seems to become increasingly important for the Netherlands to propagate the idea that, whatever the constitutional setup between the Netherlands,

Indonesia, Suriname and the Caribbean islands would become, the bond with these countries should be understood as being unbreakable. *Tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname, Nederlandse Antillen* wanted to bring that message home to the Dutch people in the guise of an exhibition. The introduction of the exhibition brochure *Tisna Vertelt* (Tisna Tells) makes crystal clear the grand aspirations of the organisers:

Just like 350 years ago, we live in a time in which major changes are taking place. The Netherlands, Indonesia, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles are facing an entirely new future. In past years it has been sufficient that a small group devoted their love, mind and energy to this, now however more is expected. The current events affect the entire Dutch people, old and young, as well as the peoples of East and West. Where free peoples work together for the future, they will have to get to know and appreciate one another in order to find a solid foundation of trust on which the future can be built. [...Hence] TISNA wants to tell you about the people in Indonesia, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles and of the countries they inhabit. TISNA wants to tell you how the people live and work there and what the Netherlands has achieved there. TISNA wants to arouse your interest, real living interest, which will lead to a joining of all forces to build a happy future for the Netherlands, Indonesia, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles in harmonious collaboration.

The supplementary education brochure promises that TISNA will “open up a strange world” for the visitor, but strongly urges to “not see the strange world as a curiosity cabinet”, since “much of what seems strange



Figure 1 *Tisna Vertelt*, exhibition brochure. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_2.



Figure 2 *Tisna Vertelt*, exhibition brochure. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_2.

in others is in essence the same as – in our eyes ‘normal’ – in the Netherlands”. On the other hand the visitor is also warned that resemblance can be misleading, as “there are things that show a great external similarity, but may differ more than we might think at first glance”.<sup>5</sup> This appears to me as a clear example of what Homi Bhabha describes as colonial mimicry, i.e. TISNA wanted its Dutch audiences to see resemblance to the extent that the peoples of Indonesia, Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean islands could be recognised as *almost the same, but not quite* (Bhabha 1984).

The idea to make use of ‘purely cultural’ means to foster in the people of the Netherlands feelings of affection/ connectedness/ kinship with the so-called overseas territories came from the Cultural Contact Department of the Ministry of Overseas Territories. However, TISNA would travel under the auspices of the Foundation to organise Indies Exhibitions and Screenings for the Dutch youth (Stichting tot het organiseren van Indische Tentoonstellingen en Filmvoorstellingen voor de Nederlandse Jeugd) that was established specifically for this purpose in December 1947.<sup>6</sup> The Ministry of Overseas Territories as well as the Ministry of Education, Arts and Sciences appointed representatives to serve on the board of this foundation, furthermore three representatives of Youth Organisations were appointed by the Dutch Youth Community (N.J.G.) and the director of National Museum of Ethnology (Museum Volkenkunde) took seat on the board as well, later replaced by the Government Advisor of Museums from the Ministry of Education, Arts and Sciences, and eventually the director of Sticusa (Stichting voor Culturele Samenwerking tussen Nederland, Indonesië, Suriname en de Nederlandse Antillen) got a seat on the board too.<sup>7</sup> A committee, consisting of technical and education staff from the Indies Institute and the Museum of Ethnology together with

employees from the Ministry of Overseas Territories, carried out the day-to-day running of the show.<sup>8</sup>

The minutes of a meeting that took place on 6 December 1947 show that the foundation took its mission very seriously. The aim was to visit twenty towns a year with an average of ten exhibition days at every location. In the same meeting it is decided that the exhibition would consist of an ethnographic collection on loan from the Museum of Ethnology, while the Indies Institute would provide a socio-economic collection. It was hoped that TISNA would be ready for travel on 1 March 1948. A letter from 28 February 1948 from the director of the Museum of Ethnology to the board of curators from Leiden University indicates that the ethnographic collection would contain objects pertaining to religion, crafts, music and dance, housing, shipping, agriculture and fishing, and war (weapons and such like) in the form of models and inexpensive objects. It is explicitly mentioned that no unique, rare or valuable items would be lent.<sup>9</sup> The total costs for the ethnographic collection could amount to a maximum of 2500 guilders, whereas the costs for the socio-economic collection provided by the Indies Institute could amount to a maximum of 3000 guilders.<sup>10</sup> KLM and the Mission would make some additional materials available with which the entire collection was to cover around 300 m<sup>2</sup>. An insurance list describes in broad terms what kind of objects were part of the TISNA collection, namely: panels, dioramas, theatres, models, maps, tropical products, ethnographic objects, drawings and photographs, as well as from which institutions these were on loan and what they were worth.<sup>11</sup> Revealingly, the exhibition booklet *Tisna Vertelt* doesn’t devote a single word to the objects that were on display. “The exhibition guide is intended as a general explanation of the exhibited, rather than following the exhibition stand by stand it reflects the content of what



is offered,” wrote the secretary of the Cultural Contact Department.<sup>12</sup> Some information about the exhibited objects is provided in the education brochure, which appeared in (at least) two different versions. The first version specifically mentions that a collection of stone and bronze sculptures from the Hindu-Javanese period would be presented together with Indonesian fabrics in a separate room and that a diorama by Leo Eland depicting Toba Lake was presented to add lustre and provide an example of the magnitude of tropical nature.<sup>13</sup> The latter seems to have been noteworthy given that Eland had exhibited his paintings and dioramas at several international colonial exhibitions (Zweers 2013). The brochure concludes with the mention that some of the subjects could be left out of the exhibition either completely or in part due to a lack of space on location. A letter written in July 1948 to the head of the Netherlands East Indies Visual Information Service Niels A. Douwes Dekker, in response to a photographic collection Douwes Dekker had sent for the show on his own initiative after receiving the *Tisna Vertelt* brochure, makes apparent that the TISNA organisers had wanted to start the TISNA tour as quickly as possible with whatever means made available to them and that it was their intention to “gradually upgrade Tisna to [present] the best possible current and visual image of the Overseas Territories”.<sup>14</sup> The second education brochure speaks of supplementing exhibition materials provided by adoptie-comité Pontianak, namely an Adat Costume from Sultan Hamid II of Pontianak, as well as a scale model from a Central Javanese house on loan from H.M. The Queen.<sup>15</sup> In the summer of 1949, thus after TISNA had been on show at the Van Abbemuseum and with the Dutch acknowledgement of Indonesian independence in view, the exhibition material was subjected to a thorough revision “with an emphasis on aesthetics, although a number of technical improvements were implemented as well”.<sup>16</sup>

In this revision the materials concerning Suriname, the Dutch Caribbean islands and the Mission were completely renewed “resulting in a significant improvement of the Tisna in both form and content”.<sup>17</sup> Next to objects TISNA also presented films that were remounted from footage of *Wordende Wereld* (Becoming World) newsreels, such as *Indonesië werkt weer*.<sup>18</sup>

At least as important a task for the foundation as securing materials for display was the formation of a local committee of recommendation in each of the exhibition locations so as to ensure “as much attention as well as support from all groups of the population” and with that make the opening of each TISNA into a “happening”.<sup>19</sup>

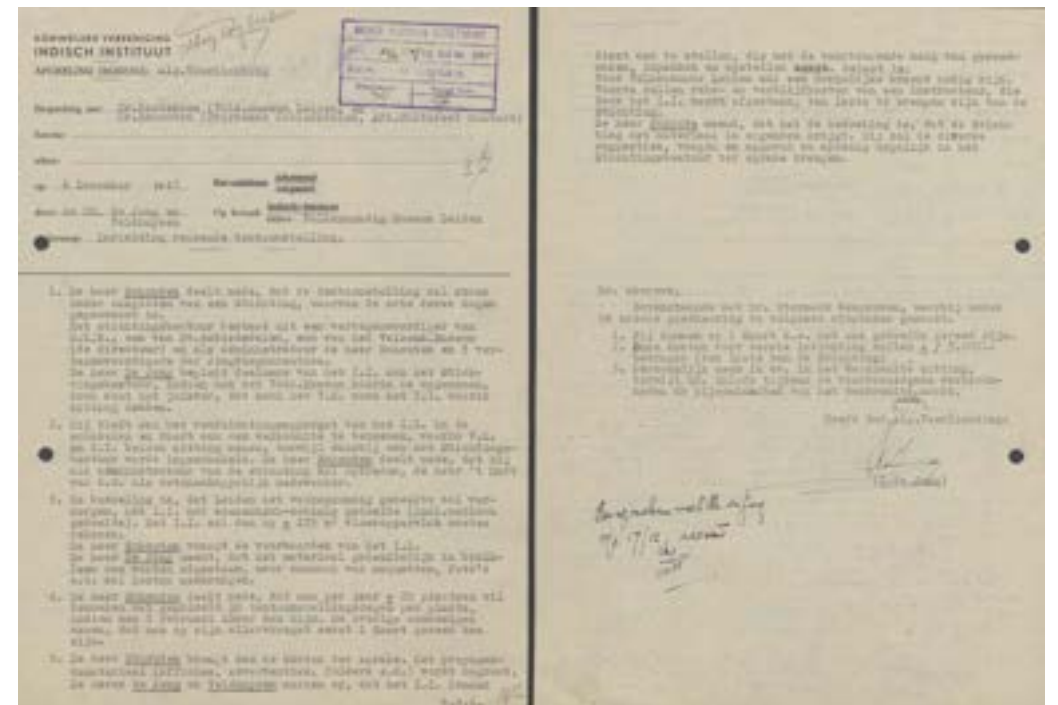


Figure 3 Minutes of meeting between Mr. Nooteboom (Museum of Ethnology), Mr. Schouten (Overseas Territories, Dpt. Cultural Contact), Mr. de Jong and Mr. Veldhuysen (Indies Institute), 6 December 1947, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_5.

Aan het College van Curatoren  
der Rijksuniversiteit  
te Leiden.

Hierbij heb ik de eer Uw College voor te stellen aan Zijne Excellentie de Minister van Onderwijs, Kunsten en Wetenschappen officiële machtiging te verzoeken tot medewerking door het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde aan de Stichting tot het organiseren van tentoonstellingen over Indonesië-Suriname-Nederlandse Antillen voor de Nederlandse jeugd.

Het is de bedoeling, dat deze stichting reizende tentoonstellingen zal uitzenden, die deskundig zijn voorbereid en goed georganiseerd worden. In deze stichting zijn o.a. de Ministeries van Onderwijs, Kunsten en Wetenschappen, en Overzeese Gebiedsdelen vertegenwoordigd.

Het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde zal na verkregen machtiging een aantal voorwerpen ter beschikking stellen, die betrekking hebben op godsdienst, kunstnijverheid, muziek en dans, behuizing, scheepvaart, landbouw en visserij, en oorlog (wapens e.d.). Ten dele zullen het zijn modellen, ten dele voorwerpen van weinig kostbare aard. Er zullen geen unica, zeldzame of kostbare voorwerpen verstrekt worden. De stichting zal zorg dragen voor verzekering der voorwerpen en het voor de tentoonstellingen aan te wijzen personeel zal uitvoerig geïnstrueerd worden over het beheer en de behandeling der collecties.

Het plan bestaat, dat in April met deze tentoonstellingen een begin gemaakt wordt.

Aangezien deze reizende tentoonstellingen bedoeld zijn de kennis van de genoemde gebieden te bevorderen in die plaatsen, waar geen gelegenheid bestaat door musea e.d. deze kennis op te doen, acht ik het van groot belang, dat het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde aan deze opzet actief medewerkt.

De Directeur,

(Dr G.W.Locher).

## ALLIES TO BRING THE MESSAGE HOME

That the openings became happenings attended by many local notables was of great importance to bring TISNA to the attention of the press. Prior to the first opening, the press had already reported about the establishment of the foundation and the upcoming show. The first public announcement seems to have appeared on the front page of the newspaper *Het Dagblad* under the heading "Ties between the Netherlands and the Indies are being strengthened". Two months later the anticipated show is front page news again, this time in the newspaper *De Stem*. Throughout the TISNA tour, local, regional and national newspapers would turn out to be important allies for the organisers to normalise their colonialist/ imperialist myths.<sup>20</sup> Not only did the compliments for the exhibition pile up steadily, the press would also regularly print the opening speeches, due to which these words spread to a far larger audience than those who attended the opening or visited the exhibition. In the opening speeches the task that TISNA needed to fulfil became bigger and bigger.

Figure 4 Letter by G.W. Locher to College van Curatoren Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 28 February 1948. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, NL-LdnRMV ARA-archief 1837-1961, correspondentie 1948.

**Banden tussen Indië en Nederland worden versterkt**

Op een honderdtal middelbare scholen in Nederland worden thans geregeld lezingen gehouden over Indië, terwijl tevens leergangen georganiseerd worden in samenwerking met het Indisch Instituut te Amsterdam en het Indische Voorlichtingsbureau in het Noorden van het land, eveneens voor leerlingen van middelbare scholen van alle richtingen.

De lezingen voor de hoogste klassen behandelen de staatkundige bouw van Ned. Indië in de 20ste eeuw, de Indische cultuur en de invloeden daarop en verschillende economische onderwerpen. Alles wordt vrijgebonden van politieke vraagstukken en figuren.

In voorbereiding is voorts de oprichting van een stichting, waarin de ministeries van Overzeese Gebiedsdelen en Onderwijs, Kunsten en Wetenschappen samenwerken met de vruchtbaarste jeugdorganisaties. Deze stichting zal reizende tentoonstellingen organiseren over de overzeese gebiedsdelen. Het Volkskundig Museum te Leiden evenals het Indisch Instituut te Amsterdam verlenen daarbij hun medewerking.

Dit alles is het resultaat van het organiserend werk van de afdeling Cultureel Contact van het Ministerie van O.G., die tevens zorgt voor geregeld contact met de studentenorganisaties in Nederland. Tenslotte valt te vermelden, dat op initiatief van deze afdeling een begin gemaakt is met de oprichting van een correspondentieschub, waarin kinderen in Indië en Nederland regelmatig met elkaar kunnen brieftuisselen. De eerste radiooproep met dit doel leverde bereids tegen de 1000 aanvragen op.

**Indië-tentoonstelling te Middelburg**  
Minister Jonkman zal haar openen

DOOR de departementen van Overzeese Gebiedsdelen en O. K. en W. is een stichting in het leven geroepen, die tot doel heeft een culturele tentoonstelling te organiseren over Oost- en West-Indië. Deze tentoonstelling (Tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname, Ned. Antillen). Met deze tentoonstelling zal men het land doorreizen ten einde in de eerste plaats een gebodene, van jeugdorganisaties, maar ook van volwassenen een kennis te geven van het werken en leven in Oost en West. De tentoonstelling zal een zekere cultureel karakter dragen en worden opgeleefd door vertaling van een reeks gebiedsmatigen over Indonesië.

Dit jaar zullen 4000 Nederlandse scholen worden bezocht. De tentoonstelling te Middelburg, waar de opening van 3 (in 14 April) in de Concert- en Geheerzaal zal zijn te bestuderen. Het ligt in de bedoeling, dat de minister van Overzeese Gebiedsdelen op 5 April officieel zal spreken. Vertegenwoordigers van de tentoonstelling spreken te Oost- en West-Indië.

503<sup>o</sup> STAATSLOTERIJ, 4e klasse. Toel. f. 1000, 2000, f. 2000, 2000, f. 1000, 2000, 2000, 2000.

DE WILLEM BARNDAG (vervolg) zal nu ten anderhalf uur worden gehouden over dezelfde periode.

NIEUW-GUINEA met opbouw van een reeks politieke discussies met betrekking tot de 11 Maart verdragen 20 verdragen en gouvernementale contracten voor twee jaar.

ZIJN EXCELLENCE van het Koninkrijk te Den Haag werd opgevoerd met de woorden van de Minister van Oost- en West-Indië voor haar begroting bij het verspreiden van politieke problemen.

Figure 5 "Banden tussen Indië en Nederland worden versterkt", *Het dagblad: uitgave van de Nederlandsche Dagbladpers te Batavia*, 16 January 1948, Delpher.

Figure 6 "Indië-tentoonstelling te Middelburg", *De Stem*, 11 March 1948, Krantenbank Zeeland.

In April 1948 TISNA was presented for the first time in Middelburg. The organisers had hoped for opening words by the Minister of Overseas Territories, but it was the head of the Cultural Contact Department who did the honours. *De Volkskrant* printed an Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau (ANP) news item about the TISNA opening, while the *Provinciale Zeeuwse Courant* and *Zeeuwsch dagblad* printed the opening speech without any reservation. The speech started with an expression of gratitude to the soldiers from Zeeland who "brought the spirit of their province to the Indies with their attitude". After this glorification of military intervention in Indonesia, the speaker sketched several ways in which future relations could take shape: "There are three ways for the people of the Empire to live in covenant with each other: the constitutional, the financial-economical and the cultural way". TISNA aimed to contribute to this third way "that has rarely been valued thus far". He concludes with a wish, namely that the object lesson: "will lead to a fuller knowledge of and affection for the peoples of Indonesia, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles in the coming generation". The *Provinciale Zeeuwse Courant* explicitly endorses this wish.

**Tentoonstelling over Indië in Middelburg**

MIDDELBURG, 5 April (A.N.P.) — Hedenmiddag is in de concert- en gehoorzaal te Middelburg in aanwezigheid van vele autoriteiten de tentoonstelling „TISNA“ (Tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname en Nederlandse Antillen) geopend. Het hoofd van de afdeling Cultureel Contact van het departement van Overzeese Gebiedsdelen, de heer A. van Velsen, vertegenwoordigde minister Jonkman, die door drukke bezigheden niet aanwezig kon zijn.

Figure 7 "Tentoonstelling over Indië in Middelburg", *De Volkskrant*, 6 April 1948, Delpher.



Figure 8 "T.I.S.N.A in Middelburg geopend. Expositie geeft veelomvattend beeld Oost en West", Provinciale Zeeuwse Courant, 6 April 1948, Krantenbank Zeeland.



Figure 9 "T.I.S.N.A te Middelburg geopend. Min. Jonkman was niet aanwezig", Zeeuwse Dagblad, 6 April 1948, Krantenbank Zeeland.

Six stops and months later another representative from the Cultural Contact Department took the stage to express even higher hopes, or rather more delusional ones, for TISNA. *Het Limburgsch Dagblad* spreads these opening words to its readers without further comment: "If one wants to see the union between Indonesia and the Netherlands as a reality the peoples of the East, the West and the Netherlands need to get to know and appreciate one another. [...] Mr. Jilderda ended his speech with the statement that he is convinced that the Dutch are fulfilling their big task in Indonesia so that in 25 years a film can be made with the title *Something great has been done*". The reference to Willem Henri van Helsdingen and with that to the ruthless pioneering colonial administrator Jan Pieterszoon Coen speaks volumes (Helsdingen & Hoogenberk 1941, Gelderblom 2000).



Figure 10 "Tisna-tentoonstelling te Heerlen", Limburgsch Dagblad, 16 October 1948, Delpher.





The Minister of Overseas Territories without portfolio opened TISNA at the Van Abbemuseum on 28 April 1949. In his speech, minister Götzen presents TISNA as a 'modest light' to help silencing those who opposed the Dutch colonialist/ imperialist project:

The Netherlands is in the glare of the spotlight of the world politically. These spotlights often illuminate the situation correctly, often also wrongly. This exhibition is a modest light. This Tisna will help to stimulate or create interest especially in the generation currently growing up. The conviction must take root, even more firmly, that the connection between the Netherlands and Indonesia is of vital importance to us. We can and must acknowledge that we are at present at the beginning of a new time in which the Netherlands will have to take up an important role. Hence the demand for interconnectedness between the Netherlands and overseas territories. Hence Tisna. So that the Netherlands can look forward to a bright future in this becoming world.

The *Eindhovens Dagblad* reproduced this text, but also *Het Parool* paraphrases the minister's words, the house journal of Philips interpreted his message into their own words while *De Volkskrant* briefly mentioned that minister Götzen opened TISNA in the Van Abbemuseum.

In January 1950 the Netherlands had finally accepted Indonesia's independence, but the exhibition leader Luteijn opened the show with confidence fuelled by delusions of Dutch grandeur in Leeuwarden. From this point onwards these spectacles of soft power had to convince the Dutch that an 'equal' relationship with independent Indonesia was depending upon Dutch



Figure 11 "TISNA in het van Abbe Museum", *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 29 April 1949, Van Abbemuseum archive.



Figure 12 "Minister Götzen opent TISNA in Eindhoven", *Het Parool*, 30 April 1949, Delpher.



Figure 13 "TISNA: tentoonstelling die men moet gaan zien", *Vrije Philips Koerier, Eindhoven*, 30 April 1949, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_31.



Figure 14 "Op de korte golf", *De Volkskrant*, 30 April 1949, Delpher.

assistance and guidance in 'developing' the new nation-state.<sup>21</sup> The *Leeuwarder Courant* and the *Heer- enveensche koerier* uncritically accepted and reproduced Luteijn's words:

Some people might ask: "Why is there still such an exhibition?" Yes, politically we lost Indonesia following the ruling of the RTC and the government. But the cultural and economic ties are not yet lost, and we hope that they will last for a long while. The fibres of this bond have not been cut and will become more solid. There are two parties: them and us. We have to wait and see if they want to work together. However, we must show our good will. I believe that Indonesia needs us more than ever before after the destruction that has taken place, because the Dutch have the experience of building Indonesia into a healthy empire. And we are not the only ones who know this; this is also said in circles of influential Indonesians. More than ever it is time to advertise for Indonesia.

## Opening tentoonstelling Indonesië Suriname en de Ned. Antillen

Gisteravond is de „Tisna“ (tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname en Ned. Antillen), die tot 24 Januari a.s. in de Harmonie te Leeuwarden z'n tenten heeft opgeslagen, geopend door de heer J. W. Geesink, voorzitter van het Indisch Voorlichtingsbureau te Leeuwarden.

Met voldoening constateerde de heer Geesink, dat in Friesland in de afgelopen vier jaar sedert de vorige voorlichtingstentoonstelling het begrip over de overzeese gebiedsdelen in sterke mate is toegenomen. Zeer dankbaar was spreker over de grote gastvrijheid, waarmee de ongeveer 6600 gerepatrieerden, voor het merendeel Indo's, in dit gewest zijn ontvangen.

Vervolgens wees spreker op de taak, die er vooral voor de jeugd van Nederland in Indonesië ligt, mits men op gelijke voet met de Indonesiërs wil samenwerken voor de toekomst van Indonesië. Met goedwill van beide kanten moet dat lukken. Mohammed Hatta heeft gezegd, dat beide landen niet buiten elkaar kunnen. De heer Geesink hoopte dat velen na afloop van hun werk in Indonesië zouden kunnen zeggen, dat zij een belangrijke bijdrage tot de opbouw van de nieuwe staat hebben geleverd. Met het uitspreken van een oud Indonesisch gezegde: „Dat de vrede heersde, dat de paddi groeide dat er weer welvaart heerste bij het volk“, verklaarde hij de tentoonstelling voor geopend.

Voor de openingsplechtigheid was de leider van de tentoonstelling, de heer W. Luteyn, even ingegaan op de klanken, die zo nu en dan worden opgevangen, dat de tentoonstelling eigenlijk geen nut meer zou hebben, nu Indonesië voor Nederland verloren was gegaan. In politiek opricht zijn wij Indonesië kwijt, aldus de heer Luteyn, maar dat wil nog niet zeggen, dat daarmee meteen alle culturele en economische banden zijn verbroken. Integendeel, er zijn symptomen, die op het tegenovergestelde wijzen. Na de grote afbraak zullen de Indonesiërs meer dan ooit hulp nodig hebben en wie kunnen die hulp beter verschaffen dan de Nederlanders met hun jarenlange ervaring?

Een rondgang over de keurige en op overzichtelijke wijze ingerichte tentoonstelling leert de bezoeker hoe landbouw, veeteelt en visserij in Indonesië worden uitgeoefend, welke gewassen er groeien en in welke gebieden, hoe de Indonesiër zich kleedt, welke volkeren er wonen. Verder kan men het werk van zending en missie zien en de verbreiding der verschillende godsdiensten over de eilanden, tevens krijgt men een indruk van de beoefening van muziek en dans in de archipel. Van het Koninklijk Huisarchief is er een woning in Japara, terwijl Sultan Hamid II zijn adat-costume voor deze tentoonstelling heeft afgestaan. De West is in hoofdzaak vertegenwoordigd door fotomateriaal.

## De Tisna werd geopend.

De tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname en Nederlandse Antillen, die binnenkort ook nog in Heerenveen zal komen, werd Woensdag in de Leeuwarder „Harmonie“ geopend. De heer W. Luteyn met in zijn openingswoord, dat velen vrazen: „waarom nu nog zo'n tentoonstelling?“

Inderdaad zijn wij Indonesië politiek gezien kwijt, na de uitspraak van de R.T.C. en de Regering.

Maar de culturele en economische banden zijn nog niet geslaakt en wij hopen, dat deze nog lang zullen stand houden. De laatste vezels van deze band zijn niet doorgesneden en spr. zalofde zelfs, dat die weer steviger worden.

Er zijn twee partijen: zij en wij. Of zij willen samenwerken, moeten wij afwachten. Wij moeten echter onze goede wil tonen.

Ik geloof, dat de Indonesiër ons meer nodig heeft dan ooit te voren na de afbraak, die er heeft plaats gehad, want de Nederlanders hebben de ervaring om Indonesië op te bouwen tot een gezond Rijk. Spreker meende, dat niet alleen wij dit weten, maar dat dergelijke klanken ook reeds gehoord worden in kringen van invloedrijke Indonesiërs. De tijd is nu aangebroken om reclame te maken voor Indonesië.

De heer J. Geesink wees de vooraanstaande personen, die deze opening mee maakten, op het feit, dat Mohammed Hatta kortgeleden nog heeft gezegd: „Wij kunnen niet zonder elkaar en ik hoop, dat vele Nederlanders hier nog zullen komen en dan later, evenals voorheen, zullen vertrekken met het tevreden gevoel, gebouwd te hebben aan de opbouw van een grote Staat“.

Deze tentoonstelling, die veel over Indonesië, Suriname en de Nederlandse Antillen duidelijk maakt en ook zeer interessant is, verdient daarom dan ook veel belangstelling.

Figure 15 "Opening tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname en de Ned. Antillen", *Leeuwarder courant; hoofdblad van Friesland*, 19 January 1950, Delpher.

Figure 16 "De Tisna werd geopend", *De Heerenveensche koerier: onafhankelijk dagblad voor Midden-Zuid-Oost-Friesland en Noord-Overijssel*, 26 January 1950, Delpher.

## MILLIOEN MINDER VOOR DE NIWIN

Voor culturele samenwerking  
hogere bedragen

De regering stelt in de begroting van Overzeese Gebiedsdelen voor 1950 voor, aan de N.I.W.I.N. voor dat jaar een subsidie van f. 2.200.000 te verlenen. Over 1949 bedroeg de subsidie f. 3.200.000.

Als subsidie voor de Stichting voor de culturele samenwerking tussen Nederland, Indonesië, Suriname en de Nederlandse Antillen wordt voorgedragen voor 1950 f. 1.800.000.

De regering heeft overwogen, dat deze steun in verband met de geleidelijk in omvang toenemende werkzaamheden diende te worden verhoogd. Voor 1949 zal nog per supplettoire begroting een aanvullende subsidie ten bedrage van f. 630.000 worden gevraagd.

Voor de stichting „Voorlichtingsinstituut voor het Welvaartplan Nederlandse Antillen“ is op de begroting f. 60.000 uitgetrokken, voor de „Tisna“ (tentoonstelling Indonesië-Suriname-Nederlandse Antillen) f. 18.000.

## Rijksbegroting 1950

Aan culturele samenwerking zal grote  
uitbreiding gegeven worden

Burgerluchtvaart krijgt  
10 miljoen minder

Den Haag, 21 September (A.N.P.) — Bij de Tweede Kamer is ingediend een aantal hoofdstukken der Rijksbegroting voor 1950. Aan het hoofdstuk overzeese gebiedsdelen is uitbreid, dat de gewone dienst voor 1950 is geraamd op 12.134.963 gulden, de buitenlandse dienst op 8.000.000 gulden. Voor 1949 was toegestaan 11.183.126 respectievelijk 10.160.000 gulden.

Als subsidie aan de stichting „Voorlichtingsinstituut voor het Welvaartplan Nederlandse Antillen“ is op de begroting

een bedrag van 60.000 gulden uitgetrokken.

In 1949 kon aan de stichting „Culturele samenwerking Nederland, Indonesië, Suriname en Ned. Antillen“ een belangrijke uitbreiding worden gegeven, mede doordat het contact op cultureel gebied met Indonesië veel intensiever is geworden. Niet alleen stelde de stichting een vertegenwoordiging in te Batavia, die voor haar contact met cultuurdragers en culturele instanties in geheel Indonesië zal onderhouden, maar bovendien zijn er verschillende negers o.g. districts autonome culturele centra opgericht, die evenals de bestaande organisatie in Suriname en het in 1949

dels tot stand gekomen Curaçaoe instituut de daadwerkelijke samenwerking op cultureel gebied tussen de vier gebieden verstevigen.

De uitwisseling van en het persoonlijk contact met cultuurdragers uit de vier gebieden moet worden bevorderd. Voorgesteld wordt een subsidie van 18.000 gulden voor de stichting „Tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname, Ned. Antillen“. Als subsidie aan de NIWIN wordt voorgesteld een bedrag van 2.200.000 gulden. Over 1949 bedroeg dit 3.200.000 gulden. Bij de bepaling van het bedrag is overwogen, dat enerzijds de toestand van 's Lands financiën en de noodzaak om zo mogelijk een sluitende begroting te bereiken, dwingen de uitgaven tot de strikt onvermijdelijke te beperken, terwijl anderzijds verwacht mag worden, dat in 1950 de sterkte van de Nederlandse instituten in Indonesië aanmerkelijk zal zijn ingetrokken.

Figure 17 "MILLIOEN MINDER VOOR DE NIWIN, voor culturele samenwerking hogere bedragen", *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 September 1949, Delpher.

Figure 18 "Rijksbegroting 1950. Aan culturele samenwerking zal grote uitbreiding gegeven worden", *De locomotief: Samarangsch handels- en advertentie-blad*, 23 September 1949, Delpher.

That the exhibition leader wholeheartedly believed that TISNA had an important task to fulfil was in line with government policy of the time. The government had provided extra money for cultural exchange in the state budget of 1950, now that less money was needed for the military, and TISNA received a portion of 18,000 guilders.

In the course of 1950 the hope for bonding seems to have faded away, or at least the government wanted out. They pulled the plug from the TISNA subsidy for 1951. The Frans Hals Museum would become TISNA's final station, and with that a last momentum for the organisers to ventilate their colonialist/ imperialist thinking with TISNA as 'purely cultural' façade. The *Haarlems Dagblad en Oprechte Haarlemsche Courant* gave the organisers a final helping hand by reproducing this last declaration:

One might wonder whether such propaganda still makes sense now that the relations have changed. However, after the Round Table Conference this contribution to nurturing understanding has become particularly topical, since it is important that equal partners are aware of each other's rights and circumstances. The Netherlands has had the privilege of being connected with Indonesia for more than 300 years. The experience gained over this period of close ties must serve as a basis for friendship, now and in the future. Therefore this exhibition mainly focuses on the youth, not only because they might feel prompted to offer a helping hand in primitive areas at some point, but above all to counteract the indifference that culminates in the statement "What does Indonesia have to do with us, we have lost it". Against this one wants to promote a sense of equality.



Figure 19 "Spectaculaire tentoonstelling over land en volk van Indonesië, Suriname en de Antillen", *Haarlems Dagblad en Oprechte Haarlemsche Courant*, 20 December 1950, Noord-Hollands Archief, Krantenviewer.

## AN INCOMPETENT RIVAL FOR AN ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

Where the press appeared to have been easily enchanted by the beautifying words of the TISNA organisers, dissatisfaction about this show prevailed at the Indies Institute. This ethnographic museum saw TISNA as an unwanted competitor, and a less-skilled one at that, with no expertise in making exhibitions appealing to its audiences nor in creating proper categorisations for display to enable teaching and learning.

The minutes of an internal meeting that took place on 28 October 1947 show that after initial rejection to partake in the show the institute was won over by the foresight of subsidy. Nonetheless a comment was added in pencil to highlight their reluctance: “the request could have been directly addressed to us, a special foundation for this is unnecessary”. A few months later, the institute would nonetheless pull out all stops to make sure that TISNA would be up and running in April 1948, not only by providing exhibition materials, but also through creating display materials and by the deployment of their installation and education staff.

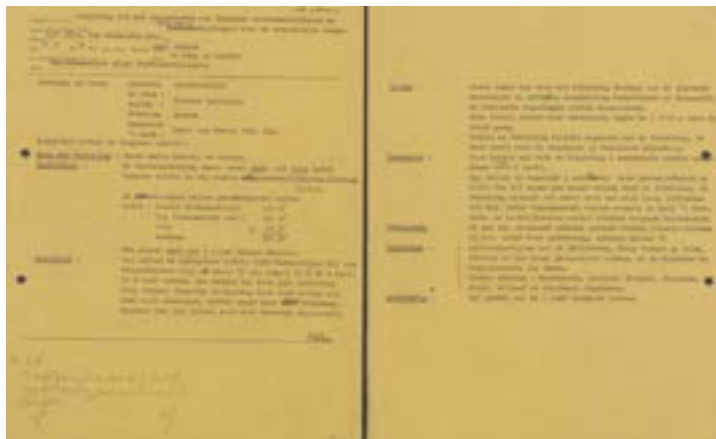


Figure 21 Minutes of meeting between Mr. Jilderda (board member Tisna), Mr. de Jong and Mr. Lulofs (Indies Institute), Mr. Noteboom (Museum of Ethnology), Mr. Schouten and Mr. 't Hart (Dpt. Overseas Territories), 8 January 1948, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_7.

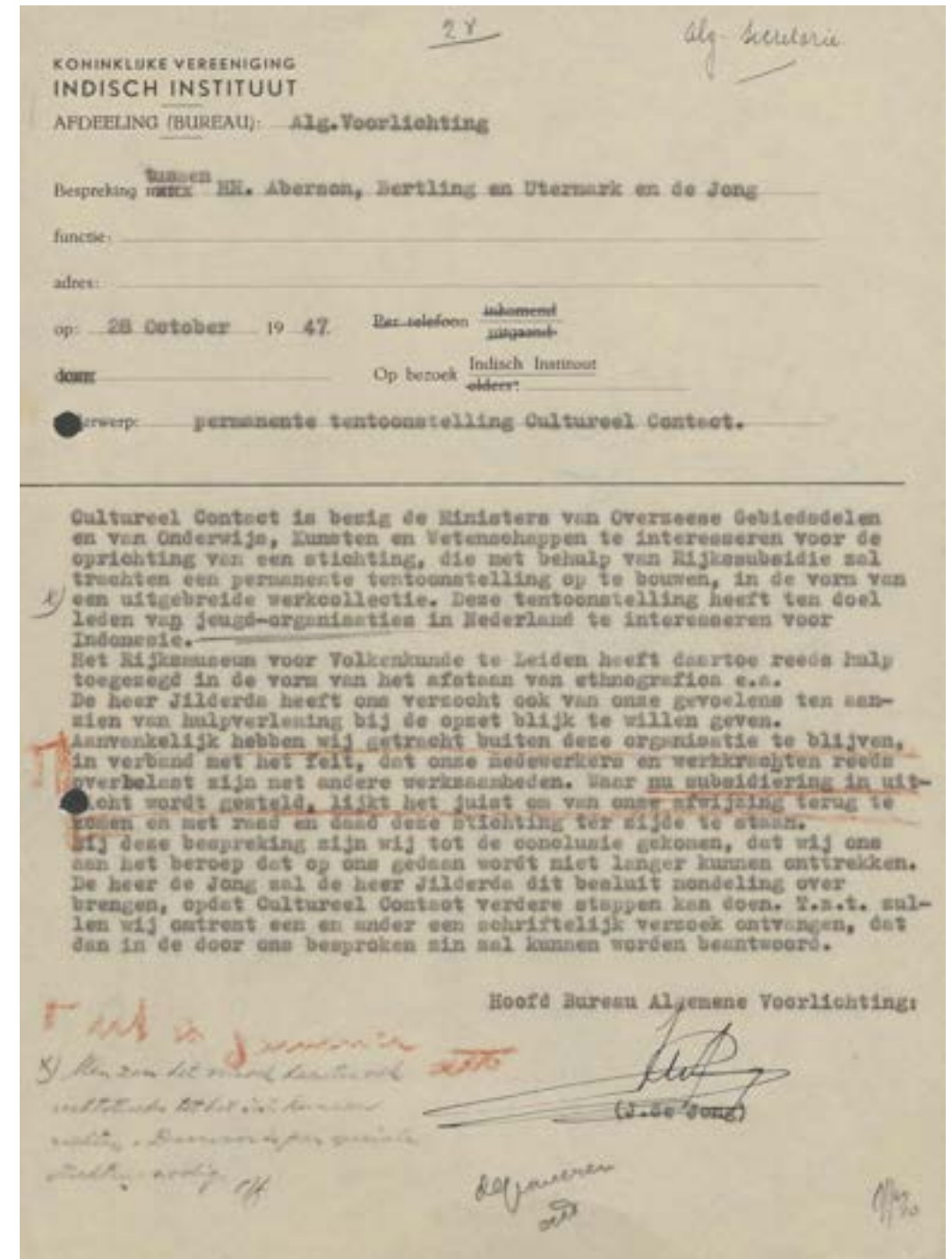


Figure 20 Minutes of meeting between Mr. Aberson, Mr. Bertling, Mr. Utermarkt, Mr. de Jong, 28 October 1947, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_4.

After the opening in Middelburg, two reports were written voicing similar concerns, namely that for the Cultural Contact Department from the Ministry of Overseas Territories it might have appeared as an entirely new idea to “bring the mountain to Mohammed”, i.e. to have an exhibition about the so-called overseas territories travel to the provinces, but TISNA might make such exhibitions already organised by the Indies Institute redundant. Furthermore the lack of signage showing the contribution of the institute to the collection formed a thorn in their side, as was the lack of qualified staff. The staff from Leiden and The Hague are portrayed as “complete amateurs, who only work for several months to eventually return to the Indies”. And it was not just personnel that lagged behind. Due to inadequate advertising, the number of regular visitors remained below expectations according to a report created after the closing of the show in Middelburg too. But more crucially the exhibition materials were not suited to provide education that met the standard of the institute. Whereas the socio-economic department provided by the Indies Institute was seen as suitable and pleasing, the ethnological section provided by the Museum of Ethnology was seen as inappropriate. Too much had been lumped together and with this topical approach it was impossible to teach the youth about differences in cultures. Furthermore it is noted that most materials are of poor quality and that the map from Papua New Guinea is not even complete. A year later, the exhibition was still unable to appeal to the employees of the Indies Institute as is evidenced by the report that was drawn up following a visit to TISNA in Oss. Dead serious, the report states that considerable improvement could be achieved if an entrance gate adorned with some plants would welcome the visitors. The display itself is critiqued for its multitude, due to which objects are presented on top of each other and sometimes even overlap, which

complicates classification and overview. Moreover, it is suggested that the collection as a whole is too mediocre to attract an adult audience, but that adding a few showpieces could solve this problem.

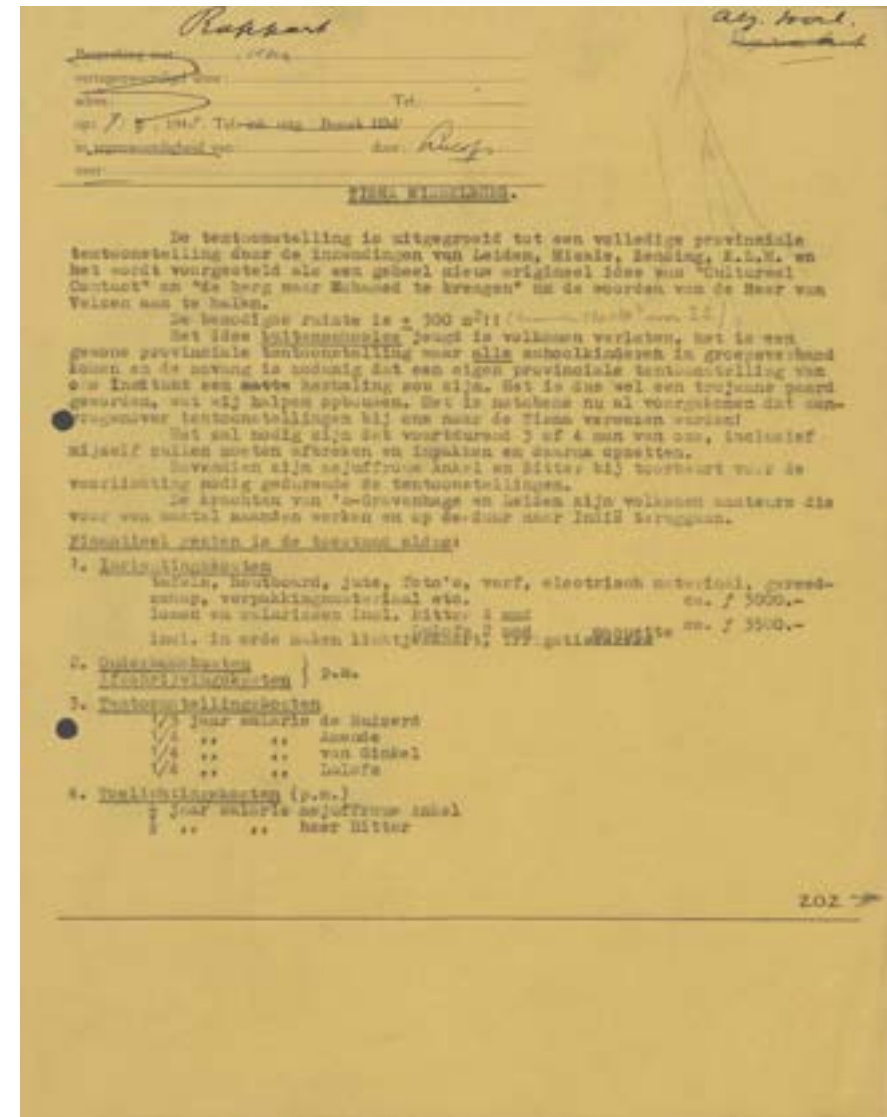


Figure 22 Report Tisna Middelburg by Mr. Lulofs, 7 April 1948. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_13.

*Mr. Offerhaus*

Opening "Tisna-tentoonstelling te Middelburg op 5 April 1948.

1. De tentoonstelling zag er goed uit; alleen was anderszide nog niet alles klaar doordat de Heer Ritter niet gereed was gekomen met de voorwerpen van enige theattertjes.
2. De opening was goed geregeld; de Heer Jilderda verwelkomde de aanwezigen, waarna de Heer van Velsen namens de Min.v.O.G. sprak. Hierna sprak de Commissaris v.d. Koz. en daarna heb ik gesproken en tenslotte de Heer Noteboun namens het Rijksmuseum te Londen.
3. Ik had speciaal versoekt, het woord te mogen voeren (wat nog even moeite kostte), omdat mij opviel, dat op de tentoonstelling nog eens bleek, dat het I.I. het grootste deel der inzendingen had verzorgd. Wel stond op de vitrines met etnografische "Rijksmuseum van Volkskunde te Londen", ook de naam "Kon. Ver. Indisch Instituut" ontbrak geheel. Ik heb daaronder met de Heer Lulofs afgesproken, dat nog een bordje zal worden geplaatst waarop staat "De sociaal-economische inzendingen zijn verzorgd door de Kon.Ver. "Indisch Instituut" te Amsterdam".
4. Het is mij voorts wel duidelijk geworden, dat ons personeel (Mej. Ankel en de Hh. Lulofs, Amenda en van Ginkel) en ons lichte tentoonstellingsmateriaal door de tentoonstellingsreus van de Tisna zodanig is geblokkeerd, dat het ons niet mogelijk zal zijn om tegelijkertijd zelf een tentoonstelling te ontwerpen, zoals vorig jaar o.v. te Dwingelo. Dit acht ik een ernstig bezwaar tegen onze samenwerking met de Tisna. So ernstig zelfs, dat ik geen, dat wij verder niet moeten proberen in het bestuur te komen, zodat wij geheel vrij zijn om ons zo nodig terug te trekken.
5. Het het oog hierop acht ik het ook dringend nodig, dat alsnog een duidelijke overeenkomst wordt aangegaan, met bepalingen omtrent de tijdstuur, de wijze van opzegging van wat er dan met de door ons geleverde objecten gebeurt.
6. In ruimer verband besien, wegens het belang van een zo ruim mogelijke voorlichting over de overzeese gebieden, is het natuurlijk toe te juichen, dat door deze "Tisna" de Min. van O.G. er toe gebracht is om belangrijke bedragen te wijzen voor dit doel; bedragen, die ons I.I. zeker niet voor zijn rekening zou hebben kunnen nemen. In zoverre te onze medewerking dan ook volkomen verantwoord. Maar uit een oogpunt van het Instituutsbelang moet dan:
  - a. steeds duidelijk tot uiting komen, welk aandeel het I.I. hierna heeft,
  - b. voorkomen worden, dat het I.I. daardoor belemmerd wordt in zijn vrijheid om zelf ook tentoonstellingen te ontwerpen.

*Offerhaus*

Figure 23 Report opening Tisna Middelburg by Mr. Offerhaus, 5 April 1948. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_12.

-3-

Woensdag 14 April.  
 Gebels der dienst.  
 Mr. Kooperterr en Mej. Ankel.  
 Schoolkinderen: 209  
 Bezoekers: 22  
 234

Totaal aantal bezoekers: 2347

De tentoonstelling opgezet voor de buitenschoolsche jeugd, werd hoofdzakelijk bezocht door schoolkinderen. DHRK zij de goede organisatie van de heer 't Hart hebben praktisch alle scholen een bezoek van de T.I.S.N.A. gebracht. Door zijn knippen en organisatie-talenten is het bovenvermelde resultaat bereikt. Middelburg was voor hem een proefstuk. Verwijl deze tentoonstelling liep, moesten Goes, Termaaten (voorloopig komen wij in deze stad niet) en Bergen op Zoom voorbereid worden.

Buiten het bezoek der schoolkinderen was een veel groter aantal mensen verwacht. De reclame is te weinig opgezet. Lang te voren moeten in de volgende plaatsen reeds de platen hangen en de bevolking moet weten dat de T.I.S.N.A. komen gaat. In een kleine stad als Middelburg, waar het leven zeer rustig voort gaat moeten de mensen eerst wakker gemaakt worden door een sprekende reclame. Indien de heer 't Hart de beschikking had over een klein vervoersmiddel en daar een loud-speaker op kon laten monteren, zou dit het werk zeer ten goede komen.

De inrichting is, wat het economische gedeelte betreft zeer geslaagd. De gekleurde theattertjes doen het goed en geven een fleurig aanzicht aan het geheel.

Naar mijn bescheiden mening is het volkenkundige gedeelte minder geslaagd voor de jeugd. Zoals de opstelling nu is, is het moeilijk de kinderen iets te tonen van het verschil in volkstypen, cultuur enz. De vitrines zijn handig gemaakt en de voorwerpen zijn goed te zien. Maar men heeft een onderwerp willen behandelen b.v. kleding en opschik. In één vitrine ligt een batik hoofddoek, sierraden enz. afkomstig uit alle mogelijke hoeken van de archipel, boombast kleding, een reukjong liggen hier naast. Een Bernesees hoofdje, is uitgesteld met een Aijahach hoofddoek en een zelfde van Celebes. Van de Papoes is niets aanwezig. De kleine Papoes is zelfs niet op de kaart van Nieuw Guinea opgebracht. Uit het stenen tijdperk geen enkel werktuig. Van het skatten is niets aanwezig en te Gemontrenen hoe dit handwerk wordt toegepast. In een bonte rij hangen niet zeer fraaie doekjes uit allerlei streken op de achterwand der vitrine. De muziekinstrumenten zijn primitief en allen beschadigd.

De samenwerking is prettig en er is met ijver gewerkt. De. Cuzoren, geref. predikant heeft verscheidene boeken afgelezen om bij de zendingkaart naar te leggen. In deze streek heeft de zending zeer veel belangstelling, te meer daar de kinderen ijverig zegels sparen voor het zendingswerk.

Kinshipen zou het wel aanbeveling verdienen, indien na het beëindigen van de tentoonstelling, de leden van het Comité bij elkaar kunnen, teneinde de dames en heren iets aan te bieden en zo dus de band te versterken tussen de medewerkende instanties. Onder enige officiële formaliteit zo naar te sluiten lijkt mij ongewenst i.v.b. met het aanhouden van gemaakte relaties.

Zijdelings werd vernomen dat de financiële resultaten niet beantwoorden aan de gestelde verwachtingen.

*J. Ankel*

*De heer 't Hart heeft de tentoonstelling in Middelburg opgezet en de organisatie daarvan is zeer goed. De vitrines zijn handig gemaakt en de voorwerpen zijn goed te zien. Maar men heeft een onderwerp willen behandelen b.v. kleding en opschik. In één vitrine ligt een batik hoofddoek, sierraden enz. afkomstig uit alle mogelijke hoeken van de archipel, boombast kleding, een reukjong liggen hier naast. Een Bernesees hoofdje, is uitgesteld met een Aijahach hoofddoek en een zelfde van Celebes. Van de Papoes is niets aanwezig. De kleine Papoes is zelfs niet op de kaart van Nieuw Guinea opgebracht. Uit het stenen tijdperk geen enkel werktuig. Van het skatten is niets aanwezig en te Gemontrenen hoe dit handwerk wordt toegepast. In een bonte rij hangen niet zeer fraaie doekjes uit allerlei streken op de achterwand der vitrine. De muziekinstrumenten zijn primitief en allen beschadigd.*

Figure 24 Report Tisna Middelburg by Mrs. Ankel, 20 April 1948. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_16.

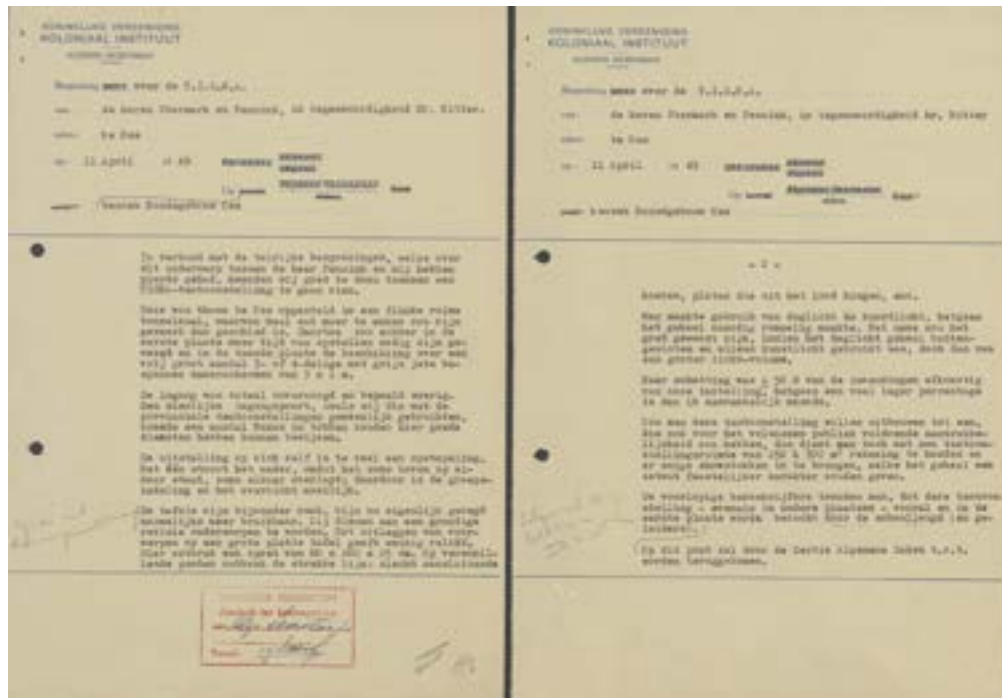


Figure 25 Report Tisna Oss by Mr. Utermark and Mr. Pennink, 11 April 1949. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_34.

Given these comments it is not surprising that when the secretary general of the Ministry of Union Affairs and Overseas Territories in March 1950 requested a summary and advice about the activities of TISNA in relation to those of the Indies Institute, the institute seized this opportunity to explain that the activities of the foundation and the institute had shown too much overlap from the very beginning. I believe it is one sentence of the memorandum in particular that ought to convince the government of the difference between the exhibition and education practices of the institute and TISNA. Both the school and provincial exhibitions of the Indies Institute and TISNA aim to educate the Dutch about the so-called overseas territories, yet “in view of the more refined method of the school exhi-

bitions from our institute, one can expect more from this education of school children than from the Tisna exhibitions”. The debriefing is also used to remind the government of its expressed wish not to be directly involved in educational work, but instead leave this to private institutions. The Indies Institute recognises the importance of this division of tasks whereby the government is activating and, if necessary granting subsidy, but should leave the practical work to the experts, i.e. to them. It is almost as if you hear a sigh of relief in the institute’s annual report of 1950 when they write: “In the course of the year the board of the [TISNA] foundation has decided to go into liquidation and transfer its activities and assets to our institute. With this a duplication in activities has ended”.<sup>22</sup>

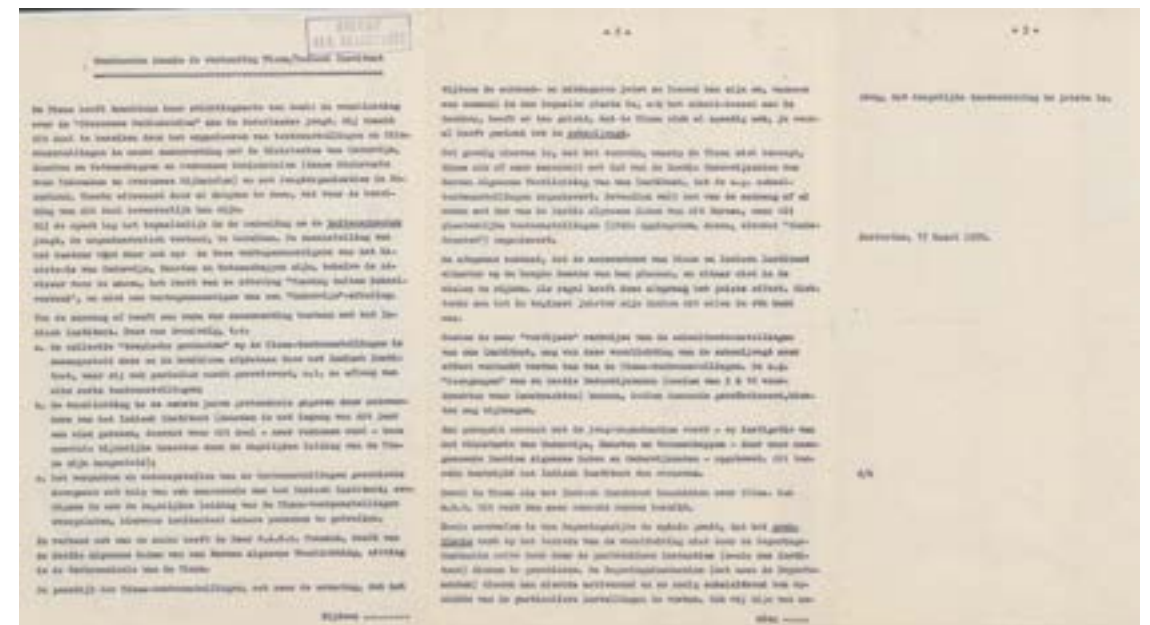


Figure 26 Memorandum Stichting Tisna/Indisch Instituut by Mr. Offerhaus, 13 March 1950, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_36.



## NOT FITTING THE STANDARDS OF A MODERN ART MUSEUM

In the years that TISNA toured through the Netherlands, thirty-seven places were visited, starting off in the South with Zeeland, Brabant and Limburg, followed by Gelderland, Twente, Friesland, Groningen and Overijssel and a few stops in Zuid- and Noord-Holland. When determining to which locations TISNA should travel, the organisers' main criterion had been whether or not there were local possibilities to "acquire knowledge of the countries, peoples, social economic and cultural circumstances of the Overseas Territories".<sup>23</sup> For that reason Breda was skipped for example, since there people could visit the ethnographic museum of the Royal Military Academy.<sup>24</sup> TISNA was not always exhibited in museums, city halls, theatres and churches served as exhibition venues too. In Brabant there had been two museum predecessors before it was presented in the Van Abbemuseum, namely the Natural History Museum in Tilburg (May 1948) and the museum of the Provincial Society of Arts and Sciences in Den Bosch (December 1948).<sup>25</sup> Eindhoven had been on the wish list of the organisers from the very beginning, but it was only in April 1949 that TISNA was shown at the Van Abbemuseum; its seventeenth appearance.

Museum director Edy de Wilde wasn't exactly thrilled to be one of TISNA's hosts. Once the organisers had agreed, albeit with some reluctance, to add artworks from *Tentoonstelling van Oost-Indonesische Kunst* (Exhibition of East-Indonesian Art) to the TISNA collection to meet the director's wishes regarding the cultural level, the museum doors were opened to them. The reluctance of the organisers lay in the fact that they understood the objective of TISNA "although indeed at 'lower level'" as being "purely cultural and

of great importance: to arouse the youth's interest (in the broadest sense) in the Overseas Territories and promote the bond between peoples, also in new constitutional relations, by laying a foundation of knowledge and understanding".<sup>26</sup> In December 1948 the Eindhoven municipality confirmed in a letter that they were willing to host "the Tisna exhibition together with the exhibition East-Indonesian Art" in the Van Abbemuseum, but requested the organisers to contact De Wilde again to work out the details. A month after receiving this letter De Wilde replied that the exhibitions would be held from 28 April until 19 May in four rooms of the Van Abbemuseum.

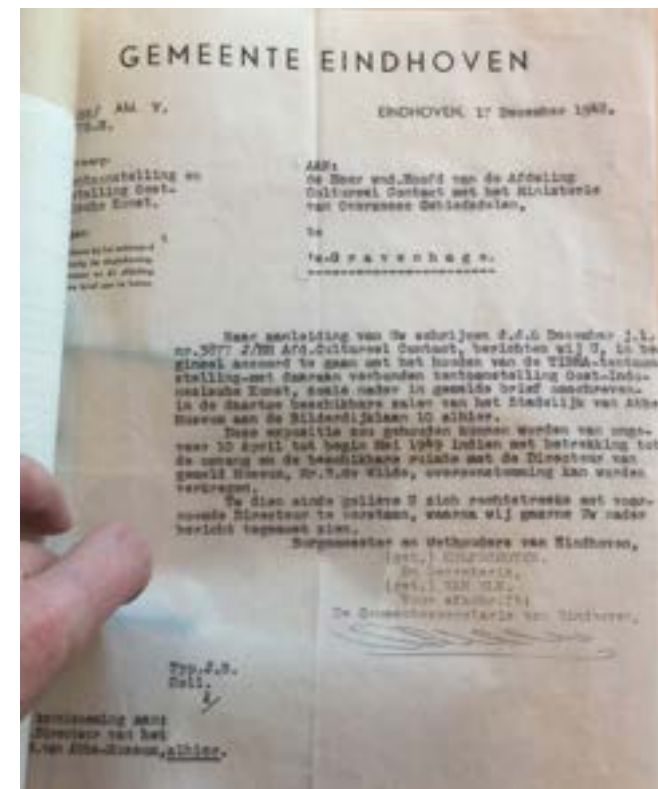


Figure 27 Letter college van burgemeester en wethouders Eindhoven to Head Cultural Contact Department, Ministry of Overseas Territories, 17 December 1948, Van Abbemuseum exhibition archive, East-Indonesian Art 'TISNA', inv. 19.

18-1-1949.

Het College van Burgemeester en  
Wethouders te  
EINDHOVEN.

Den Haag, 18-1-1949.  
Van de afd. Cultureel Contact;  
Ministerie van Overzeesche Gebieds-  
Zaken.  
R.N.N. 2112

In aansluiting op Uw schrijven d.d. 17 December 1948  
nr. 510R/ 9870-H; afd. V, deel ik U mede dat de tentoonstelling  
in overleg met een vertegenwoordiger van het Ministerie van  
Overzeesche GebiedsZaken van 28 April - 19 Mei a.s. zal worden  
gehouden in vier zalen van het museum.

De kosten van inrichting, propaganda, rondleidingen  
etc. zullen door de Tisna worden gedragen, terwijl het museum  
de conciërge beschikbaar stelt en zorg draagt voor verwarming  
en verlichting. Ter vergoeding van de kosten welke het museum  
dragen zal staan twee mogelijkheden open:

1. Een vast bedrag, te betalen door de Tisna;
2. Een percentage van de entree's, welke door de  
Tisna zijn vastgesteld op fl.0.80 per persoon  
( fl.0.30 voor de scholen.)

Persoonlijk geef ik de voorkeur aan de laatste moge-  
lijkheid omdat daardoor de kosten evenredig zijn met de werke-  
lijke inkomsten. Ik zou het voor het museum gereserveerde per-  
centage voor de entree's van fl.0.30 op fl.0.15, voor de en-  
tree's van fl.0.25 op fl.0.05 redelijk achten.

De directeur,

Mr. E.L.L. de Wilde.

Figure 28 Letter E.L.L. de Wilde to college van burgemeester en wethouders Eindhoven, 18 January 1949, Van Abbemuseum exhibition archive, East-Indonesian Art 'TISNA', inv. 19.

A month prior to the opening of TISNA at the Van Abbe-  
museum the organisers reached out to the Minister  
of Overseas Territories without portfolio to enquire  
whether he would be willing to open the show. In this  
letter, TISNA is openly referred to as a “semi-official  
apparatus that seeks to contribute to the design of the  
Cultural Contact Department by means of visual edu-  
cation”. The letter ends with the remark that “such an  
official side to the Tisna work would be greatly appreci-  
ated”, and that after it has been noted that TISNA would  
offer the minister “the opportunity to ventilate things  
unobtrusively (if desired)” in the presence of the press.<sup>27</sup>  
The minister came and so did the press, De Wilde how-  
ever politely declined the invitation to the opening.

2011

21-4-1949.

Den Schiedalgebouwen Heer  
W. Luteyn,  
w/o Secretariaat, Nieuwe Uitleg 28,  
Den Haag.

Tot mijn spijt zal ik aan Uw  
uitnodiging, de opening van de TISNA-tentoon-  
stelling in Eindhoven bij te wonen, wegens  
uitstedelijke gastverplichtingen over.

De directeur,

Mr. E.L.L. de Wilde.

Figure 29 Letter E.L.L. de Wilde to W. Luteyn, 21 April 1949, Van Abbemuseum exhibition archive, East-Indonesian Art 'TISNA', inv. 19.

On the closing day De Wilde received a thank you letter from Mr. Jilderda from the Cultural Contact Department in which it seems that he had not hidden his dissatisfaction with TISNA from the organisers during the running time. Jilderda writes: “I can perfectly imagine that this exhibition did not fully meet the standards you have set for exhibitions in the unequalled halls of the Van Abbemuseum. I very much appreciate that you cooperated to make this exhibition into a reasonable success despite of these legitimate objections”. After these words of understanding and gratitude, Jilderda expresses the hope that “this exhibition has contributed its mite in the difficult path from the Netherlands to Indonesia”.

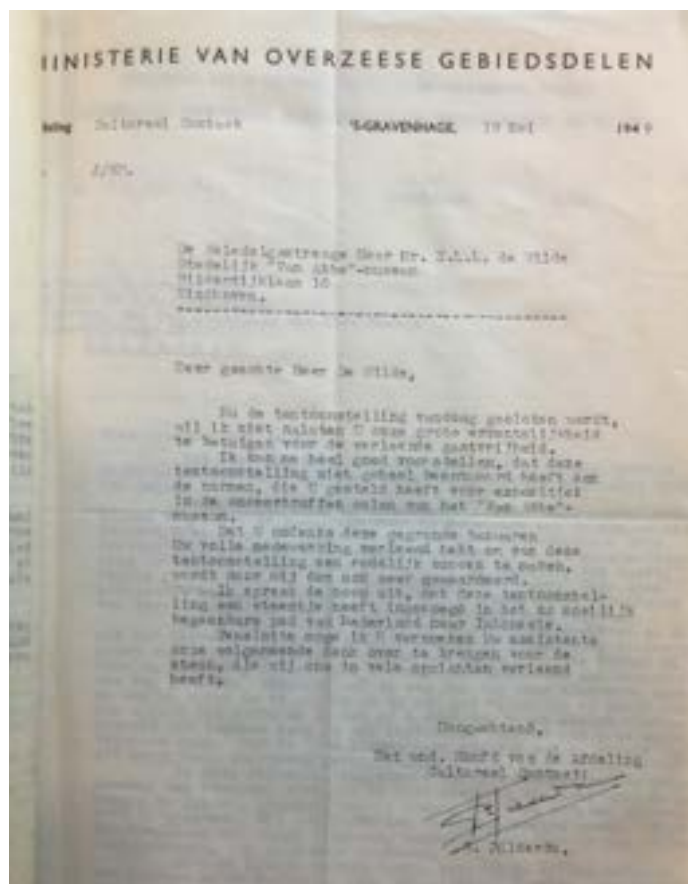


Figure 30 Letter B. Jilderda Ministry of Overseas Territories, Dpt. Cultural Contact to E.L.L. de Wilde, 19 May 1949, Van Abbemuseum exhibition archive, East-Indonesian Art 'TISNA', inv. 19.

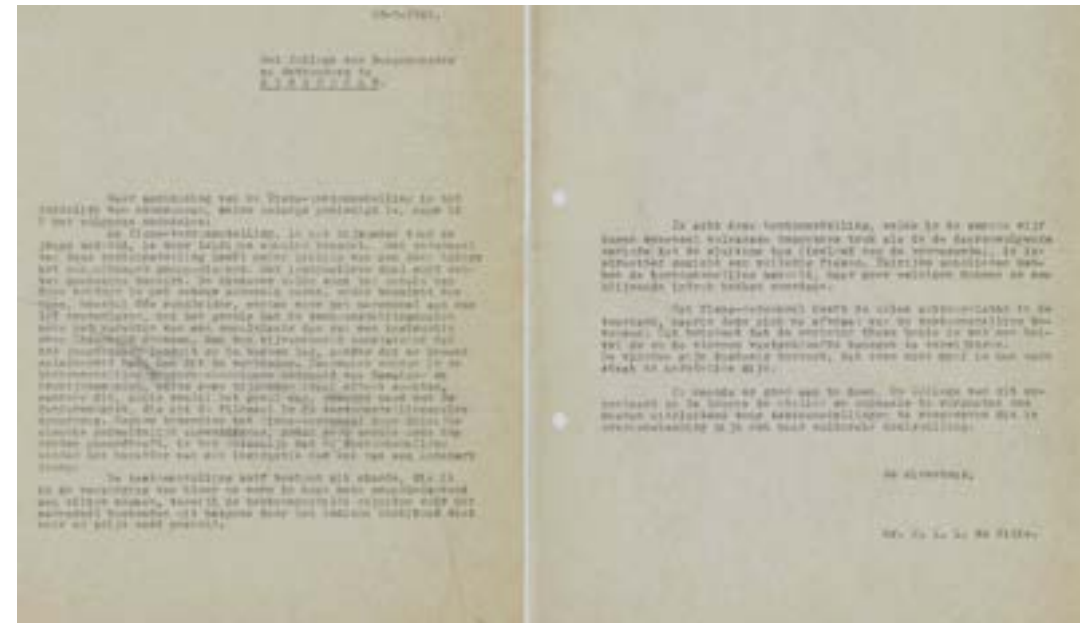


Figure 31 Letter E.L.L. de Wilde to college van burgemeester en wethouders Eindhoven, 23 May 1949, Van Abbemuseum exhibition archive, East-Indonesian Art 'TISNA', inv. 19.

De Wilde couldn't agree less. In a letter to the municipality he makes very clear that in his view TISNA failed in all respects. De Wilde thought the show was “a complete failure in terms of education”, even though “many school children have visited the exhibition, few will have had a lasting impression” since “the galleries seemed more like a playground than a lesson about Indonesia”. And that was not the worst of it: “The exhibition itself consisted of stands that I would want to call highly taste-spoiling in both colour and form”. And he thought of the exhibited objects as cast-offs of the Indies Institute. De Wilde closes his letter with the urgent request to the municipality to reserve the museum exclusively for exhibitions that are consistent with its cultural objective. Strikingly De Wilde doesn't devote a single word to the East-Indonesian art collection that should have lifted the whole show to a 'higher'

cultural level to match up to the standard of the Van Abbemuseum. Could it be that this collection did not meet the standards he had set for the museum either? The closure of De Wilde's letter could be read as questioning the cultural objective of the exhibition organisers. However, I am more inclined to read De Wilde's seething critique as being targeted at TISNA's aesthetic imperfection rather than at its colonial gaze. On the one hand because De Wilde writes that TISNA was a failed lesson about Indonesia, not per se an unwanted lesson. Even more so because he had brought up the hierarchical high/ low dichotomy from the very first negotiations about hosting the exhibition, brought up again by Jilderda in his letter to De Wilde. That is of course not to say that I think of TISNA as an under-appreciated aesthetic masterpiece, but it seems to me that De Wilde was so occupied with modern aesthetic standards that if TISNA had been an aesthetically pleasing art exhibition with the same goal he would have refrained from critique. That is to say that I believe it was the museological standard, both in the Indies Institute and the Van Abbemuseum, which made the passage from the political arena to the cultural field slightly more bumpy for the TISNA organisers than anticipated. The object lesson, however was steeped in colonialist/ imperialist thinking and was initiated to enable much sought-after speech moments which legitimised the continuation of the Dutch colonialist/ imperialist project in relative lee. What is more this went without explicit critique or, I'm afraid, without being noticed at all. It appears to me as if the lack of interest on the part of the TISNA organisers in exhibition-making, and the inability on the part of the Indies Institute and the Van Abbemuseum to recognise that, and (consequently) their inability to denounce TISNA for what it was, also makes visible how ethnographic and art museums operate as powerful devices of segregation in and of themselves (Mbembe 2017).

Within their critique of TISNA as being not good enough an exhibition, both museums seem to have defended the rules of classification and rationales for presentation in divided and divisive categories, with which they unwittingly showed their role(s) in upholding the dichotomy between Europe and the colonised and othered parts of the world.



"Exhibition about the Indies for the Dutch youth." Polygoon bioscoopjournaal, 18 may 1948, Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid. The film footage was shot while TISNA was on show in Goes. Report about the "Tisna" experience in Goes, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_19.

Press  to play the video

## REFERENCES

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## NOTES

1. "Archives. tentoonstellingen 1936-2016 (exhibitions 1936-2016)", see the Van Abbemuseum website.

2. Undated report/ communiqué, Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Ministerie van Koloniën en opvolgers: Dossierarchief 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

3. *Tisna Vertelt*, exhibition brochure, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_2.

4. I call it hidden/ suppressed history not only because of the evasive title of the exhibition in the Van Abbemuseum archive, but also because a large part of the materials created by the exhibition organisers are stored in the Dutch National Archives (Nationaal Archief) with restrictions on public accessibility. For that reason reproductions of documents from this archive are absent, though I have been given permission to consult the archive and hence will draw from the notes I took.

5. Korte beschrijving samengesteld ten behoeve van jeugdleiders en onderwijskrachten van de voornaamste onderwerpen, geëxposeerd op de Tentoonstelling Indonesië-Suriname-Ned. Antillen, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_45.

6. Articles of Association Stichting tot het organiseren van Indische Tentoonstellingen en Filmvoorstellingen voor de Nederlandse Jeugd, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_9.

7. Annual report 1948, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164. The Sticusa Foundation was established in February 1948 and helped to ensure that a selection of the exhibition East Indonesian Art would be exhibited at various locations in the Netherlands, including the Van Abbemuseum.

8. Minutes of meeting between Mr. Nootboom (Museum of Ethnology), Mr. Schouten (Overseas territories, Dpt. Cultural Contact), Mr. de Jong and Mr. Veldhuysen (Indies Institute), 6 December 1947, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_5.

9. C. Nootboom also addressed two letters: one to Mr. Beers (Indies Institute), dated 31 March 1948, and the other to Mr. Schouten (TISNA), dated 1 April 1948, about the loans from the Museum of Ethnology from which the originally attached loan lists are missing. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, NL-LdnRMV ARA-archief 1837-1961, correspondentie 1948.

10. Letter by B. Jilderda and H.A.H. Schouten to the director of the Museum of Ethnology, 12 January 1948. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, NL-LdnRMV ARA-archief 1837-1961. Letter by B. Jilderda and H.A.H. Schouten to Mr. A. Aberson (Indies Institute), 12 January 1948. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_8.

11. Insurance specification, O.W.J. Schlenker, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

12. Letter from H.A.H. Schouten to Niels Alexander Douwes Dekker, Netherlands East Indies Visual Information Service, 20 July 20 1948, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

13. Korte beschrijving samengesteld ten behoeve van jeugdleiders en onderwijskrachten van de voornaamste onderwerpen, geëxposeerd op de Tentoonstelling Indonesië-Suriname-Ned. Antillen, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_45.

14. Letter from H.A.H. Schouten to Niels Alexander Douwes Dekker, Netherlands East Indies Visual Information Service, 20 July 1948, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

15. Korte beschrijving samengesteld ten behoeve van jeugdleiders en onderwijskrachten van de voornaamste onderwerpen, geëxposeerd op de Tentoonstelling Indonesië-Suriname-Ned. Antillen, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

16. Annual report 1949, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

17. *ibid.*

18. Annual report 1948, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164. See also: NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1169.

19. Annual report 1948, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

20. Also Dutch-language newspapers published in Indonesia, Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean islands reported about TISNA, see for example: "Tentoonstelling Nijmegen", *De locomotief: Samarangsch handels- en advertentie-blad*, 8 January 1949, "Tentoonstelling overzeese gebiedsdelen", *Het nieuwsblad voor Sumatra*, 14 January 1949, "Suriname tentoongesteld", *Het nieuws: algemeen dagblad*, 8 April 1950, "DE „TISNA“ – VERZAMELING", *Amigoe di Curaçao: dagblad voor de Nederlandse Antillen*, 22 December 1950. Delpher.

21. During a board meeting of the foundation on 11 January 1950, it is noted that it is necessary for the foundation to explain in the annual report how TISNA aims to fulfil its task after the R.T.C. Consequently the annual report of 1949 remarks that "now that the political struggles are over the aims of our foundation might be better achieved than ever before". It seems that in addition, a text was written with the telling title *Indonesië Een jonge Staat in samenwerking met Stichting Tisna* (Indonesia A young State in collaboration with the Tisna foundation). NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

22. Annual report 1950 Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen <voorheen koninklijke Vereeniging Indisch Instituut.>. Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.

23. Annual Report, 1948. NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

24. Annual Report, 1948. NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

25. Report Tisna Tilburg by Mrs. Ankel, 3 June 1948, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_23. "Veel schoons en leerzaam op de TISNA te Den Bosch. Een tentoonstelling die speciaal de jeugd wat te zeggen heeft." Press clipping, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, KIT, ID 3169\_26.

26. Undated report/ communiqué, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

27. Letter to minister by A. van Velsen, Ministry Overseas, Dpt. Cultural Contact, 21 March 1949, NL-HaNA, Koloniën / Dossierarchief, 2.10.54, inventory no. 1164.

# Ernest Mancoba

## Visible Man, Invisible Work?

# Winnie Sze

Is Ernest Mancoba (1904-2002) overlooked as an artist because of his race? Some recent writings indicate that he was a founding member of CoBrA, the European post-World War II art movement whose more famous members include Karel Appel and Asger Jorn, but he was marginalised because of the colour of his skin<sup>1</sup>. Mancoba himself suggested this may be the case when he referred to himself as an 'invisible man' in his interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2002 (Obrist 2003). That interview, high profile exhibitions such as Okwui Enwezor's *The Short Century* (2002) and most recently *documenta 14* (2017), as well as critical writing by Rasheed Araeen (2005)<sup>2</sup> have made Mancoba more visible today. But what has become more visible, the man or the work? Is that visibility based on art or skin colour?

My initial proposal for the Van Abbemuseum's Deviant Practice research fellowship (2017) was to look for evidence of Mancoba's marginalisation based on racism. What I found was more nuanced and complex. I will share my findings on Mancoba's link with CoBrA based on researching the archives of the Johannesburg Art Museum (South Africa), the Van Abbemuseum (VAM) and the Stedelijk Museum (the Netherlands), Museum Jorn (Silkeborg, Denmark), the Dutch art history archive RKD for Constant's archive, as well as conversations with curators at those institutions and at



the National Gallery of Denmark, the CoBrA Museum in Amstelveen and the Galerie Mikael Andersen in Copenhagen, who has represented Ernest Mancoba since the late 1980s and administers his estate today.

I then focus on Mancoba's artwork in the context of the different influences, including those from the countries of his birth, South Africa, and where he worked, France and Denmark.

Looking for Mancoba's work turned out to be difficult: much of it is not held in public institutions and images are scattered across the randomness of the Internet. This begs the question of how other writers were able to write about him in the first place and leads me to think not only about past prejudices but the possible new ones we may unconsciously create – I include myself in this query. I end by acknowledging our blind spots: how can we re-balance how we look at art that does not fit in the Western art canon without reverting to hyperbole based on the biography of the Other?

### THE SHORT CHAPTER – MANCOBA AND COBRA

Mancoba left South Africa for Paris in 1938. Shortly after he arrived, he met the Danish artists Ejler Bille and Sonja Ferlov. Bille was to remain a longstanding supporter<sup>3</sup>, and Mancoba and Ferlov married in 1942. In 1947, Mancoba and Ferlov moved to Denmark, to the small village of Kattinge just outside Copenhagen, and Ferlov re-established her Danish art connections including with Asger Jorn. Jorn belonged to the Høst artist's association, and he invited Ferlov and Mancoba to exhibit in the upcoming Høst annual selling exhibition.



Figure 1 Høst 1948 exhibition catalogue with list of artists, sourced from Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.





Mancoba C. H. Pedersen Oetvad Bille Knud Nielsen Møllerup Vogel Jørgensen Thomsen  
 Appell Mme. Appel Dotremont Sonja Ferlov Else Alfelt  
 Jørn Corneille Constant Nieuwenhuys Heerup

**HØSTERPORT**  
 Nous sommes arrivés à Copenhague en dormant. C'est le choc du train qui nous a réveillés. Ce choc en annonçait d'autres. D'abord la vue de ce petit groupe d'hommes muets qui nous regardaient d'une manière interrogative et qui ne commencent à vivre qu'après mon cri charmeur: Bille! Bille! L'un d'eux se détacha et nous guida silencieusement dans le matin froid et obscur de Copenhague. Le deuxième choc: Ce photographe de presse qui nous chassait dans un coin pour faire un "flash" et à qui nous devons d'être apparus dans les journaux du soir effrayés et saes comme du bétail exporté. Les chocs ont été innombrables. Faut-il parler de l'accueil étonnant d'Else Alfelt, de la découverte des tableaux de nos camarades danois, des interviews, des ventes, des dîners, des speeches, des fêtes, des discussions, des amarrébrød, des danoises, des lumières de néon ...? Mais je risque d'oublier le plus important: la Høststilling, cette manifestation d'une vie libre, heureuse, active. Je n'avais jamais rien vu de pareil dans les autres pays. Les camarades danois nous ont montré, à nous et à nos camarades belges, ce qui reste à faire par tous ceux qui considèrent l'art comme une arme de l'esprit, comme un outil pour la construction, la transformation du monde, et l'artiste comme un bon ouvrier qui subordonne toutes ses possibilités, toutes ses activités au travail commun et qui ne cherche pas à être grand mais à être utile. Le peuple danois a compris grâce à nos camarades ce que c'est qu'un artiste, il a dû adopter ce nouveau phénomène: Un art simple, bon comme les enfants, qui ne cherche pas leur beauté.

L'encombrement des salles d'exposition, les réactions des spectateurs et de la presse en témoignent.  
 Mais il y a autre chose. Nous vivons dans une société qui nous accule à la lutte. Aussi avons-nous rencontré de nos amis mis à Copenhague. Nous nous en sommes même occupés, et en blaguant (le peuple danois est trop sérieux pour ça) mais en discutant et souvent avec agressivité. Au Danemark comme ailleurs il existe encore des "paristes" qui voudraient nous faire croire que le langage qu'on parle est composé de mots et que le groupe expérimental danois est composé d'individualités. Les puritains qui cherchent les mots et qui détestent les individualités regardent si haut qu'ils ne trouvent rien de ce qui est à leurs pieds.  
 Il y a aussi des emmerdeurs qui pensent que si l'artiste cherche pas le beau il cherche le laid. Ils oublient que le beau et le laid sont deux branches du même arbre, et que ce qui est *notre*.  
 Mais les peintres de Høst ont une longue "expérience" parbleu, ils savent employer leurs armes!  
 Nos camarades nous ont donné une leçon d'escrime et nous ont appris à faire l'amour sans funérailles.  
 Nous rentrons en Hollande — et Dotremont reste en Belgique — avec un sentiment de force. Nous avons trouvé des amis sans perdre des ennemis.  
 Les ennemis sont-ils indispensables? Ils le sont, ils le sont jusqu'à ce que nos problèmes soient vaincus: Nos ennemis nous ont appris à nous connaître et de notre faiblesse nous sommes devenus plus forts.  
 Constant Nieuwenhuys

Figure 2 Høst 1948 group photo, as shown in CoBra magazine issue no. 1, sourced from CoBra Museum

Jorn had also invited Constant and Corneille, whom he met whilst travelling after the war, and they in turn invited some of their network. Though only some of the CoBra artists participated, this 1948 Høst exhibition has come to be described by some CoBra art historians as the *first* CoBra exhibition in part because the CoBra manifesto had been signed shortly before. The first page of the 1948 Høst catalogue lists the guest artists. There is a famous group photograph, one of few to exist or survive from this early period, which was published in the first issue of the CoBra magazine as part of an essay on the innovative artistry of Danish artists.

When Constant and Corneille (through Brands) were invited by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam to put on what has come to be known as the seminal CoBra exhibition, the *Exposition Internationale d'Art Expérimental*, in 1949, they returned the favour and invited some of the Danish artists. The invitation was not extended to all the Høst artists, but only seven of them, including Mancoba.

The fact that Mancoba did not participate in the Stedelijk exhibition after all has had an impact on his CoBra legacy. As a consequence, he was not listed in issue 4 of the CoBra magazine, which served as the Stedelijk exhibition catalogue. This listing has been cited directly and indirectly by some CoBra researchers as *the* list of CoBra artists, and this may partially explain the exclusion or at least the marginalisation of Mancoba (and even Ferlov who was not even invited to the exhibition) from the movement by those historians.

It is unclear why Mancoba did not participate. His biographer Elza Miles said it was due to 'dissatisfaction' with the selection of artists (Miles 1993, p. 142) which seems to suggest that Mancoba felt slighted by





the CoBrA artists. Unfortunately her otherwise helpful book is confusing with regards Mancoba's life in Denmark, mixing up facts about Høst and CoBrA<sup>4</sup>. Therefore it may be the case that Mancoba's relationships with CoBrA versus Høst artists were also muddled. Evidence suggests that Mancoba was respected, not ostracised, by some of the key CoBrA artists at least.

The Stedelijk invitation originated with Constant and Corneille, and was organised behind the scenes by Jorn<sup>5</sup>. They recommended to the Stedelijk Director the seven Danish artists to be invited (see [Appendix 1](#)). There is a little known photograph of Mancoba with Appel, Ortvad, Constant and Corneille<sup>6</sup>, probably taken at the Høst exhibition. At a time when photography was uncommon and expensive, surely this intimate shot suggests some degree of camaraderie. On the other hand, Miles's point cannot be altogether dismissed<sup>7</sup>. Was Ferlov's exclusion the source of Mancoba's 'dissatisfaction'?



Figure 3 Photograph of Mancoba with (from left to right) Ortvad, Corneille, Appel and Constant; sourced from the Van Abbemuseum.

Miles may have been confused by the discontent amongst the Høst artists. Høst started as a group of

landscape painters but the younger more abstract artists took over and the Stedelijk exhibition drew only from the abstract artists. Historian Peter Shield states that the remaining landscape artists were forced out at the end of 1948/ beginning of 1949. This caused Jorn to resign and join Spiralen. Mancoba and Ferlov only showed with Høst in 1948, they later joined Linien II. Most of the remaining abstract artists scattered after the 1949 show with only Alfelt and Pedersen remaining (Shield 2003).

This is not to deny that Mancoba may have felt ostracised by some of the CoBrA artists. But, in many different interviews, he also referred to them as his "spiritual tribe", people with whom he shared artistic and social values.<sup>8</sup>

One eminent CoBrA historian who knew that Mancoba was invited to the Stedelijk is Willemijn Stokvis, but she argues against including Mancoba – and Ferlov – within CoBrA. Regardless of the validity of her other arguments for excluding Mancoba, one phrase hijacks all the rest: "This included his wooden sculptures from the time just after the war, which tend towards Naturalism, *strongly betraying his African origins*" (Stokvis 1974 /2017) (my emphasis). In commenting about his African origins, whether intentionally or unintentionally, her point becomes about race. Is she saying that he can't be in CoBrA because he is African? Certainly it appears to be Mancoba's suspicion for there is very little doubt that Mancoba was thinking of her when he said: "Some critics totally obliterate my participation in the movement, as modest as it admittedly has been, on the reason that my work was suspected of not being European enough, and in [the] words [of one], 'betraying (my) African origins'" (Obrist 2013).

## THE LONG CHAPTER – MANCOBA’S ART

I wanted to look at Mancoba’s work not just around the period of CoBrA but as comprehensively as possible and in the context of his words. Finding information about his work proved a challenge. **Appendix 2** which is published online at [www.ernestmancoba.org](http://www.ernestmancoba.org) is my working compilation of known works, published here in case it can be helpful for other researchers.

Mancoba had no formal art training, though he learnt wood carving as a young man whilst studying at Grace Dieu, an Anglican missionary school<sup>9</sup>. His first carvings were decorations for the church, but in 1929 he carved the *Bantu Madonna* now known as the *Black Madonna* or the *African Madonna*<sup>10</sup>. Mancoba depicted the Madonna as a black African woman, highly unusual given the traditional depictions of the Madonna which Mancoba’s religious upbringing would have exposed him to<sup>11</sup>.



Figure 4 Ernest Mancoba, *Bantu Madonna* (now renamed *Black Madonna* or *African Madonna*), 1929, collection of Johannesburg Art Gallery

Mancoba studied journalism at what is now the University of Fort Hare in Eastern Cape but he dropped out to pursue a career as an artist, moving to Cape Town in 1935. He met artist Lippy Lipshitz amongst others. Mancoba says that Lipshitz “spoke long about art, his experience in Paris”, the works of van Gogh, Picasso and other modern artists, and also “recommend[ed] that I go to this library in Cape Town” to read a specific book. That book was *Primitive Negro Sculptures* (1926) by dealers Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro (Laird 1993) which was important to him for the rest of his life<sup>12</sup>. Whilst the title sounds offensive to our contemporary ears, it is in fact a sensitively considered, respectful book on how to look at West African sculptures, how they informed Picasso and could lead to further artistic developments. The impact on Mancoba’s work can be seen most directly in the sculpture *Faith* (1936) which he carved after he read it. Until this point, Mancoba’s works had been mostly representational if sometimes stylised (see *Figure of a Woman*, 1936, and *The Musician*, 1936, in **Appendix 2**). Whilst the figures are still discernible, *Faith* is a jump across the abstraction spectrum, as if Mancoba was attempting to “distort more consciously and frankly in the interest of plastic form” to “find [the] compromise between representation and design which negro sculptures offers, and which has made it interesting at the present time [to] artists like Picasso and Matisse” (Guillaume & Munro 1926<sup>13</sup>).



Figure 5 Ernest Mancoba, *Faith*, 1936. Image sourced from *Lifeline Out of Africa* by Elza Miles.

In 1938 Mancoba left South Africa, settling in Paris. Whether Mancoba meant to return to South Africa is not known but he lived and worked for the rest of his life in Europe. He did not visit the country of his birth until 1994 for his retrospective at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

In Paris, Bille, Ferlov and Mancoba saw each other almost daily, engaging with each other's work (Bille 1969). At this time the Danes were particularly interested in Surrealism and Miles attributes the fact that Mancoba no longer titled his work – with one known exception – to his developing interest in this movement too. She also associates his abstracted works on paper with automatic drawings. Bille indicated that they were also interested in the work of Miró, Picasso, Laurens, and Giacometti, amongst others, and visited exhibitions together.

The three of them visited the Musée de l'Homme and Mancoba had visited the African collection at The British Museum when he was in London just before coming to Paris. The fact that Mancoba was learning about African art through European collections may sound surprising since Mancoba grew up in South Africa. But his upbringing was in a missionary school which, whilst more liberal than most, would still have focused on teaching its pupils their gospel and focused on the education needed to support its dissemination. Though apartheid had not been legally implemented, the country for all intents and purposes was in the throes of segregation. In response to a question about the government's preconceptions towards "black art" at that time, Mancoba considered that the authorities believed that black artists should not be allowed (Laird 1993). This is not to say that Mancoba would have had no exposure to African art whilst in Africa. He speaks about his mother going off one month a year with

other women to make pots as an act of culture not just practicality. The year before he moved to Paris he taught English and Zulu in Pietersburg, in north South Africa, and with the artist and fellow teacher Gerard Sekoto, he visited villages on weekends and engaged particularly with the Sotho people<sup>14</sup>. He met those "who worked with wood carving, and who worked with the remembrances, who carried the traditions of Africa" (Laird 1993). One of the carvers gifted him a chieftain's walking stick, the head of which has been one of Mancoba's lifelong, treasured possessions, as much for that act of giving as for the object itself. Bille explained that it was he and particularly Ferlov, who had grown up with access to a great African collection, belonging to Carl Kjer Meyers, who explained the objects at the Musée de l'Homme to Mancoba (Bille 1969), but that in turn Mancoba spoke of his observations of South Africa and "they were very interested to know more about the continent that had produced the objects they so admired" (Obrist 2003).

That these drawings and paintings of masks are clearly not copies of known African masks is evident, and arguably owe as much to Picasso as to carvings Mancoba may have encountered in Africa and through the Guillaume and Munro book and the museums.



Figure 6 Ernest Mancoba, Work on paper, ca. 1939-1940. Collection Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.



Figures 7 and 8 Ernest Mancoba, Works on paper, ca. 1939-1940. Collection of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.



Figure 9 Ernest Mancoba, *Komposition*, 1940, oil on canvas, private collection

When World War II broke out, Mancoba was interned. Miles says that Mancoba could have left Paris but this would have meant leaving Ferlov. Ferlov also remained in Paris. In 1942, whilst Mancoba was still interned, they married. Of the war, Mancoba says the following: it led to “a sadness in me, when I came and found dis-integration. And it is the sadness when I hear the music of Mozart. I always have this strain of sadness, and this longing for something lost, when I hear Mozart. I have got to hope that these people have kept this thing alive, this need for human reintegration” (Laird 1993).

Mancoba was released in 1944, their son Wonga was born in 1946, and the family moved to Denmark in 1947. By the time he meets the CoBrA artists at the Høst exhibition in 1948, he would have made the works shown as Figures 10 through 12. Figure 12 was included in the Høst 1948 catalogue. The CoBrA artists may also have seen a little known textile work (1949) – or sketches thereof – said to have been commissioned by the Danish textile printing house Helga Foght<sup>15</sup>. That such works clearly straddle Western and African aesthetics may have been one reason why the CoBrA artists wanted him to exhibit with them in the Stedelijk.



Figures 10 and 11 Ernest Mancoba, *Untitled*, 1945, wooden sculpture (left); *Untitled*, 1948, pen on paper (right)



Figure 12 Høst 1948 catalogue showing *Untitled*, undated. Sourced from Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.



Figure 13 Ernest Mancoba, Textile for Helga Foght. Collection Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.

Through Jorn and other CoBra artists, Mancoba was exposed to other ideas and traditions. He says: “Together with Asger, all the members of CoBra were touched by the strength simplicity and boldness of this [Viking] expression”. His interest may be concluded from this statement: “An expression from a most foreign culture (let’s say New Guinea, or the Mexico of Aztecs) – and even without my having any knowledge

of the particular customs and rites that gave rise to it – may touch me to the core, and sometimes infinitely more than some from my own cultural background and times” (Obrist 2003).

Mancoba attributes to the CoBra movement “the disquiet of youth in general, youth which puts questions to itself” asking who is responsible for “our humanity. The church and political institutions pretend to be responsible for the survival of man as man”. He also speaks of “CoBra pressing forwards from the efforts of Picasso to go deeper into this thing which Picasso avoids...” which is humanity, rather than the individual (attributed to text in Artcurial 1993<sup>16</sup>). It should be noted that this dates from 1993, decades on from when he was involved in CoBra. Was he remembering clearly his thoughts back then? Was he ascribing to CoBra values he had come to deeply believe himself?

It is clear that Mancoba believes that “Man is One” (Obrist 2003). He is consistent in the rare direct accounts found in the archives, which extend from a 1963 letter to Asger Jorn to his last interview in 2002 (it is well worth reading the letter to Jorn for his thought-provoking argument and it is included as **Appendix 3**, p. 117). He considered that the artist has a role to play in promulgating this message of unity amongst men and describes artists as shamans:

The shaman in African society is the conception that there are figures like animas [that] have survived and they feel their way... Shakespeare is a shaman, [who] tells us if you go on this way there is no way forwards and you must think about another way. That’s shaman[ism]. My paintings as a whole, as you have mentioned, are shaman[ism].  
(Artcurial 1993)

Moreover, based on his reading of what is shared by African and Greek classical sculptures, Mancoba believes that the appropriate language for the shaman is the human form.



Figures 14 and 15 Ernest Mancoba, *Untitled*, 1965, oil on canvas, collection of Iziko South African National Gallery (left); *Untitled*, 1966, indian ink on paper, sourced from catalogue of retrospective held at Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, 1997 (right).

This belief may explain Mancoba's mature style, works where a central figure-like form oscillates between being discernible and dissolving into the surrounding abstract field of colourful paint marks. Though at times he seems reluctant to say that the central form is an actual figure (Obrist 2003), at other times he is more committal about that reference: "In this painting I have used the human form as a central point, so if I let the human form go, it becomes a disintegrated context to be free in, and at the same time to be integrated" (Artcurial 1993). The centrality of the figure to Mancoba's work is reinforced by a study under the microscope of a painting from this period, *Untitled*,

1965, by the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, which reveals that "the blue figurative form representing the ... figure that can be seen at the centre of the image, was applied first and the colourful brushstrokes and daubs of paint that surround it were applied afterwards" (Zehnder & Leone 2018).



Figure 16 Ernest Mancoba, *L'Ancêtre*, 1968/71, oil on canvas, collection of Johannesburg Art Gallery



Figures 17 and 18 Ernest Mancoba, *Untitled*, ink on paper, 1988, courtesy of Mikael Anderson Gallery (left); *Untitled (V.5)*, 1993, ink and oil pastel on paper, courtesy of Mikael Anderson Gallery (right)

The only painting Mancoba gives a title to since 1939, is *L'Ancêtre* (Ancestor), completed in 1968/71. It was retitled when he decided to sell it to the Johannesburg Art Gallery on the occasion of his retrospective there in 1994. "The plight of the *Fingos* [Mancoba's tribe] when they fled from Shaka Zulu in KZN had an enduring impact on Ernest. Later in life as a mature artist living in Paris he painted *L'Ancêtre* which is a tribute to the self-sacrifice of an old woman who insisted, when she impeded the flight of her people, that she be left behind. The painting is also a tribute to his mother, keeper of tradition, who told him of the incident" (Miles 1993, p. 138). Whilst I do not disagree with Miles' interpretation, I find it interesting that the title is in French, and not in English or in the language of his ancestors. Mancoba was careful in his choice of words: it suggests that the subject matter is not just about his ancestors specifically but possibly ancestors generally, and thus the painting, whilst personal, is also universal.

In the late 1980s, his style shifted. The central form is no longer present, and the previous abstracted and spontaneous dabs of colour seem to have been re-organised into orders of calligraphic 'scripts'. The landscape format, changed from the earlier portrait format, emphasises this absence of the figure in these abstrac-

tions. Having painted for the better part of three decades with the figure central to the image, this shift was clearly important to Mancoba, yet there is nothing in the archives to help explain this change. However, one part of his acceptance speech for his honorary PhD from the University of Fort Hare strikes me. He first tells a tale of his father as a boy being chastised by a stranger for behaving badly. When his father complains that the stranger had no right, the stranger tells him that in his father's absence he can step in to teach him a lesson, "for the Africans, in the traditional culture, any adult, even in the absence of any blood relations, can be your father". Mancoba continues: "And that day he had been taught in the hard way, the meaning of the word *ubuntu*, a word that has become fashionable recently but of which few imagine the full implications in a traditional sense, in the same way as few understand to the full extent that Jesus speaks literally when he says from the cross, to John the Apostle, showing Mary: 'This is your mother' and to Mary 'This is your son'. These are two anecdotes belonging to two different traditions but they have the same fundamental meaning and implication"<sup>17</sup>. Could the artworks, in their replacement of the singular central figure with many figures both different and alike, be trying to reflect this similitude of *ubuntu*, Christianity and other human beliefs?

## THE MISSING CHAPTER

My research on Mancoba was partially spurred by the sense of injustice I read in most of the writings about him. However, my research has come to direct me to consider those writers too. How could they write about his work and its deserved standing in art history when there was no, or very minimal assessment of the artwork itself? At most, some discussed one work or a selection from one period of his life. Most seem to be

writing about Mancoba's "biography" as a stand in for his art. Would this be acceptable in writing about any Western artist? I hasten to add I am not naively saying this does not happen to Western artists but – paraphrasing South African artist Kemang Wa Lehulere – it just seems when someone is talking about an African artist – or any artist not from the West – most of the discussion is about Africa and not about the art<sup>18</sup>.

These writers may be taking a rhetorical stance for the sake of activism, to right cultural injustice when other socio-economic injustices are clearly not forthcoming enough. But in doing so, they risk treating Mancoba as a cipher. The word 'cipher' is chosen with care for the Merriam Webster dictionary defines it as "one that has no weight, worth, or influence" or "a method of transforming a text in order to conceal its meaning in secret communications". In other words, Mancoba is simply a means to an end, nothing more. His art stands in for the writer's ideology and prejudices.

Stokvis, the CoBrA historian, was not incorrect to state that Mancoba's art may owe something to his African origins, but she failed to consider how he came to those artistic influences, and the influences of other non-African art which mattered to him, and how he transformed these into his own unique artistic language<sup>19</sup>.

One might think that the greatest outrage with regards Mancoba's marginalisation would come from South Africa, but some writers – the most vocal ones anyway – want to deny all but his African influences. This is because their real issue appears to be about black protest and Mancoba's works that explicitly reference Africa, such as *Bantu/Black Madonna* and *L'Ancêtre*, are co-opted to be symbols of their protest.<sup>20</sup> These writers set Mancoba's cultural knowledge and

identity as "ethnically absolute", to use the expression as African American writer and professor Paul Gilroy intended, in the sense of immutable, unchangeable – and which Gilroy did not agree with (Gilroy 1995). Isn't Mancoba, both the man and his artwork, evidence to the contrary?

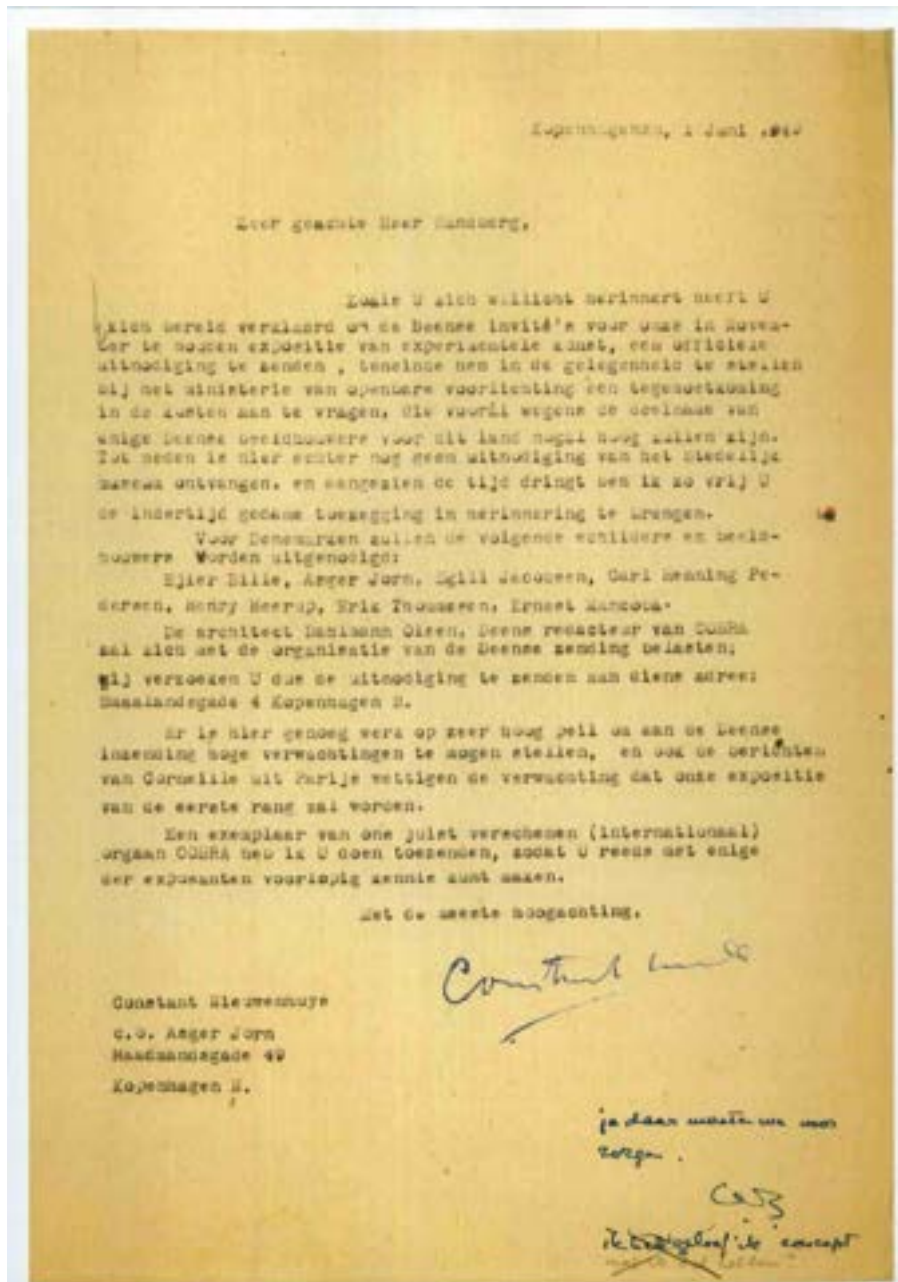
On the other hand, some who write of the worldliness of Mancoba's experience have a tendency towards hyperbole. It is incorrect that the "apartheid system forced him into exile" and that he lived an "itinerant life" whilst in Europe (Hassan 2010). This is romantic distortion at best and sensationalism at worse. Rasheed Araeen's open letter in 2004/05 considered Picasso's artistry of bringing together "two systems of knowledge with their own rationalities, and in a dialogue from which emerges a new system of knowledge" and posits that Mancoba's work functions on a similar level. It is clear from Mancoba's words that he desired to understand and extol what we have in common. His artistic peer Ejler Bille says: "What I like very much in his painting is his ability to combine an African feeling with living [in a] Western culture. What I mean is, that he has always found his own personal way without listening to – or following – other second hand references – [which] is poor art"<sup>21</sup>. In other words, Mancoba's art may be important not because of its relation to CoBrA (or South African art for that matter) but because his work may have transcended the cultural vernacular. Looking at his work may help us likewise, or at the least give a lens to see our prejudices. It is this that should make his work – not just the man – more visible.





APPENDIX 1: CORRESPONDENCE

Images courtesy of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam



Appendix 1.1 Letter from Constant to Stedelijk Director Sandberg recommending seven Danish artists for the exhibition including Ernest Mancoba, 01 Jun 1949.



Appendix 1.2 Letter from Director Sandberg to Asger Jorn inviting the seven Danish artists recommended by Constant, 12 July 1949.



21/7. 49

h  
 Monsieur Sandberg!  
 Nous vous remercions pour l'invitation à l'exposition en Amsterdam le 4-28 novembre, dans laquelle nous sommes très heureux à participer, et nous allons donner message à d'autres invités.  
 Dans l'invitation nous manquons deux artistes, que nous voulons très bien avoir avec nous: le peintre Tage Møllerup et la sculpteurtrice Sonja Ferlov.  
 Dans une exposition à cette caractéristique nous voulons montrer l'art expérimental danois si complètement que possible, et voilà que ça est important, que les deux seraient aussi invités.

Lise Otten, Ejgil Jacobsen,  
 Carl Henning Pedersen, Else Møller,  
 Erik Thomsen. Eyle Pella

Gemeente Museum  
 207 1326  
 79  
 1720

Appendix 1.3 Letter from six of the seven invited Danish artists (excluding Mancoba) asking Director Sandberg to extend the invitation to three other Danish artists (including Sonja Ferlov), 21 July 1949.

Tage Møllerup

S.M.1720

Amsterdam, le 17 août 1949.

M. Asger Jorn  
 Sandemangede 40  
 Copenhagen N  
 Danemark.

Monsieur,

En réponse à la lettre du 31 juillet adressée à M. Sandberg par les six peintres invités pour la participation danoise à l'exposition internationale d'art expérimental, j'ai le plaisir de vous informer que nous sommes entièrement d'accord de votre proposition d'inviter aussi les artistes Tage Møllerup et Sonja Ferlov. Je vous prie de bien vouloir vous mettre en rapport avec ces deux artistes.

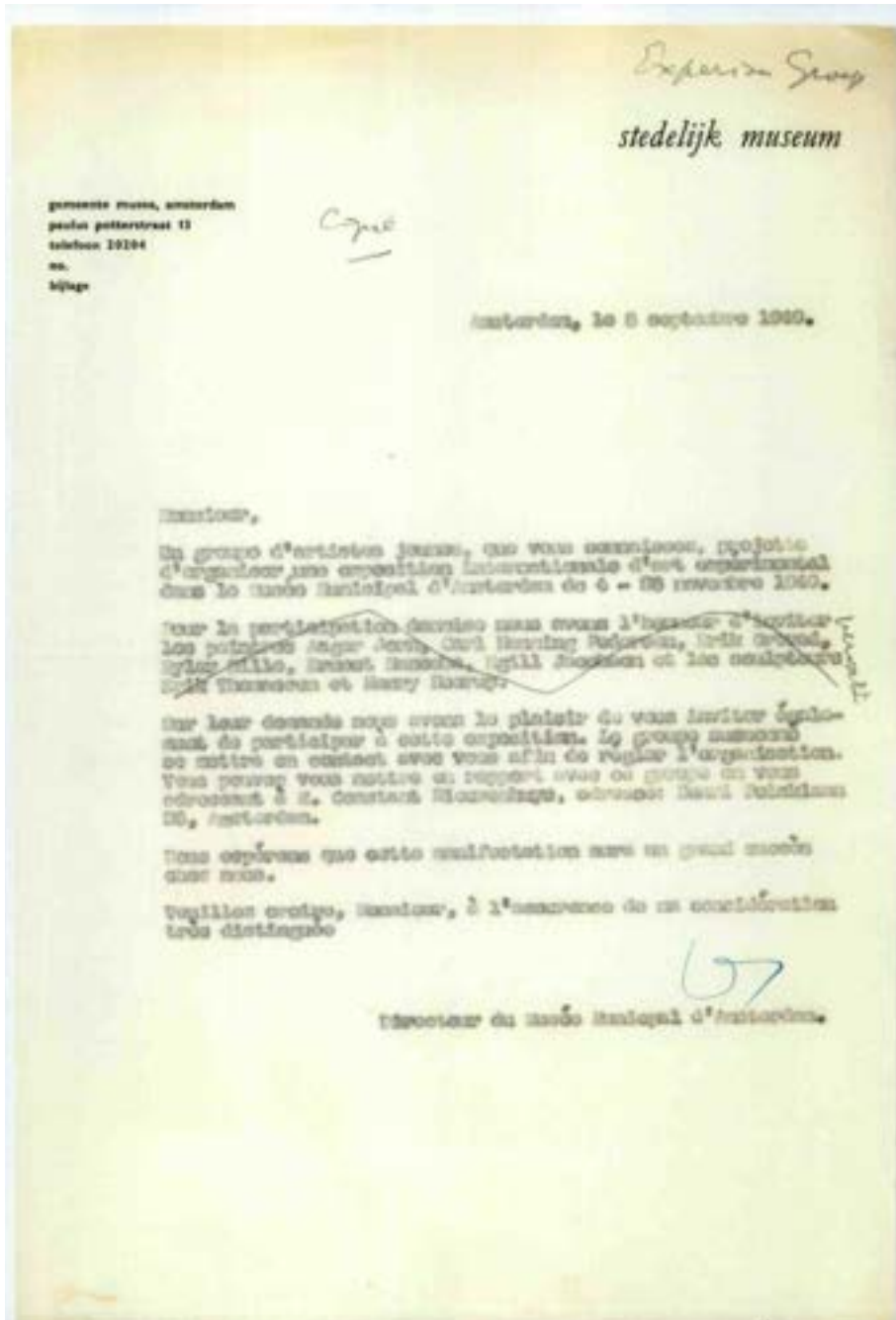
Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de nos salutations les plus distinguées

?

Directeur adjoint du Musée Municipal.

Appendix 1.4 Letter from Assistant Director of the Stedelijk to Asger Jorn agreeing to extend the invitation. 17 August 1949.





Appendix 1.5 Letter from Director Sandberg to Asger Jorn. This is identical to the letter sent previously, with no mention of the further three. 8 September 1949.

**APPENDIX 2:**

Please consult [www.ernestmancoba.org](http://www.ernestmancoba.org).

This is my working compilation of known works by Ernest Mancoba.

**APPENDIX 3:**

Transcribed letter from Mancoba to Jorn

My dear Asger,

It was a happy surprise to find you at home the other day for me & to exchange a few remarks about our strange so-called developed world of today – So far as I am concerned I [believe] we are engaged up to the eyes in such a confusion that it will take a long time to find ourselves standing on our feet and to see straight before us to build a civilisation that will eventually [merit] the name and compare with the great efforts of the civilisations of the past.

I find it puerile and pointless to reject our past heritage and the experience of humanity that history has revealed – In order to see more clearly ahead of us we must know where we come from.

That is the reason for my interest and enthusiasm for the effort you have undertaken to publish the book on the Art expression of the people of Northern [illegible]. There is no doubt that each people has to make its contribution to the general knowledge and largess of all mankind.

However courageous and hopeful the Christian enterprise was at its beginnings, today it can no longer serve as a base for a new society. Man has to believe in himself or he is doomed to disaster from [cut off] of the earth and make room for other and more intelligent creatures.

The other day in my looking [illegible] at some of Wonga's school books I fell upon a very interesting description of the first contacts with Christianity of a Danish King in the court of Charlemagne – It seems to have been of primary importance for the Church to efface and to destroy the cultural heritage of the Danish people and to place them under the domination of a theocracy controlled by Rome. The harm had been done and even the attempt of the Lutheran emancipation from the Papacy only resulted in the reinforcement of the Bourgeoisie stranglehold of economic and spiritual forces of mankind.

For our society to find its equilibrium and get rid of its vestige, it will need enormous courage not only of individual effort but also of collective attempt of collaboration by people who still believe in man. But for the moment at least it seems evident that each one of us is today praying [to] God to save his head first and the Devil to take care of the last imbecile.

Anyhow whatever may be the destiny of man, I find it more amusing and more "edifying" to hope for a world that will perhaps always be a dream world – but I believe there have been periods in history where the dream [cut off] fact – I think the Greeks really lived their dream until Socrates destroyed their illusion. But while the "dream" they materialised the poetry of existence which has given so much courage to future generations.

Now dear Asger all of us send you our best wishes and also to your family

Very truly, Ernest Mancoba



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## NOTES

1. For example: Dr. Z. Pallo Jordan, South African Minister of Arts and Culture, "Ernest Mancoba in historical perspective", in Thompson, B. 2007; Hassan, S. 2010; Blackman, M. 2014; Aicon Gallery 2017; Cotter, H. 2017.

2. An open letter was first distributed at the 6th Dakar Biennale in May 2004, and subsequently published in *Third Text* (Araeen 2005).

3. Bille wrote the essay for Mancoba's retrospective at Holstebro Kunstmuseum, 1969. He collected works which he subsequently gifted to the Museum Jorn. In a letter to Elza Miles in 1993, he spoke warmly and respectfully of Mancoba and his art.

4. "In 1949 Sonja Ferlov and Ernest Mancoba, who by then were members of Høst, took part in the last exhibition. An ink drawing by Ernest was used for the front page of the catalogue. ... At the time of the exhibition Ernest Mancoba was invited to participate in the famous CoBrA exhibition under the auspices of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Willem Sandberg, the director, curated it. Dissatisfaction arose among Høst members on account of Sandberg's selection. Although Mancoba was initially attracted to CoBrA because of its proclaimed openness and inclusiveness, he declined the invitation. The following year, however, he and Ferlov joined CoBrA." (Miles 1997). Mancoba and Ferlov only participated in Høst in 1948; that year's catalogue cover was by Else Alfelt (although an image of a Mancoba sculpture was included in the catalogue). The last sentence, about Mancoba "joining CoBrA the following year" is meaningless for its lack of detail.

5. Judging by the quantity and detail of letters between Jorn and Constant, found in Constant's archive at RKD.

6. This photograph was found in the VAM archive by the librarian.

7. Though Ferlov was not among the seven invited artists, six of them (excluding Mancoba) wrote to the Stedelijk Director to ask that the invitation be extended to three other artists, including Ferlov. The Assistant Director agreed, but when the Director wrote again, he repeated (word for word) his initial invitation.

8. The interview with Alex Laird in 1993 concerned fellow South African artist Gerard Sekoto. A copy of the transcript is in Elza Miles' research archive for *Lifeline Out of Africa* at Johannesburg Art Gallery. Mancoba says "Yes I would say first of all in Paris there was an inclination for an absolute disintegration of all the citizens so that it was very very complicated for a man to find where he spiritually belongs because, in France, people are very logical and they have to be hard headed and very individualistic. And Sekoto longed for this, and he couldn't get hold of where he could belong to a spiritual tribe, in the same way as when I belonged to the Høst group, CoBrA group. I felt I was belonging to a tribe – spiritually, which belonged to me also." (quotes cleaned up for typos and spelling errors by the transcriber).

9. Near the city of Pietersberg, now renamed Polokwane, in the north-eastern part of South Africa.

10. When the Johannesburg Art Gallery acquired the work from the Anglican Church on 4 November 1996, it was still called the *Bantu Madonna* (JAG archives). I do not know when it was renamed or by whom.

11. Sculptures made subsequently also used black bodies as models and subjects – see Appendix 2.

12. See for instance: *Star Newspaper*, 8 June 1936, and Obrist 2003.

13. Guillaume was the main dealer of African objects to Dr. Alfred Barnes, and the objects illustrated in the book are those in the Barnes Foundation, USA.

14. Mancoba belonged to the Fingou people by ancestry.

15. Helga Foght ran an industrial textile printers in Denmark which was highly influential particularly between 1945 and 1965. She invited artists to work with architects on commissions. Foght's main interest is said to be abstract patterns (Information thanks to Johanne Løgstrup, PhD candidate). The textile could have been commissioned for a restaurant.

16. Typed notes headed "Artcurial 1993" were found in Elza Miles archive at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. I believe it to be from the exhibition *Retour sur Cobra* at Galerie Artcurial, Paris, though I have not been able to trace the original document to date.

17. Ernest Mancoba, Speech on receiving honorary PhD, University of Fort Hare, Eastern Cape, 13 May 1996. A copy of the handwritten speech is found in Miles's archive, JAG Archive.

18. See the artist's interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist at Art Basel Miami Fair salon talks, 9 December 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45uAkSitCTK>.

19. I wrote to Stokvis but have yet to hear back.

20. Sue Williamson's book *Resistance Art in South Africa* though written in 1989 as a protest during the apartheid era still casts a long shadow. Rhodes University lecturer and art writer Athi Mongezeleli Joja positions thinking about Mancoba's *Black Madonna* as a way of thinking about the student protests that were happening at the time he writes in 2016. Joja claims that because Mancoba was educated by the Anglican Church, he was allowed to make the *Black Madonna*, but that Mancoba's true intention was to make a "radical intervention" to reject the white institution from within. According to him, writings by art historians such as Elza Miles and Rasheed Araeen ended up co-opting the artwork into white art history, continuing to distort black history. (Talk during the seminar "The Art of Curating Mancoba", Institute of Creative Arts, based at the University of Cape Town, September 2016 [https://www.google.co.za/search?q=ica+curating+mancoba&rlz=1C1BLWB\\_enGB580GB580&oq=ica+curating+mancoba&aqs=chrome..69i57.6817j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.co.za/search?q=ica+curating+mancoba&rlz=1C1BLWB_enGB580GB580&oq=ica+curating+mancoba&aqs=chrome..69i57.6817j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)).

21. Letter to Elza Miles, 2 March 1993. Miles' archive, Johannesburg Art Gallery

Thanks need to start with the Van Abbemuseum for having me as a Deviant Practice researcher. My special thanks to Nick Aikens, curator, and Relinde ter Borg, librarian.

In South Africa, thank you to Tara Weber, curator at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, and Elza Miles. The Johannesburg Art Gallery, underfunded, under-resourced, is a treasure which is sadly under-appreciated.

Other museums and institutions that made my research possible include the Stedelijk Museum, the CoBrA Museum, the RKD (Dutch art history archive), the Statens Museum for Kunst (Danish National Gallery), and the Jorn Museum. In particular I would like to thank Hilde de Bruin at the CoBrA Museum and Lucas Haberkorn at the Jorn Museum.

Thanks also to The Mikael Anderson Gallery, who represents Mancoba's estate. It was at the Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, who hosted an exhibition of Ernest, Wonga and Sonja's works, that I first saw Ernest's work; I'm thankful for their ongoing support in this and my other projects.

Thank you also to Juliette Reijnen and Johanne Logstrup who translated Dutch and Danish documents respectively for me, to my fellow Deviant Practice researchers who inspire me with their passion, creativity, and intellectual rigour. Finally, my love and thanks to my husband, Kevin Fellingham, who read through many drafts of the paper, always with honesty and encouragement.



**NO OPENING  
NO CLOSING**

**The infinite  
archive of  
René Daniëls**

**Sara Giannini**

## **BEFORE OR AFTER**

You find yourself in a room whose walls are covered with a chessboard of closed notebooks. It must be hundreds of them. The notebooks have rigid covers of different sizes and colours, although mostly black. You cannot touch them. In the middle of the room a small vitrine shows one of the notebooks, opened on a double spread. On the right page there is a drawing in blue that almost looks like another version of the room. A human figure on a sail boat is at the centre of the page, surrounded by number cards, a calendar of sorts distributed onto four sections.

You haven't noticed before but there is music playing in the room.

You know, I could write a book  
And this book would be thick enough to stun an ox  
Cause I can see the future and it's a place  
About 70 miles east of here. Where it's lighter  
Linger on over here. Got the time? Let  $X = X^1$

You turn back and you read that the music comes from a compilation of favourite songs by René Daniëls, the author of the notebooks. Every day the room will open a different notebook.

You contemplate the blind books in front of you. There is so much that we don't know.



## PREMISE

The following text is an account of the year spent researching the archives of the Dutch artist René Daniëls at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, in the framework of the first edition of their Deviant Practice Research Programme (2016/2017).

Daniëls' complex and mysterious work weaves a theory of the unfinished and the infinite through a humorous approach to space, time and language. His drawings and paintings can be read as a meta-critical reflection on art history and museology, stripping off the myth of chronology and definition that is foundational to Western epistemology: they “strip the muse of all her clothing again and she shows us her Genial zones. That quite amuses her” (Daniëls 1983, p. 16). Twenty-five years ago curator Ulrich Loock intercepted in Daniëls' “representation of the representational device (...) the potential for a precise institutional critique” (Loock 1993, p. 67). With the multi-fold research and curatorial project *OWNNOW: René Daniëls*, I wanted to actualise this potential and question the taxonomy of the archive in which his works are kept. The initial research question asked: What happens if we subtract Daniëls' works from the tyranny of historical time and look at them as portals to lateral dimensions of knowledge?

The encounter with René and his infinite work confronted me with word-games, riddles and oracles, appearing to me across conflated time/space dimensions. It conducted me on a philosophical and on occasion spiritual journey through altered conceptions of time and language that has profoundly changed how I perceive the human condition. I hope this text will offer you a small taste of what I saw and experienced.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1 René Daniëls, *Grammofoon*, 1978, courtesy Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

## THE STORY

Starting from a place where we will not go back, I would like to provide you with an introduction on René Daniëls according to art history books.

René Daniëls is a visual artist based in Eindhoven where he was born in 1950. Predominantly active for about ten years between the late 1970s and 1980s, Daniëls is regarded today as one of the most influential and inspiring artists of his generation. Trained at the Art Academy in Hertogenbosh, René Daniëls came to prominence in the late 1970s with almost expressionistic paintings of bookcases, super-8 cameras, gramophones, and records (1977-78)(Fig. 1). The attention towards these means of reproduction represented for Daniëls a way to break with the “emotionalism that was quite the thing then” (Daniëls, 1983) and embrace distance and repetition, two core aspects of his practice in the years to come.

From this first group of works, Daniëls moved on to more dreamy paintings of swans, mussels, and eels, ironically entitled *La Muse vénale* (1979-80)(Fig 2, 3). *La Muse vénale*, a verse borrowed from Baudelaire’s poem *Les Fleurs du mal*, inaugurates Daniëls multifaceted relationship with language. This series is followed, between 1980 and 1984, by increasingly humorous and enigmatic works. By using portmanteau words in-and-out of the canvas, the painted space starts to assume strongly associative and conceptual connotations. It becomes a form of visual poetry, as Daniëls would call it, in that “former no-man’s land between literature, visual art and life” (Hoek 1996, p. 52). These paintings bear witness to his admiration for the cold and humorous conceptualism of Duchamp, Picabia, Magritte and Broodthaers, as well as for the concrete poetry of Theo van Doesburg and Guillaume



Figure 2 René Daniëls, *La Muse Vénale*, 1979, courtesy Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



Figure 3 René Daniëls, *La Muse Vénale*, 1979, courtesy Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



Figure 4 René Daniëls, *Twee I's strijdend om één punt* (*Two I's Fighting Over One Dot*), 1985, courtesy Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Apollinaire, who also appear in a number of them. Language and image are never caught in an illustrative manner. As the theorist Jacques Aswad elegantly described, “with Daniëls, instead of limiting or reducing each to one ‘good meaning’, the readable and the showable multiply each other’s possibility of meaning” (Al Solh & Aswad 2007, p. 10). To this period belongs the series *De revue passer* (*Passing under review*), the *Palais des Beaux-aards* (a pun between the French Palais des Beaux Arts and the Dutch word *boosaards*, meaning ‘malicious people’), *Alzumeazume* (a possible anagram of “la muse s’amuse”) or the *Hollandse nieuwe* depicting two herrings devouring each other in an infinite loop.

The meaning of these compositions is always ambiguous, suspended and open, as the series of *Two I's Fighting Over One Dot* brilliantly suggests (Fig. 4). These paintings visualise the signification struggle that plays a central role in Daniëls’ artistic research. In this struggle, the signifier and the signified are always unhooked, searching for and fighting over one another. The series reminds us that identity, the I, is neither identical nor singular, but always an uneven multiplicity.

Curiously I first encountered the work of René Daniëls through the alter ego of the Dutch/ Lebanese artist Mounira Al Solh, Bassam Ramlawi. Ramlawi is a painter and juice vendor based in Beirut, who, like Mounira, was trained in the Netherlands. Depicting characters and stories from the streets of Beirut, Ramlawi’s paintings are sprinkled with Daniëls-inspired motifs. Somehow the polyphonic meanings of René Daniëls handed Mounira Al Solh a vocabulary through which to come to terms with the schizophrenic experience of life.

Over the years Daniëls loosens the lyrical and symbolic tone of his canvases and ventures into a more



diagrammatic language. In 1984 he starts painting what became his signature feature, the schematic image of a space in perspective, mostly known as the bow-tie, but otherwise perceivable as a human figure, and very often as an exhibition room with windows, doors, and paintings on its walls (Fig. 5, 6). These paintings can be seen as “metonymic units” (Loock 1993, p. 68) in interconnection. Daniëls repeats and manipulates these spatial diagrammes in association with polysemic and mysterious titles, elaborating a meta-discourse on representation and interpretation. As again Aswad noticed, “far from being the exploitation of a single discovery, repetitions represented a field of unexplored possibilities” (Al Solh & Aswad 2007, p. 15). In semiotic terms, they trigger a chain of *interpretans* that runs on the surface of signification without ever falling in the limited depths of meaning. Evoking Pierce’s concept of infinite semiosis, the bow-tie is a sign that always refers and deviates to something else. It is semiotised through other infinite signs as if in a state of hallucinatory wandering. One painting leads to another painting which leads to a drawing which leads to a note, which leads to a title, which leads to a thought in the mind of the viewer and so on.

The “interconnection of figurations” (Loock 1993, p. 68) occurs not only among more paintings but also within the same one through the technique of the “fleece” (Fig. 7, 8). The fleece, a term coined by Daniëls himself, evokes the translucent effect of a candy wrapper and consists in layering the canvas through subsequent strata of semi-transparent colour. One painting is therefore never singular, but plural. Transparency is a veil, which hides while revealing “unknown languages”.<sup>3</sup>

Daniëls used to work on his paintings, layer after layer, even after exhibiting them. He would change their titles too, avoiding the trap of definition and finitude. In this



Figure 5 René Daniëls, *De terugkeer van de performance* (*The Return of the Performance*), 1987, private collection.



Figure 6 René Daniëls, *Painting On The Bullfight*, 1985, collection of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



Figure 7 René Daniëls, *Landschap*, ca.1987, courtesy René Daniëls Foundation, Eindhoven.

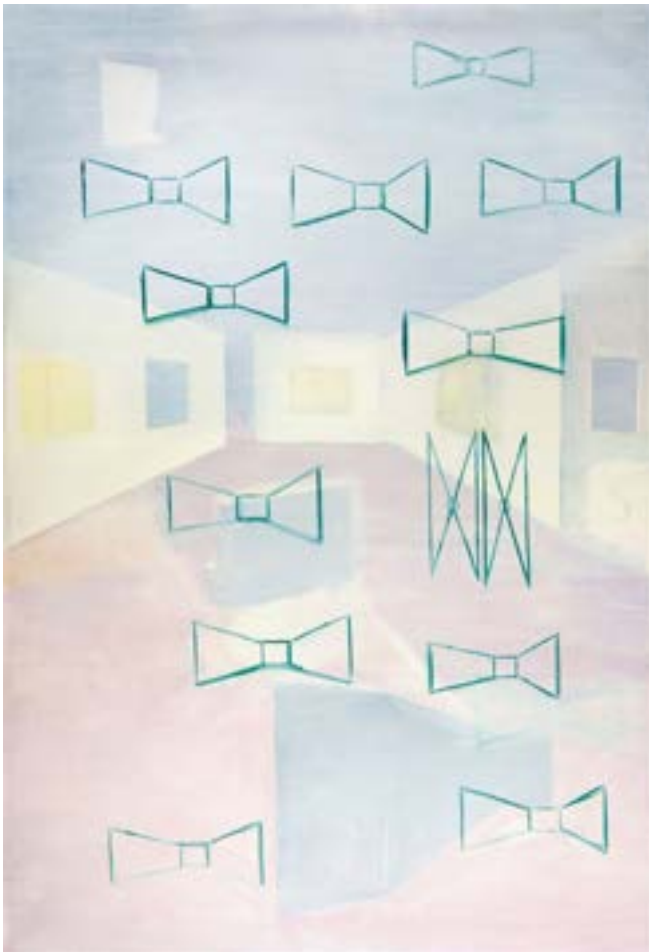


Figure 8 René Daniëls, *Het Huis*, 1986, courtesy Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

sense every Daniëls is untitled and unfinished. His work is radically open (Eco 1989): open to interpretation but also to infinite rework, renaming and transformation. This *modus operandi* resonates with Édouard Glissant's "right to opacity". In his *Philosophy of Relation*, Glissant confutes the notion of identity as a transparent monolith. Each of us is the dynamic result of a multiplicity of beings in relation:

If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. We need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction. (Glissant 1997, p. 189-190)

Over the years Daniëls has carried out a steady deconstruction of space, time and language, the main categories through which transparency and scaling are possible, and in 1981 he stated: "The art world is afflicted by a disease: (...) interpretation becomes too much unambiguous, so that a label can be put on you as quickly as possible. I oppose that. What I don't want is becoming increasingly clear" (Tilroe 1981, p. 24-25). But, notwithstanding his criticism, Daniëls' career takes off and he participates to the most important shows of the time including Rudi Fuch's documenta in 1982.

## THE RUPTURE

As is widely known, in 1987, at the age of 37, Daniëls was struck by a severe brain hemorrhage, which left him physically challenged and without the use of speech. After this terrible accident most of his studio went into the care of the newly established René Daniëls Foundation<sup>4</sup>. At the request of the foundation, the Van Abbemuseum catalogued, documented, and archived the hundreds of drawings, sketches, notes, and paintings that now form the René Daniëls Archive.

The year 1987 became a straight demarcation line in the narrative surrounding Daniëls' life and work, now split between a 'before' and an 'after'. The trope of the rupture satisfies the archival imperative to be complete and coherent, to create regions of authenticity and distinguish between the known and the unknown, the immutable and the mutable, the past and the future. Despite this imperative however, the René Daniëls archive is not complete, let alone homogenous. It contains a wealth of untitled, undated, and unfinished materials, which, because of their undetermined status, have never been shown or, if they have, raised doubts over their legitimacy. As Daniëls has always been very well aware, the symbolic and financial economy of the art world does not cope well with slippery matter, for it rather lies on producing identity as value. Antithetically, his radical idea of the open work has instead contributed to complicate the discrimination between finished/ unfinished, titled/ untitled. The intrinsic 'unfinishedness' of his work, both on a visual and linguistic level, pushes the discourse away from historical/ exegetical categories towards unexplored epistemological paths.

Borrowing a metaphor first employed by Umberto Eco (1997), we can approach this defying un-definability

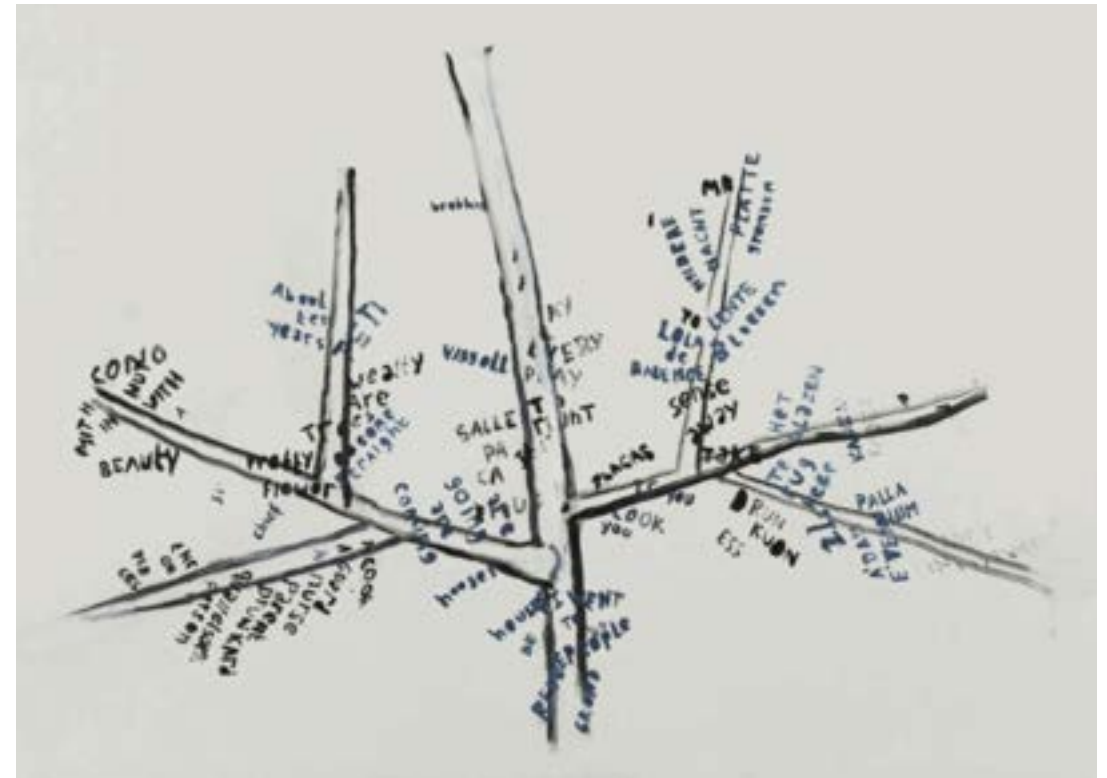


Figure 9 René Daniëls, *Zonder titel*, 1987-1988, courtesy René Daniëls Foundation, Eindhoven.



Figure 10 René Daniëls, *Zonder titel*, 1985, courtesy René Daniëls Foundation, Eindhoven.



Figure 11 René Daniëls, *Zonder titel*, 1985-1987, courtesy René Daniëls Foundation.



Figure 12 René Daniëls, *Zonder titel* (performance), 1985-1987, courtesy René Daniëls Foundation.



through the platypus. When brought to Europe in the eighteenth century, this peculiar being – a reptile and a mammal that lays eggs all at once – stirred up an eighty year long negotiation epopee among the scientific community of the time. At first it was seen as made of pieces from all other animals, but eventually the platypus ended up disrupting the taxonomic classification of the time. The anatomists who were examining the first specimen from Australia could not believe their eyes and were convinced that the platypus was a product of Asian taxidermists. Robert Knox, the Scottish anatomist who introduced the theory of transcendental anatomy, officially declared the platypus a ‘freak impostor’ while striving to find stitches on one of the skins he owned. The anatomists’ impossibility to perceive the platypus as a real living being stresses the morbid relationship that ties taxonomy to death.

As the artist and film-maker Mariam Ghani beautifully put it:

When a collection becomes an archive, the linguistic shift registers a transformation from a group of objects that are, to a group of objects that were. (...) In this sense, the archive is founded on a moment of passing into the past, a kind of death, and the impulse to archive is connected –as Derrida said, following Freud– to the death drive. The need to archive is connected to the fear of loss; but to archive something, it must be fixed in time, like a butterfly pinned in a glass case, and thus to archive is also to kill the very thing you feared to lose. (Ghani 2003)

The constitution of Daniëls’ archive promoted a similar movement of historisation, definition, and in a way canonisation. The archive was created to preserve and protect Daniëls’ artistic legacy, but in order to do

so it had to simulate his artistic death interrupting the process of becoming that pertains to his work. The peculiarity of Daniëls’ archive illuminates what one could call the archival paradox: the conflictual tension between death and the promise of immortality.



Figure 13 René Daniëls, *Zonder titel (Hier rust de kunsthistoricus) / Untitled (Here Lies the Art historian)*, no date, courtesy René Daniëls Foundation.

With my research project I tried to escape from this paradox and approach the René Daniëls archive as a living body – as a *corpus* – rather than as a rigid corpse. Like the platypus, Daniëls’ works are one and many at the same time, they operate continuous displacements and transfigurations, making ‘transcendental anatomy’ impossible. They call our epistemological systems into question, alerting us to be open to the non-understandable and the unknown.

This is why at some point I stopped visiting the archive, and I started visiting René Daniëls.

### ANOTHER BLINDSPOT: THE NEW

If an archive describes regions of authenticity and non-authenticity through a double movement of inclusion and exclusion, what is the status of that which lies outside of it? In the specific case of the Daniëls’ archive, the outside corresponds to all that has been produced after 1987. Falling off the legitimising timeframe, these copious works are not assigned a place in the archive and lack a clear identity, but are they perhaps less authentic René Daniëls?

Having been neglected for many years, a very tiny few of the ‘new’ works have recently been acquired by the Van Abbemuseum and shown in exhibitions there and elsewhere. However, they are normally presented as a small appendix to the ‘real’ body of work and as far back as 1998 still “no one knew how seriously to take these new works, (...) because they lack the intensity and consistency of the oeuvre as we know it,” according to a spokesman of the Van Abbemuseum at the time (Den Hartog Jager, 1998).

It is interesting that for the work of an artist to be considered the work of that artist, it should satisfy seemingly abstract parameters, like ‘intensity’ and ‘consistency’, whereas we know that interpretation and aesthetic judgment are always conditioned by time and space. Art that is made now may (or may not) resonate with humans (or non-humans) in 50, 100, or 1000 years. This is why, it is often mortifying when we expect art to address or even solve urgencies and emergencies, following this or that political, social and cultural trend. By doing this, we are using art as a currency. We blindly fall for the fiction of language, believing in the controlled delivery of a message. What the work of René Daniëls shows, on the contrary, is that discourse never ‘belongs’ to the speaking subject and is rather based on “unknown languages”. As my eternal source of inspiration, the philosopher/ actor Carmelo Bene once said:

We have to respect the obscure. Poetry that can be explained, it is no longer poetry. Theatre that can be comprehended would be in the slums of representation. Poetry does not belong to communicability, to society, and to the civic; it does not even belong to culture. Culture comes from “colo”, which means to colonize. Culture is written in the codex and is a representation of the state. (Bene & Dotto 2005)

### OLD NEW

While indulging in these reflections, I found a drawing in the archive. In this drawing, the words ‘old’ and ‘new’ appear first separated by a central line (‘the rupture’) and later meet within a texture of bricks (Fig. 14). This astonishing encounter, which I could only read as a sign from the past or, who knows, from the future, com-



pelled me to question chronological time and search for different conceptions of time that would help me unmask the illusion of linearity.

### TIME ENTANGLEMENT AND INFINITE SEMIOSIS

Chronological time – namely the idea of a past-present-future-causality – is what humans have adopted to come to terms with the mystery of life (and death). The sequential distinction between past, present and future, as is the self-other distinction, is nothing but an illusion dictated by the limits of our human perception/cognition. Chronological time is fiction at its finest, a deception that we hold dear to tame the ungraspable and unspeakable nature of time. Already in Ancient Greek *chronos* was just the empirical face of the true, eternal divine time, *aion*.

The time-arrow is the visual/ spatial representation through which we rationalise the flow of time into an ordered sequence of units. It is revealing in this sense how chronology seems to be tightly related to language. Both are linear constructions, where discrete units are placed next to each other and are assigned clear identity values. Just like the timeline orders time flow, semiotic units of expression and content partition the continuum of semantic, psychic and phonetic matter. Vocal enunciation and even more so writing and reading take place over time, along a timeline. There is growing evidence that our conception of time is influenced by the language we speak and that the directionality of our mental timeline is bound to the way in which we write and read in our own mother tongue. Mirroring the direction of our hand-writing, time may progress rightward, leftward or downward.

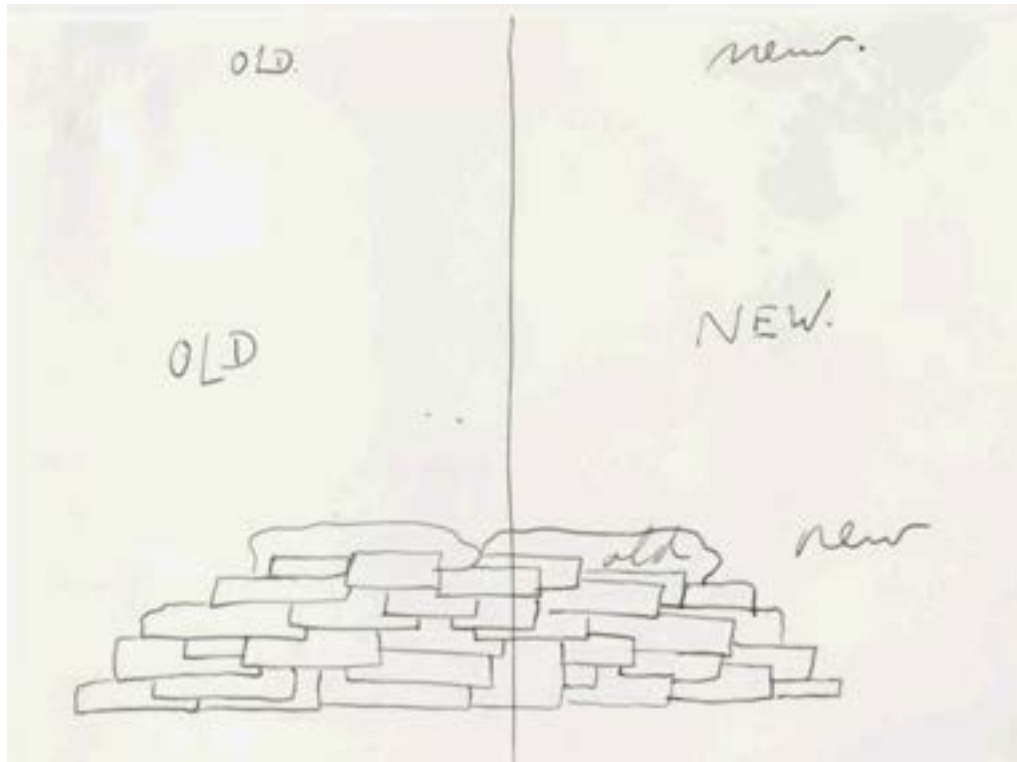


Figure 14 René Daniëls, *Zonder titel* (OLD. NEW), no date, courtesy René Daniëls Foundation.

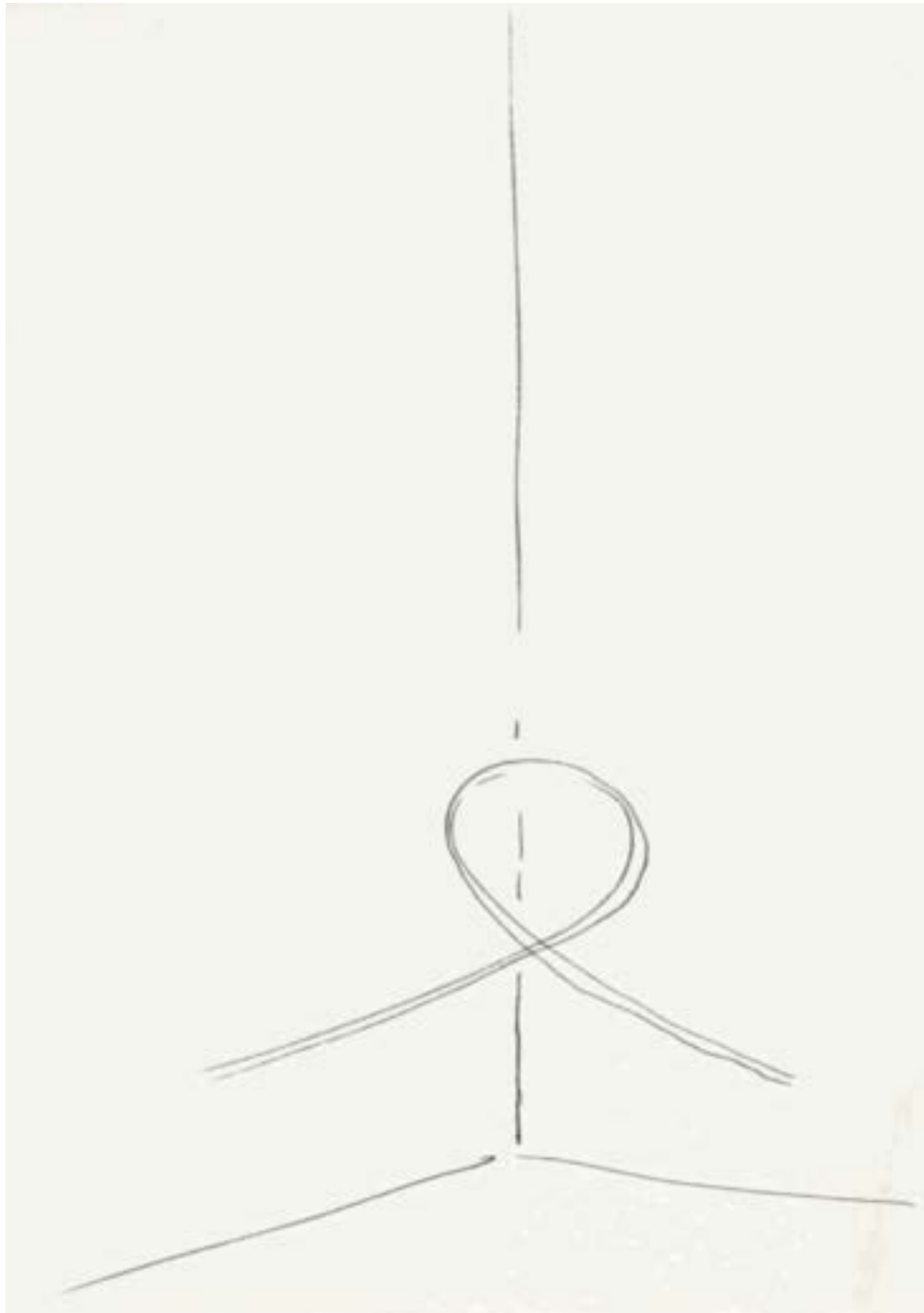


Figure 15 René Daniëls, *Zonder titel*, no date, archive of the René Daniëls Foundation.

For us linguistic animals, time and language are two variables that depend on one another, there is no language outside of (chronological) time as much as there is no (chronological time) outside of language as we know it. Language and chronology are the guardians of rational thought, both are essential in the construction of definition, finality and identity. It is not so striking therefore that in individuals affected by serious neurological or neuro-degenerative pathologies, the interconnected loss of temporal and linguistic competences causes a fragmentation of the self as a defined singularity.

Contemporary quantum physics is currently trying to prove the century-long mystical and philosophical vision of non-human/ non-linguistic time as this pan-temporality in which past, present and future all happen at the same time in the now. According to the theory of quantum entanglement, a group of particles are entangled when they are correlated in their properties. What happens to one affects what happens to the other. After being tested across space, physicists are now speculating on the existence of time entanglement, namely of correlations between particles spanning time.

Two events can become correlated in two different time-space fields in a way that it becomes impossible to say which is earlier and which is later. Each is the cause of the other. If we think through the idea of time entanglement, there is no pre-determination, but a continuous co-determination in the now, which is the only time that really exists.

What is also fascinating is that according to quantum physicists, it is the simple observation or measurement of the particle that may cause its transformation in a correlated field (either in space or time). The transfor-



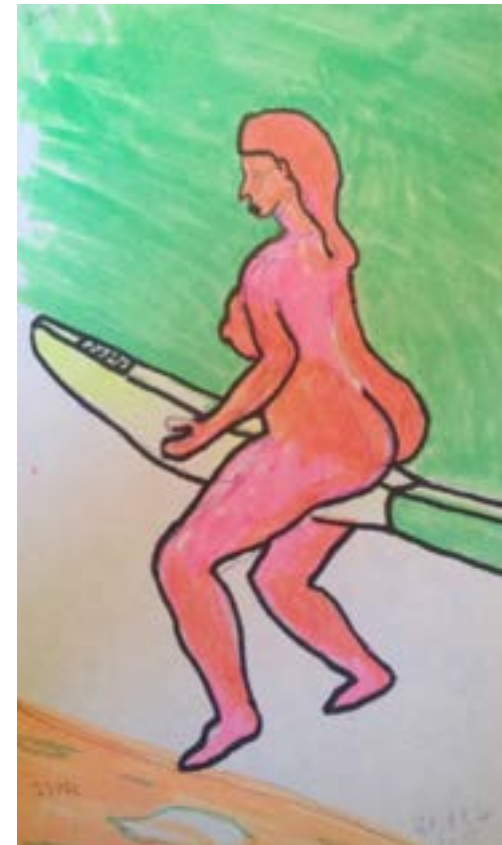
mational power of observation seems to corroborate the idea of infinite semiosis for which interpretation can change the past by looking at it in different ways.

After Daniëls was hit by the stroke, many critics have stressed the bitter and paradoxical fate of an artist who researched opacity and has later plunged into forced silence. However, I dare to pose an inverted question: What if Daniëls' theory of the unfinished and his 'misuse' of language have instead been co-produced by the future? What if the future has already happened? What if the 'new' and the 'old' are being co-determined in the now?

This co-determination is what my curatorial project at the Van Abbemuseum, entitled **OWNNOW: RENÉ DANIËLS**, aimed to tackle and put in practice through a series of performative encounters and an exhibition.

### STABBING THE ARCHIVE

The future provided me with the right tools to unpack the closed sequence of the archive (Fig. 16, 17, 18). It allowed me to create little holes through which to rescue the past from inertia, apathy and apparent death. Through these holes, I mobilised several drawings in the archive and connected them to a number of new ones, considering that drawing has meanwhile become Daniëls' main artistic medium. I created constellations where Daniëls' visual philosophy of space, time and language could cross-pollinate. I did not use captions, dates, nor a given linearity. One could not tell what was old, what was new, signed or unsigned, finished or unfinished. What one could see is the eloquence of Daniëls' denial of the archival apparatus, through the recurring presence of hystoria mysteria, the conflation of space/ time dimensions through the diagramme



Figures 16, 17, 18 René Daniëls, untitled sketch book drawings, courtesy the artist.

of the bow-tie, the manipulation of language as visual signifier, the repetition of doors and key-holes, the meta-critical reflection on the art system, the insistence on aphasic language and so on.

From this entangled perspective, the old/ new Daniëls provides us with the key to question chronology and taxonomy, unsettle definitions, and, like Glissant wrote, “displace all reductions”.

### OWNNOW | PERFORMATIVE INTERVENTIONS

These constellations formed the basis for a performative intervention scripted with artists Mercedes Azpilicueta and Stav Yeini. Together we experimented with a language that would not explain, label, and dissect but, with a sort of anti-language, that would relate and play with Daniëls’ works. The sessions started from a simple observation: if language is the bearer of time and time is bearer of language, what happens when we talk about art with aphasic tongues?

Mercedes Azpilicueta is a visual artist, performer and poet who works primarily with the affective quality of the voice, pushing language to its limits. Stav Yeini is instead a dancer and reiki practitioner, who in her practice blends contemporary dance with the activation of different senses and unconscious sensations.

The intervention consisted in a series of nine one-to-one closed sessions with people who hold a peculiar relationship to language. The participants came to us through an open call which we tried to keep as open, generous and undefined as possible. While formulating the open call we did not know how to name these experiences and we still have no word for it (Fig. 19). They were neither workshops nor performances but

something in between. It was important for us to create a space of no expectation, devoid of utility and finality.

During these encounters we experienced non-normative relations to language taking Daniëls’ drawings on display as a starting point. The drawings functioned as a common script among all the sessions, while each performance varied enormously with every guest, depending on their bodies, needs, desires, and moods. Each session became a very charged performative universe. All that entered this universe would be embraced and transformed by the alchemy of the performance. There was no outside. Every step, sound or insignificant gesture would acquire a symbolic connotation. Everything was natural and yet it was performed. Everything was a stage and hence there was no stage. Everything seemed scripted and yet it was not. Language was transfigured and re-invented collectively with each guest using words, vocal and bodily sounds, gestures, breath, and movement.

WE ARE LOOKING FOR:

Individuals of any age who hold a peculiar and deviant relation to language. Particularly...

- Those who feel that verbal language is inadequate;
- Those who oppose the constraints of grammar;
- Those who feel that feelings and thoughts are unnamable;
- Those who can speak the unspeakable;
- Those who misuse language;
- Those who communicate in silence;
- Those who master the art of coding and decoding language;
- Those that can transfer energy and channel identities;
- Speakers of non-verbal language, such as the language of dance, music or signs;
- Readers and interpreters of non-human languages, such as the language of stars, tarots, or animals.

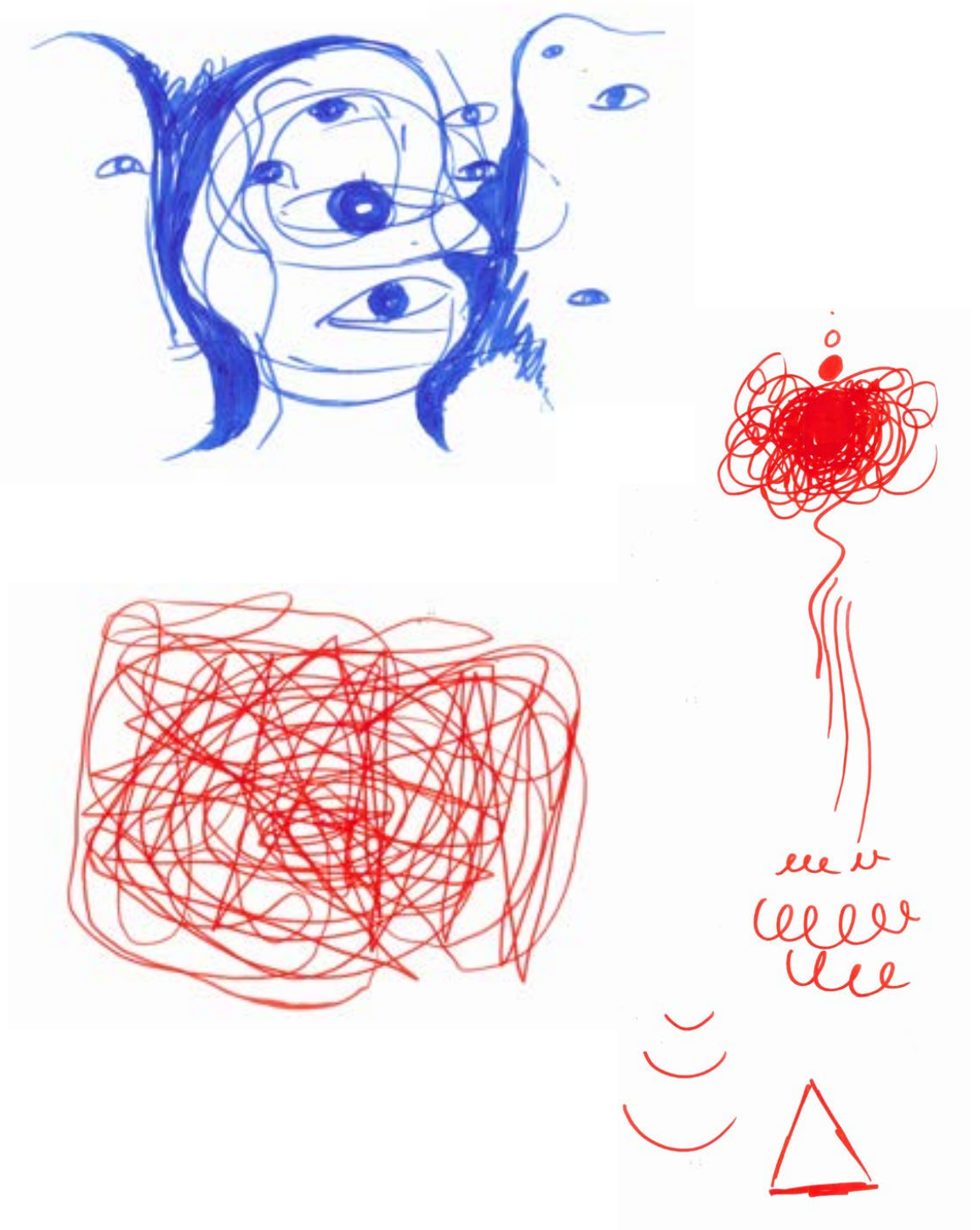
Figure 19 Extract from the OWNNOW open call.

The language we were tending towards has an affinity with glossolalia or speaking in tongues, a phenomenon in which people appear to speak in languages unknown to them. Such speech lacks any codified meaning and is often at the core of religious rituals. French philosopher Michel De Certeau defines glossolalia as the voice that possesses discourse (De Certeau 1996, p. 30), as a wild voice beyond meaning and truth that reclaims the potentiality to speak “within the apparatus that governs and distributes speech and its modalities” (De Certeau 1996, p. 39). With our sessions we attempted to infiltrate a space of pure enunciation within the folds of official discourse (the museum, the archive), carving out idiosyncratic microcosm outside the jurisdiction of codes, interpretation and history.

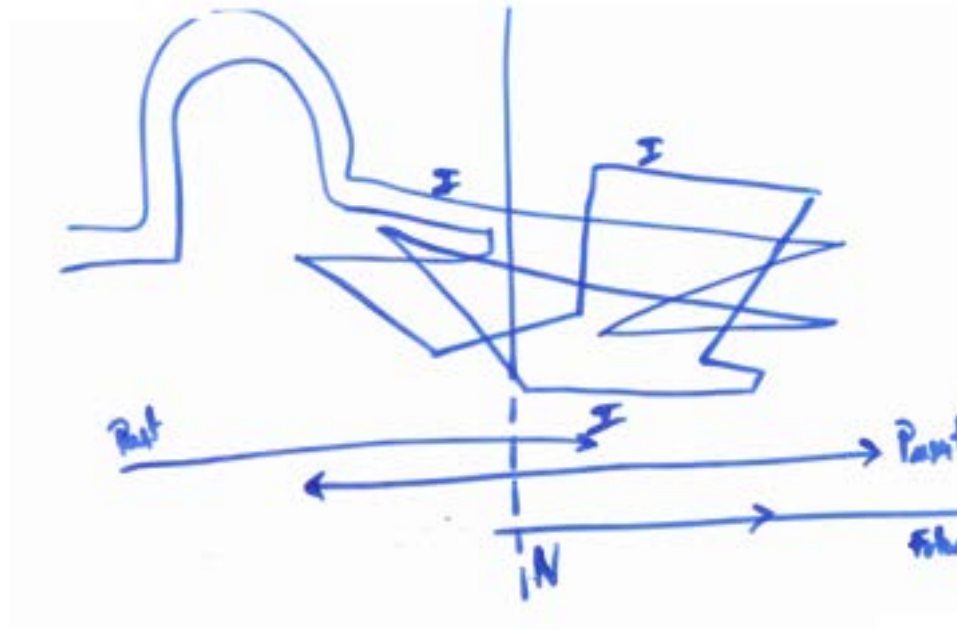
## WANDERING

Inspired by the beautiful and cryptic writings of the French radical psychiatric Fernand Deligny, wandering – both as a metaphor and practice – became the guiding principle of our sessions.

From the 1950s onwards, Deligny conducted a series of collectively-run residential programmes for children and adolescents with autism. He and his collaborators rejected to force the mostly nonspeaking autistics to standards of speech. Instead, they sought to develop “a practice that would exclude from the outset interpretations referring to some code” so that “the remainder, resistant to any comprehension” (Deligny 2015) might emerge. Deligny opposed language as a keeper of sense, identity and finality, denouncing the brutality of language as a defining power that prevents us to exist without names, attributes, and labels. According to the Brazilian philosopher Peter Pal Pélbart, whose advice was very precious in the initial



Figures 20 - 22 Scans of the “wander lines” drawn by some of our performance participants.

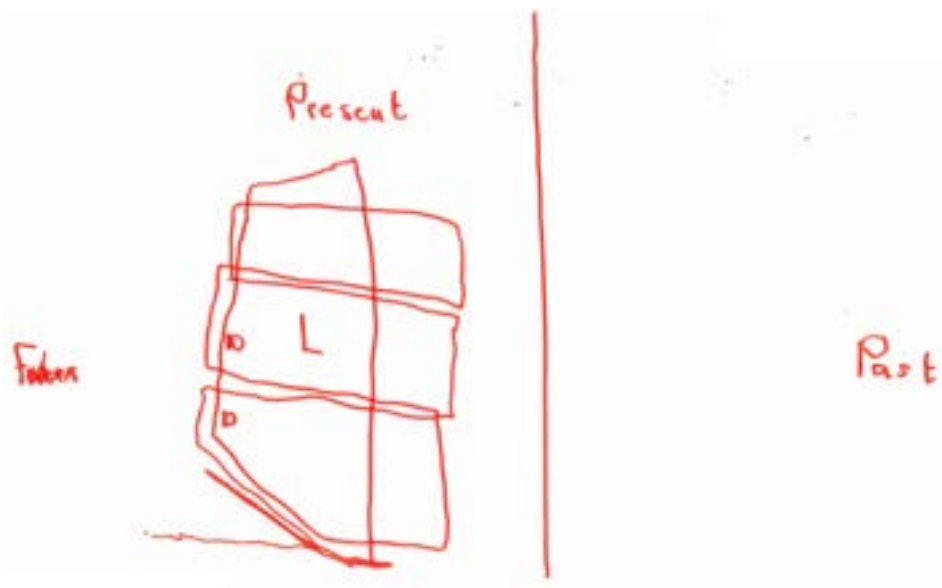


development of my research, “for Deligny the entire problem lies in how to avoid language that kills. Saying ‘that boy’ one already produces identity. How can one allow the individual to exist without imposing the He, the Subject, the Him, that whole series that we ascribe to individuals?” (Pelbart 2016).

To allow for the exhaustion of sense (language) and direction (time), wandering became the main group’s daily activity. Deligny would then focus on tracing the free trajectories that the children would undertake during the day, calling these ‘wander lines’. The cartographic tracing of the ‘wander lines’ soon became the epicenter of Deligny’s research. No attempt was made to regulate their movements, or to explain them.

Inspired by Deligny, together with our guests we wandered across space, language and time. Paraphrasing Peter Pál Pelbart: “The whole challenge was to be at the service of something we don’t know, can’t anticipate or predict. We must place ourselves in the present without hoping to entertain, fulfil, without the fear of nothing happening. The condition for something to happen is that nothing must happen, since it is precisely when something must happen that the most impalpable happenings run the risk of being aborted” (Pelbart 2016).

During the sessions, we invited our guests to trace their own wander lines, giving attention to the visualisation of time through space and of space through time. These maps are the only trace of the sessions, intended as a kind of post-script of the performances as well as a relational, translational and opaque document of the drawings that were on display (Fig. 20-24).



Figures 23 - 24 Scans of the “wander lines” drawn by some of our performance participants.

## EXHIBITION: CONSTELLATIONS AND PUNCTUATIONS

Shortly after the sessions we opened the exhibition to the public, adding to the constellation of drawings a small selection of paintings from the archive. The paintings punctuated the space in an unusual and non-linear positioning. With no captions or labels, they were suspended in their unfinished and infinite becoming. In the spirit of the workshops we invited the audience to appreciate the room as a “multi-dimensional space/ time capsule in which to move and be moved.”

## POST SCRIPTUM: NO OPENING NO CLOSING

Like I confessed to Peter Pál Pelbart when I started my research, I always found myself in the aporia of wanting to go somewhere I cannot go, wanting to be out of time and out of language, while I'm here, writing, with my words and with a sense of time.

To my slightly scared remark, Peter responded: “But Sara, aporia is a very beautiful place to be”. One year later, I can say that he was right, unresolvable contradiction is what keeps us alive and in love, searching to contradict ourselves more and more, and attempt, and wander, and fail, without any finality and any definition, with no opening and no closing.

*This is for you, my beloved mum.  
You are always with me, whoever, wherever,  
whenever we are.*

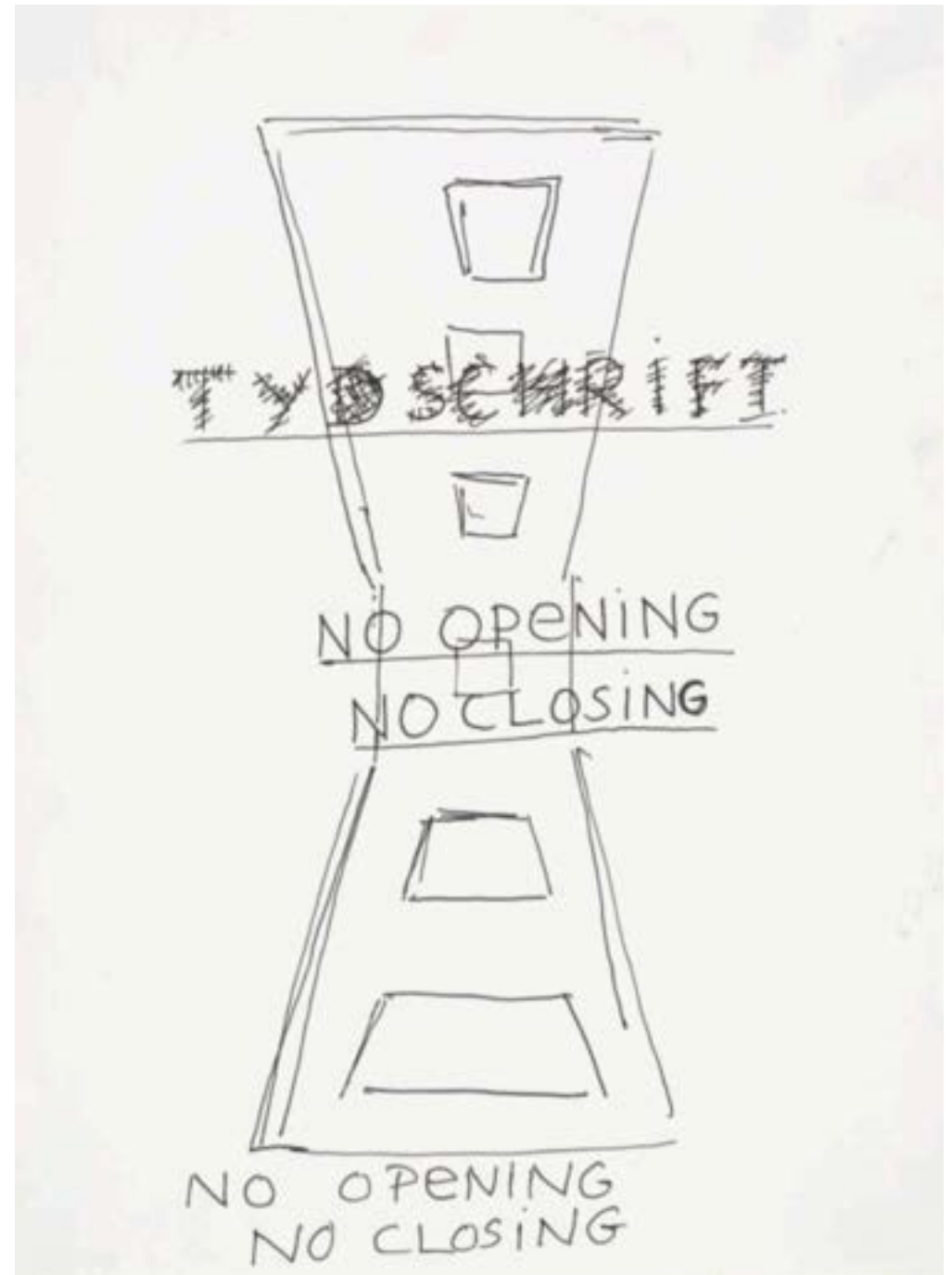


Figure 25 René Daniëls, *Zonder titel (No Opening No Closing)*, 1985-1986, archive of the René Daniëls Foundation.

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## NOTES

1. From the song Let X = X by Laurie Anderson.
2. I am deeply indebted and grateful to René Daniëls for his incredible work and his time-traveling artistic spirit, to Marleen Gijzen, the head of the René Daniëls Foundation, for her support, warmth and generosity throughout this year, to Nick Aikens for having been a gentle, thoughtful and acute research mentor, to Annie Fletcher for believing in and assisting me with the exhibition project, to Charles Esche and the whole team of the Van Abbemuseum for having selected my proposal and accommodated it in the best of ways, to Mercedes Azpilicueta and Stav Yeini for being exceptional, outwardly performers and human beings, to the participants of our obscure performances for their trust and incredible presence, to Andrea Verdecchia for his sharp, gifted mind, hands and soul, to Mounira Al Solh/ Bassam Ramlawi for introducing me to René Daniëls in the first place, to all future - past - present allies and enemies.
3. *Painting in Unknown Languages* is a (recurrent) title in Daniëls' oeuvre.
4. The René Daniëls Foundation was founded and is still run by Marleen Gijzen in Eindhoven.
5. *Unknown Languages* refers again to the series *Painting in Unknown Languages*.
6. On the relationship between language, writing/ reading direction and mental timeline see among others: Cooperride & Núñez 2016; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2016; Bylund & Athanasopoulos 2017.
7. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Catholic mysticism all talk about historical time as an illusion, envisioning instead a pan-temporality where there is no distinction between past, present and future. For contemporary mystical visions of time see Neale Donald Walsh, Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle, Abraham Hicks. (I thank Patrizio Di Massimo for these references).
8. The first clues of the idea of time entanglement are to be found in Don Page's and William Wootters's research in the 1980s. A team of Italian researchers at the University of Turin experimentally demonstrated the phenomenon in 2013 in a simulated universe of two photons.
9. <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/ownnow-1/>
10. The performances took place on 23, 24, and 25 June 2017.
11. Quote from the exhibition's wall text and press release. The exhibition was on view from 8 July through 3 September 2017.



# Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik

Brook Andrew

My practice has for a long period involved creating installations and working with collections in museums and contemporary art gallery contexts.<sup>1</sup> However, the Deviant Practice project at the Van Abbemuseum (VAM) encouraged me to take a further step which led me to radically reconceive how artworks can be presented. This paper reflects on some of the choices and processes involved in my practice-led research.

Originally titled *Inside the Depths of the Unknown: New Lines of Interpretation*, the research used the Van Abbemuseum collection and archives, as well as my own archives, to understand how narratives within a Western heritage institution such as this museum are produced, who are the main protagonists in those narratives, who is excluded and how we might reorient towards different ways of seeing and understanding. This ultimately led me to present *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik* at the Van Abbemuseum from September to December 2017 – a single gallery installation combining works from the museum’s collection and archives with my own work and archives.<sup>2</sup>

As a ‘child of the colony’, my status emerges from a mixed cultural background: my mother is Wiradjuri from western New South Wales, Australia. Wiradjuri is one of over 300 Aboriginal nations in Australia, with more than 400 languages. My mother’s multiple identities



also include Nganawall and Celtic. My father is Celtic, with Jewish ancestry from London. Growing up in an ex-British colonial society, many Australians are very aware of the complex racial divide and histories such as the Frontier Wars and hidden actions of the human remains trade and slavery. These historical legacies are now surfacing at an exceptional rate, not to mention the extent of linguicide of Indigenous languages.

What exists within the VAM collection that represents me, my experience, my ancestors, my multiple identity and does it even exist in this collection and will this project work? Most of our cultural materials were taken from Australia during early British explorations and invasion as early as 1770. These items are priceless to the British Museum in London and the Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology as 'first contact' evidence and trophies. It is a complicated position considering the anthropological and historical context of the primitive lens.

In my own practice as an artist, I activate my archives and those of museums, to integrate them, or reflect on them – particularly in the context of societies with dominant narratives such as in French, Swiss, Dutch, Spanish, Australian and British museums. Today, some museums are finally asking questions such as: how do we represent this material in a contemporary world? What do we do with this collection and who does it have real meaning for?

My initial research into the VAM archive included looking at magazines, books and other archives held by the museum such as the Gate Foundation archive, now known as the Gate Archive. It reminded me of the South Project and its residual archive that now exists in my storage unit in Melbourne. The South Project involved artists, curators and writers such as

Anthony Gardner, Magdalena Moreno, Amelia Barikin, Léuli Eshraghi, Julie Tipene-O'Toole and myself. The South Project, like the Gate was an active hub, though its mandate was specifically to activate and collaborate across southern locations of our planet such as South Africa, South America, Australia and New Zealand, with an ambitious programme of exhibitions and events that culminated in the publication *Mapping South: Journeys on South-South Cultural Relations in 2013*<sup>3</sup>. As an artist who has a growing active archive, the chance to work with these collections, no matter how mundane or hidden they may seem, is an opportunity to unveil them.<sup>4</sup>

It was quite curious for me to realise the relative lack of representation of women or non-European cultures in the VAM. What is the foundation and now the legacy of the entire museum and its artworks and archive which is mainly male, European and Western? With the support of Nick Aikens and the museum team, *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik* has enabled a re-imaging, re-presentation, and I would even say, a replacement of the usual modes of displaying art and culture – to display a very Western and male collection in a subversive way which supports new ways of looking at these artists in the context of their relevance today.

The challenge was how to push this without the constant gaze and pressure of strict immovable museum collection or conservation restrictions, which are often driven by the monetary value of the artwork or the fame of the artist. The experiment was to shift desire, location, orientation and hence the power of well-known artworks in order for them to be displayed in complex and unconventional ways; to shift their meaning, wrap them in different forms of display and juxtapose them with archives of postcards, artworks and magazines that reflect anarchy and modernist



adventures in the Asia-Pacific and African post and current colonial territories.

When the opportunity arose for a proposal to work within the museum's collections and archives, the first action I imagined was that of subverting an artwork by Pablo Picasso – to empty it out, spill its guts. My original idea was to make a drawing on the wall that spilled out past Picasso's painting. In my eyes at least, this spilling had already occurred in the 2017 exhibition *Picasso Primitif* at the musée du quai Branly in Paris<sup>5</sup>, which I saw whilst I was researching the Van Abbemuseum project. It revealed that the legacy of Picasso's romance with the 'primitive' is still very much alive. The exhibition included didactic comparisons of Picasso's paintings of penis masks and bodies with 'primitive' artworks such as a bark painting from the Northern Territory. These bark paintings are religious ancestral figures. They hold important stories, meaning, and connections to education and religion that were reduced to mere 'primitive animalism'. I mention animalism here as a basic desire and romance for a primitive experience of Indigenous or peoples from places such as Africa. This animalism is a basic raw human action, and yet it is so often directed through the lens of primitivism at so-called 'primitive' peoples. Regardless of the intent of the exhibition, the result was very much a figurative and romantic comparison between Picasso and Indigenous 'primitive' cultures. It is a real problem when such stereotypes are still peddled in 2018. It may not have been the intention of the curator or the museum, but a general public may have seen it this way. I mention this exhibition to illustrate the power Picasso evokes as part of a dialogue, some kind of invisible romance with the uncivilised, poor primitives of the world. I wanted to alter the addiction to this infatuation: that became my agenda. I wanted to delete this experience all together. I wanted to kill

primitivism. I hoped to engage with different worlds, by upending the usual display of a painting in a museum or a cultural object, often emptied of any meaning, in a vitrine. What is the stale 'air' comparable to in these vitrines, behind these glass façades? Is it the invisible stuff of ideas and stereotypes that is vanquished?

When curator Nick Aikens and I proposed to present Pablo Picasso's painting *Buste de Femme* (1943) lying on its side with Wilfredo Lam's painting *Le Marchand d'oiseaux* (1962) hung above it, leaning out from the top on a 25-degree angle, the proverbial bar of how these famed artists are usually displayed had definitely been lifted. That the collection team permitted this was surprising considering that in 2015 my request to hang Francis Picabia's *La Révolution espagnole* (The Spanish Revolution) (1937) in my installation *A Solid Memory of the Forgotten Plains of our Trash and Obsessions* at the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid had been denied.<sup>6</sup> Maybe I should have insisted on a facsimile paste-up... I was juxtaposing British, Spanish and Australian colonial histories. The very act of inserting the Picabia seemed too risky as a political move alongside ethnographic and colonising ideas. Bizarrely, exhibiting Diego Rivera's painting *Vendedora de flores* (Flower Vendor) (1949) was approved. I was approached by locals during the opening querying my motivation for showing Rivera in the context of my work. They were worried I was further romanticising the painting in a Spanish context – a touchy subject. The context of a painting or idea, especially when it challenges the usual narrative modes, can throw up complex new stories. Furthermore, this deliberate playful and experimental act can have confusing outcomes. Who has the right to alter the state of someone's artwork to fit into an unusual mode of exhibiting art? Picasso's *Buste de Femme* was mobilised in the the 2011 *Picasso in Palestine* project at the International Academy of Art Pales-

tine as a device to challenge its and modernism's aura.<sup>7</sup> What does Picasso's *Buste de Femme* mean in the context of occupied Palestine? Likewise, what does the legacy and fame of Picasso mean for an Indigenous person in the Global South or a non-European? The 'hang' of the Picasso on its side demonstrated the Van Abbemuseum's willingness to push at the edges of normalised ways of viewing artists who are seen as the power foundations of the artworld – but by distorting the presentation of these paintings, it also breaks the histories they embody and the powerful narratives around, such as primitivism.



Figure 1 Pablo Picasso's *Buste de Femme* (1943) being unpacked in the Art Academy Ramallah, as part of *Picasso in Palestine*, 2011.



Figure 2 Pablo Picasso's *Buste de Femme* (1943) hung on its side in *Brook Andrew: Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik*, Van Abbemuseum, 2017. Photo: Peter Cox.

Waiting for the conservator to give the go-ahead was a light-hearted but tense moment for Nick and I. Once we received it, the rest of the installation came into order, like a jigsaw puzzle. The Deviant Practice project assisted in a physical, dynamic change in how one can experience the collections of the VAM. The painting *Fallender Engel* (1979) by Anselm Kiefer was installed on a ping-pong style table. Work by artists such as Anna Boghiguan, Yael Bartana, Gabriel Orozco, Nilbar Gures, and Keith Piper contributed in this unravelling. As recent additions to the museum's collection, they already challenge the VAM historical collection by their mere presence. 'Messy' archival material launched out and about these works, sitting as equals beside them. This included intense graphic novels, magazines and postcards from the VAM and my collections such as colonial tourist postcards, a list of carved Aboriginal



Figure 3 Brook Andrew: *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik*, Van Abbemuseum, 2017. Photo: Peter Cox.



trees that were removed from their sacred grounds in Australia, press photographs. I was hoping to create friction, by disrupting the graphic caricatures and journalistic writing of the magazines. The magazine themes often related to colonial impact and modern government endeavours, such as medical or food aid of Dutch and other European nations in parts of Asia and Africa. Indeed my own archive developed through my own curiosity growing up and experiencing the world as a 'child of the colony'.

This background comes through my Aboriginal family, my grandmother and grandfather's country, and the connections to culture after intense colonial oppression. Vigilance is required to regain cultural knowledge which is now stored within international museums. This mess is evidenced in the non-representation of Indigenous people in the Australian constitution which is directly related to how dominant cultures still view Indigenous cultures. Picking up the pieces of this mess often means collating the pristine artworks of the dominant other and re-coding them, disembodiment and reconfiguring them as a means to re-activate a different lens through which to view the world. At the same time, it means giving visibility to narratives and images that would otherwise become lost – such as my ongoing project to promote the story of important sacred ceremonial sites of the dendroglyph tree carvings, from New South Wales, Australia, whose purpose were for ceremonial and burial practices. The black and white patterns I used in this installation, and others, are derived from the tree patterns, transforming the space into an optical, ceremonial space, and forming the visual, political and conceptual ground from which the other artworks speak. Unfortunately, most of the trees I am referring to here were cut down and removed/ destroyed in the 1940s by pastoralists and anthropologists. The act of their disappearance from

the country and their appearance in museums like the Pitt Rivers in Oxford and the Ethnographic Museum in Geneva, is not only in the doctrine of primitivism but is evidence of the violence of colonialism that still affects real lives today.

In his remarks during the Deviant Practice symposium, Charles Esche asked what meaning does what takes place in the museum have for the person in the market for example? Who are we talking to? These questions reflect my own community politics surrounding cultural objects that were taken from Aboriginal countries: how and when we can exhibit sacred tree sections for example? To add to the context of confusion, some have men's ceremonial status and, in most cases, we do not know which are and which are not due to the nature of their violent removal en masse, the consequence of their public visibility and (non-sacred ceremonial) display in museums and some community centres in Australia. This act has changed cultural primacy, but in ways that some believe should be either left behind or moved into a future of other possibilities. The case study of the sacred tree A4 print out is evidence of the power and also invisibility of its contents, whereby the trees are both powerful and disempowered.

Other printed material from my Australia Council Research grant – *Representation, Remembrance and the Memorial* – reflects internationally on the Frontier Wars in Australia and allows visitors to read recent interviews I conducted with architects and historians such as Peter Eisenman, Youk Chhang from the Document Centre in Cambodia. These research interviews focused on international sites of trauma. There is also an interview with Indigenous Australians Neil Carter and Lyndon Orond-Parker on the promotion of a new idea to create a national memorial to the repatriation of Aboriginal human remains [National Resting Place].





Figures 4,5,6 & 7 Archival display, Brook Andrew: *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik*, Van Abbemuseum, 2017. Photo: Brook Andrew.

*Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik* also includes a full printed list of the sacred trees held in the Australian Museum in Sydney (which are not allowed to be seen by the public due to complex protocols). This list sits beside the monitor showing Mike Kelley's video *Extracurricular activity projective reconstruction (domestic scene)* (2000) with the back of Kiefer's painting as a backdrop; all on a table. I aim for these to work in unison to disrupt and reunite in a new historical context. Caricatures that appear in the magazines such as the anarchist magazine *Aloha* showing a sexualised caricature of a young Hawaiian girl and other archive printed material of Indigenous or colonised peoples, and even nudists, homosexual events and police riots, often offensive and full of parody, were juxtaposed alongside artworks such as Anna Boghiguian's Scissor drawings and screaming mouths. My painted red target circle placed as a background for Gilbert and George's *Red Fists* (1980) aims to discombobulate and, as Spike Lee would say, 'bamboozle' the complex gaze of the artists with a *trompe l'oeil* effect. The opposite projection of Keith Piper's film *The Exploded City* (1998) adds conspiracy to *Red Fists* and provides other linguistic opportunities away from a white male voyeuristic hegemony.

The experiment of *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik* could have manifested in numerous ways, it could be an ongoing and moveable project. It questioned the insertion and juxtaposition of the archive by placing often disturbing images and information such as the sacred trees and offensive magazines like *Aloha* in dialogue with artworks by established artists who were having with their own life situations such as Picasso with African masks or Gilbert and George with their desire and attraction to young men of colour. This is the problem: artists of colour are often defined by a primitive doctrine. The products of such uncivilised peoples, and the offspring, no matter how 'diluted' are still tar-



Figure 8 Aloha Magazine, issue No. 22. Courtesy Van Abbemuseum.

nished by the blood of our forebears, in many ways we are seen as mongrels. Hence, the so-called primitive objects on display throughout Europe and the world are in many cases presented as mere utilitarian or pagan religious objects. Hence, Picasso can paint subjects as he likes, and Kiefer paints the psychosis of his experience. How then does a subtle shift in juxtaposition change the wind, time and appearance and the manner in which we look? *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik* was an attempt to re-define a world timeline where the vitrine was shattered: objects and ideas from the Global South that are now in Europe, and now inserted in this installation, in amongst objects that have specific meaning for people in Holland or Europe.

The reason why I proposed that the Lam painting should lean out to gaze down at the Picasso, was to bring humanity and frailty to the paintings and the artists themselves, to subvert the status of the 'master' artist, and shift our visual perception and relationship to the paintings and their meanings that have often been driven by particular doctrines such as primitivism. The protagonists in this installation seemed to be destabilised by each other's presence, as if they were pushing each other about to form new places, spaces, disrupting timelines and legacies. The Western paintings were challenged by not only the unusual positioning, such as Kiefer on a table top, but also through the gaze of the many Indigenous and other peoples in the mixed-media photographs and printed media. This upended the usual clean museum style of viewing these 'masters', turning them in our mind and questioning their power. This installation was very much a testing ground to figure out how we can critically explore the impact of artists such as Picasso in the context of utilitarian and political archives? Who is Picasso now in this new, imaginative context? This was also a deliberate, polemic action to open up and unhinge the discourse around 'master' painters like Picasso in their complex relationship with 'primitive' art and cultures. The global conversation of primitivism in connection with many European artists, not excluding artists of the USA and Australia, is to upend Picasso from this dialogue, an attempt to dis-arm the work itself.

In the context of possibly chaotic archival material that includes interviews, magazines, photographs and also artworks, *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik* was an archival experiment to reveal what is often hidden and place these ideas and evidence of other events at the same level as artists from the modern, Western canon. The idea was to shift the world view and experiment with a different centre.



Figure 9 Brook Andrew: *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik*, Van Abbemuseum, 2017. Photo: Peter Cox.



Figure 10 Brook Andrew: *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik*, Van Abbemuseum, 2017. Photo: Peter Cox.

## NOTES

1. *A Solid Memory of the Forgotten Plains of our Trash and Obsessions*, part of *Really Useful Knowledge*, Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2015; *Evidence*. Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), Sydney, 2016.

2. See website: <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik/>.

3. Gardner, A. (ed.) 2013, *Mapping South: Journeys on South-South Cultural Relations*, The South Project, Melbourne.

4. I came across Keith Piper's video *Exploded City* (1997) in the Gate Archive and included in my installation at VAM.

5. <http://www.quaibranly.fr/en/exhibitions-and-events/at-the-museum/exhibitions/event-details/e/picasso-primitif-36915/>

6. <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/really-useful-knowledge>

7. <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/picasso-in-palestine/>



# THROUGH THE GATE / an(g)archivery

susan pui san lok

## PREAMBLE

To offer a sense of direction (possibly false), this presentation is in two halves, verbal and visual, each in turn comprising two parts. In the paper, I will share some archival preambles, followed by some preliminary findings, which are really questions met with further questions, and the prospect of future deviations. While the following notes are numbered, my path through the archive is far from linear, repeatedly diverted by potholes and rabbit-holes (or perhaps *I am diverting it*).

The doubled visuals will unfold and loop concurrently in a ten-minute experimental film called *an(g)archivery*.



susan pui san lok, an(g)archivery, 2018, 2-channel video, 10 mins



## SOME AMBLINGS

1. How might we come to know, or forget, the Gate Foundation archive, acquired by the Van Abbemuseum (VAM) in 2006? What questions arise from its integration, or disintegration, and dispersal into this museum's collection? I am not an archivist, but rather an artist given to archiverish impulses (Kristensen & Lok 2014)<sup>1</sup>; interested in systems of classification, orders of identifications, as well as misidentifications, disorders, omissions, ill-fitting categories, and the slippages between.<sup>2</sup> What happens when two archives converge? What might be gained or lost in the process? When one archive subsumes another, one 'active', one 'dormant', what mutual transformations might occur?

One might not ordinarily associate archives and collections with volcanic metaphors, but I rather like the idea of the archive as a sleeping, mountainous entity, that looms over and ahead, rather than beneath or behind the museum. The archive whose surface stillness may suddenly break, its shadows finding form, spewing smouldering debris and setting alight (both in the sense of burning and firing up) the ideas constructed at its foothills. Perhaps the curating of archives as the 'taking care' of objects should also carry the sense of a warning, a precaution – 'take care' – beware of histories erupting.

2. I am struck by the Gate's limited online presence. At [www.gatefoundation.nl](http://www.gatefoundation.nl), I find a single post by Admin, dated 10 October 2011, which Google translates as: "Welcome to Gate Foundation NL. This is the former Gate Foundation website. This foundation is no longer active. The information on this website may not be current. Read this information in the past. This website is in no way connected with the Gate Foundation".

And for emphasis in the sidebar: "Disclaimer: Gate Foundation no longer exists".

As is often the case when a web domain is vacated, the page is squatted by advertisers. The former Gate homepage now proclaims the virtues of various pens suitable for different sales scenarios (ballpoint versus fountain, writing instruments that resemble gadgets...), while the sidebar links to information on common medical conditions (anaemia, blood pressure, motherhood, hairloss...).

I find myself dwelling on this site – this schism – at which the Gate no longer dwells, yet nevertheless remains. The URL or Universal Resource Locator clearly no longer locates the resource. There is no forwarding address, no redirection or reason offered, just junkmail for discerning pen-lovers. On acquiring an archive, does the museum inherit both its material and virtual remains? Should such vacated spaces be salvaged? Such schisms read as part of the archive's afterlife. After the institution, where does the archive begin and end?

3. "The Gate Foundation was established in 1988 in Amsterdam with the aim to stimulate the communication between western and non-western art. Until its closure in 2006, the Gate Foundation had accumulated archives with documentation on more than 750 non-Dutch artists, plus a specialized library" (Medina 2010).<sup>3</sup>

This extremely short history is offered in the documentation accompanying two earlier projects on the Gate archive at VAM, by researcher and curator Gemma Medina. In 2010, *Gate Keepers* explored links between the so-called "non-Western artistic world and the Netherlands", involving "a presentation of (parts of the) archives by invited guests from those regions



in the world represented in the Gate Foundation archive as well as those who [were] not". In 2014, *Still at the Gate* focused on Latin-American art shown or produced in the Netherlands, in relation to the narratives proposed by the São Paulo Biennale curated by Charles Esche that year, inviting audiences to "dive into the Gate archive" and "[propose] re-interpretations of these projects from the present..." (Medina 2014).

Elsewhere, I come across a short interview with Sebastian Lopez, originally published in *ArtAsiaPacific* in 2001, which credits Lopez with "spearhead[ing] consistent art programming of artists from Other continents – artists born in the Netherlands, those resident in the country, as well as those from outside... Under Lopez's directorship, the Gate Foundation pursues research into contemporary and modern art and maintains an archive of documentation of work by Dutch and European artists of colour, and those from other continents" (Lopez 2001). The introduction highlights – but does not go on to discuss – several so-called 'Asian artists' who had exhibited at the Gate since 1997, including Bhupen Khakar, Wang Du, Sikay Tang, Ding Yi, Hong Hao, Tiong Ang, Yee-Ling Tang, Tariq Alvi and Ken Lum.

4. I begin to wonder how 'Asia' and 'Asian' might have been defined or articulated institutionally and curatorially across projects; how these artists, identified as 'Asian', may or may not at particular moments recognise themselves as such; and how they might be otherwise visible through the Gate and VAM.

I note that of the nine artists, only two are women: Sikay Tang and Yee-Ling Tang. I am interested in Sikay Tang and Tiong Ang in particular, as artists working in and between moving image and film in apparently very different ways. Tang appears to have moved from

contemporary art to commercial film, while Ang has incorporated film, televisual and theatrical tropes into his art practice. Do their paths converge?

I met Ang at the 2015 Guangzhou Triennial, where we were both exhibiting. Ang's collaborative site-specific multimedia installation and performance work, called *Universality: Decorum of Thought and Desire*, struck me as bold, complex, intriguing, generous, and funny. I wondered about Ang's clear identification as a Dutch artist (mindful of my own persistent hesitation to identify as 'British', 'Chinese', 'British-Chinese', or latterly 'British diasporic', though I will settle for 'British-born Hong Kong Chinese diasporic', if I must). I had to admit my ignorance of Chinese and East Asian migrations to the Netherlands. Could collaboration be a strategy to mitigate and complicate binary projections of 'Dutchness' or 'Asian-ness', to counter homogeneity with heterogeneity? Moreover, I wondered about the work. In the context of this Triennial's theme, *Asia Time*, questions of centricity, ex-centricity and displacement, were necessarily provoked. What, where and when are the geographies, histories and the contemporary, in and of the museum and archive? How might they become more eccentric (strange) or ex-centric (estranged, decentralised)?

5. In the absence of an overarching view or record of the Gate's history, scope and remains, the visibility of the Gate within VAM is confined to the elements that have been integrated as physical objects and digital data, namely the Gate's specialist library and artists' archive. Although I come across references to the Gate's collection of 3,000 books and documentation concerning 700, 750 or 900 artists, the VAM database only returns 2,041 entries relating to the Gate, of which 1,320 are publications. The number of artists' files integrated into the VAM is around half the

Gate's estimation. Such disparities may be attributed to multiple copies of books, differing criteria for creating and maintaining an artists' file (such as period of continued activity), or indeed human error and hyperbole. The Gate's materials span some 60 institutions, at least 15 languages, 100 countries and over 75 cities, contributing significant cultural and historical scope to the VAM library and resources. So what do numbers matter? If conflicting narratives raise questions of truth; of accounting and accountability, what is institutional truth? To whom does it belong? And to whom is it owed?

6. Periodically, the team of librarians and archivists allude to the abrupt acquisition and chaotic condition of the Gate's arrival at VAM. I hear about the Gate's sudden loss of state funding, and speculations as to why this happened. Faced with imminent closure, the Gate entered into discussions with various museums. VAM proposed to take the archive in its entirety (that is, the library, the artists' archive, as well as the institutional archive), and hence a sliver of its history, policies, processes, politics and practices. Discussions took place over several months, while books and artists' materials continued to arrive, accumulating in boxes around the office. Suddenly given two days' notice to vacate their premises (allegedly due to a failure to keep up rental payments), the process of transition became an emergency. As such, the archive was packed up in a panic, and delivered to VAM's door without warning. From an archival perspective, this was disastrous. Filing cabinets and shelves had been emptied haphazardly into crates, loose desktop papers swept into boxes, and loaded in a van along with the desks themselves. Any coherence was, if not destroyed, then disrupted or corrupted, compounding the archival work to follow, and obscuring the history of the archive itself.<sup>4</sup>

7. On my first pre-residency visit, I learnt that beyond the integrated collection of books and artists' files (a process that took two years), and the 31 boxes containing the uncatalogued institutional archive, there are a further 8 boxes of uncatalogued 'stuff'. The archive does not exist 'as a whole', but rather in dispersed parts, some visible (the catalogued library and artists' files), and some opaque (the uncatalogued boxes). Aptly enough, while sampling a box from the institutional archive, I happen upon a project called *Orientation*. *Orientation* proves elusive however, as the semblance of order falls away – papers are collated more or less chronologically, then jump a year or two, forwards and back again. How to navigate these unwieldy contents? A few months later, the boxes have been numbered, though the numbers bear no relation to the chronology of their contents, which remain jumbled. Since there is still no identifiable beginning or end, I decide that should I have time to return to these boxes, I will move through them backwards – after all, why not?

8. How can we consider this archive of the past in relation to the museum in the present, when we do not know the past of the archive? My tactic is to embrace the opacity, to venture semi-blindly, in anticipation of dead ends, loops, and short circuits, with myopic and "optimistic uncertainty" (Slager 2017, p. 4).

Between January and July, I return several times to move circuitously between catalogued and un-catalogued dimensions of the archive, privileging the boxes of as yet unclassified or unclassifiable 'stuff', presently eluding recognition and validation; I am particularly interested in the archival excesses that slide between systems.

Looking before knowing, I am frequently disarmed, disorientated by this self-inflicted anxiety-inducing

approach. I meet the archive's unknown scope with my own known-unknown limits – the simple fact of my not-speaking and not-reading Dutch is a continual reminder of that which can be seen but not known, that which may be unknowable, and the inevitably selective, partial, incomprehensible nature of my errant archivery.

Soon, the idea of tracing configurations and interpellations of 'Asia' and 'Asian' seems a gargantuan if not impossible task, that I happily, indefinitely, postpone. Instead, I defer to the analogue distractions of the archive's disparate materiality – remnants and repetitions, soon revealing shadows and traces of Ang.

## SOME FINDINGS

1. On my second visit, the eight boxes of uncatalogued material have become twenty. The boxes have moved, and I am invited to re-number them. Here are the labels:

- 1 "IIAS"
- 2 "1996-2000 Fotos / Projecten 1"
- 3 "Projecten IV / Vietnam 93 ELS"
- 4 "A Short Historie Video Art 2003-2006 / Projecten X"
- 5 "91 Lezingen [lectures], 94 Symposium / Lezingen I"
- 6 "Inventarisatie Archief I" Inventory – Archive I
- 7, 8, 9, 10 Unlabelled, marked "Van Abbe" or "Van Abbe archief"
- 11 ("7") "Van Abbe archief (multi media)"
- 12 ("4") "Agenda's, Gastenboek" [Diaries, guest books]
- 13 "Foto's CD's Video's – A Short History of Dutch Video Art / Fotos 2"
- 14 "BYZ"
- 15 "Algemeen [General] '98, Limited Space '97, Suriname '97, Democracy Show '98, Dunya 2000 / Projecten VI"

- 16 ("3") A Short History of Dutch Video Art
- 17 "BIBL" for library
- 18 "BIBL Depot F80A", Sealed
- 19 and 20 Unlabelled

I open them up, and find that:

- 7 boxes hold 7 or 8 lever arch files, containing mostly paperwork, but also slides, photos, negatives, cards, notebooks, press cuttings.
- 5 boxes contain unbound printed matter, stationery, diaries and guest books.
- 6 boxes hold assorted VHS and Umatic tapes, DVDs, audio cassettes, slides both sleeved, boxed and scattered, and assorted ephemera, including two biscuits.

2. From the 'first' box, I pull out a file and land in 1995: a list of 'top ten' publications. At number ten is Ramdes, A. and Lopez, S. (1995) *The Land that Lives in Me*, with a note: "Tion Ang" [sic] and "Vinh Phuong", "2 from Asia". 'Asia' is referenced as both a geographical place of origin and conceptual realm, existing both outside / beyond, and inside / within the artist. VAM does not have the catalogue. I wonder: is this an inherited gap, or was something misplaced in the move?

There are further 'top ten' lists, letters, handwritten notes, and numerous faxes sent between 1995 and 1996 – quarterly call-outs for information to be included in the Gate's "agenda of worldwide Asia-related activities", which it compiles for the cultural pages of the IIAS newsletter (the International Institute for Asian Studies, based at Leiden University).

Interestingly, the Gate did not set any parameters beyond 'Asia-related', allowing institutions to designate 'Asia', 'Asian' and 'relevance' on their own terms. As such, this expansive category comes to encompass exhibitions from San Francisco to Rotterdam to



London, Tokyo and Queensland. Between 1995 and 1997 alone, these ranged from *Splendors of Imperial China*, *Manifesta*, *Gwangju Biennale*, *Rhapsodies in Black: the Harlem Renaissance*, *Asia Pacific Triennial*, to *Parisien(ne)s*.

3. If the faxes are a reminder of a much slower era of global networking (early Internet, pre-social media, punctuated by beeps, whirs, screeches, pips and dings), they also suggest the Gate's persistent endeavour to make itself known to an international network of public institutions and commercial galleries.

At the very back of the last file in the box, an inconclusive exchange of letters between the Gate and IAS dated November 2000, intimates disagreements and dissatisfaction over terms, services and payments, and the end of an eight-year arrangement. Perhaps the IAS, in the burgeoning era of email and Internet usage, no longer saw the need to outsource this editorial work. Perhaps the Gate had also outgrown its IAS role (I can only speculate).

After the departure of founding director Els van der Plas, and the arrival of Lopez in 1997, the material suggested a shift in focus and volume of activity, signalling a growing ambition to not only compile the Asia-related agenda but also define it. In an undated mission statement, circa 1994, the Gate highlighted several large-scale projects to date – exhibitions inspired by Japan, showcasing foreign artists living in the Netherlands, modern and contemporary artists from Indonesia, and a festival of Vietnamese contemporary art and film. From 1996 onwards, the Gate's activity seems to multiply five-fold, with the Gate curating or co-curating some twenty-five to thirty projects over the next ten years, that also see a significant move away from what might be called

ethno-centric programming, towards solo shows and thematic projects. Artists include: Toshihiko Komatsu, Fernando Arias, Eduardo Padilha, Keith Piper, Milton Moreiro, Bhupen Khakhar, Julia Ventura, Bülent Evren, Ken Lum, Remy Jungerman, Mariano Maturana, Gillion Grantsaan and Tiong Ang. Among the few projects documented by publications in the VAM library are: *Migrating Identity – Transmission / Reconstruction*, the Shanghai Biennale, and *The Third Space in the Fourth World*, Shanghai (all 2004), and *A Short History of Dutch Video Art* (2005). (In addition to the missing institutional history, there are exhibition histories yet to be reconstructed.)

4. By my third visit, I still haven't found anything on Sikay Tang. There are no results in the library database. The uncatalogued 'stuff', which includes at least three boxes of loose artists' materials – slides and photographs labelled with return addresses, which have evidently never been returned; unlabelled slides and negatives in sheets and loose rolls, some of which I unfurl and recognise as works by Xu Bing, Yue Mingwei, Qiu Zhijie – how did they get here? There is an artist's limited edition print gifted by the Wellcome Trust,<sup>7</sup> enclosed with a letter – to whom does this now belong? And a small cellophane bag with biscuits, in a box labelled 'Gingerbread 1999' – not a snack, as I later realise, but an artwork by Mary Evans.

One box contains the 'VVN Archief' (1995), a project with the Dutch Refugee Council on so-called 'refugee artists'. Five folders titled 'Strangers in NL' are filled with reams of inquiry forms, information sheets, and materials submitted by artists in response to a call for information, and the offer of free membership of the Gate's Artists' Archive (the usual cost being f25 guilder a year plus an entrance or joining fee of f50). I search a few of the names in the VAM database and find



nothing. The artists remain strangers / estranged from the archive.

Some boxes contain materials from the touring exhibition, *A Short History of Dutch Video Art* (2005). Soon after the Gate's arrival, VAM invited Irit Rogoff and Deepa Naik to open the crates as part of the *Academy* exhibition and research programme in 2006. When word reached Tiong Ang that his work had been screened as part of *Academy*, VAM discovered that the Gate did not own rights to this material as had been previously understood. This called into question the entirety of the artists' materials and their status within the collection.

What was the nature of the Gate's relationship with, and responsibilities towards, the artists it worked with? Having sought to promote artists who were "neglected by institutions",<sup>8</sup> was the Gate also guilty of neglect? These materials left behind, within yet without the archive, raise questions of status, of ownership, of responsibility and care. How many artists were *an*-archived by the Gate? The prefix *an*- suggests 'lack', a state of being 'without', a negation. What is the archive lacking or missing, and who are the artists situated *without* or outside it? How many artists remain neglected, negated, suspended between the two – the Gate and VAM?

5. In contrast to Sikay Tang, there is a lot of material on Tiong Ang – indeed, out of the nine 'Asian artists' named in the *ArtAsiaPacific* interview, Ang has the highest visibility across the VAM library collection. There are 39 catalogued items, of which 27 are publications, mostly exhibition catalogues spanning the period from 1990 to 2006. Tellingly, Ang occupies multiple locations and categories, namely:

ART EDUCATION  
TRIENNALES  
NETHERLANDS  
GENDERED ART  
VIDEO ART  
EXCHANGES  
ART DESIGN  
IDENTITY  
MANIFESTATIONS  
GLOBALISATION  
PAINTING  
ALIENATION  
PRIZES.<sup>9</sup>

There are also numerous uncatalogued (hence inaccessible) items scattered through about a third of the boxes – Ang turns up on flyers, press releases, cuttings; a face in a crowd, a name printed, misprinted or scrawled on an envelope; in DVDs, slides and negatives.

6. It is evident that Ang's trajectory traverses both the Gate and VAM, and inverts the usual paradigm of institutional neglect. Embraced very early on by institutions including De Appel and VAM, with several high-profile shows in the mid-1990s showcasing new and contemporary 'Dutch art', Ang's involvement with the Gate came later, preceded by an invitation from Lopez to show in the 1994 Havana Biennial.<sup>10</sup> After this, Ang exhibited and initiated a number of projects with and without the Gate, themed around Chinese-ness (or not-Chineseness), mobility, migration, identity, and decolonisation.

Alternately identified and positioned as 'Dutch' and 'Other', Ang's practice proceeds along concurrent and entangled paths of experimentation, re-situated through collaborative projects in South Africa,



Indonesia, China and the Netherlands. It continually re-articulates arguably contradictory (for whom?), contingent and mutable narratives. Moving from high modernism to situation comedy, from painterly sculptural installations to raw video works, Ang transforms or transposes the artist's studio to the TV set, the academy, soap opera, the seminar or pop concert. Such seeming schisms may have confused the very institutions and collectors that once readily embraced him, rendering him increasingly difficult to 'see' and place – an artist-producer-collaborator-performer, making serious mockery (and mockery serious).

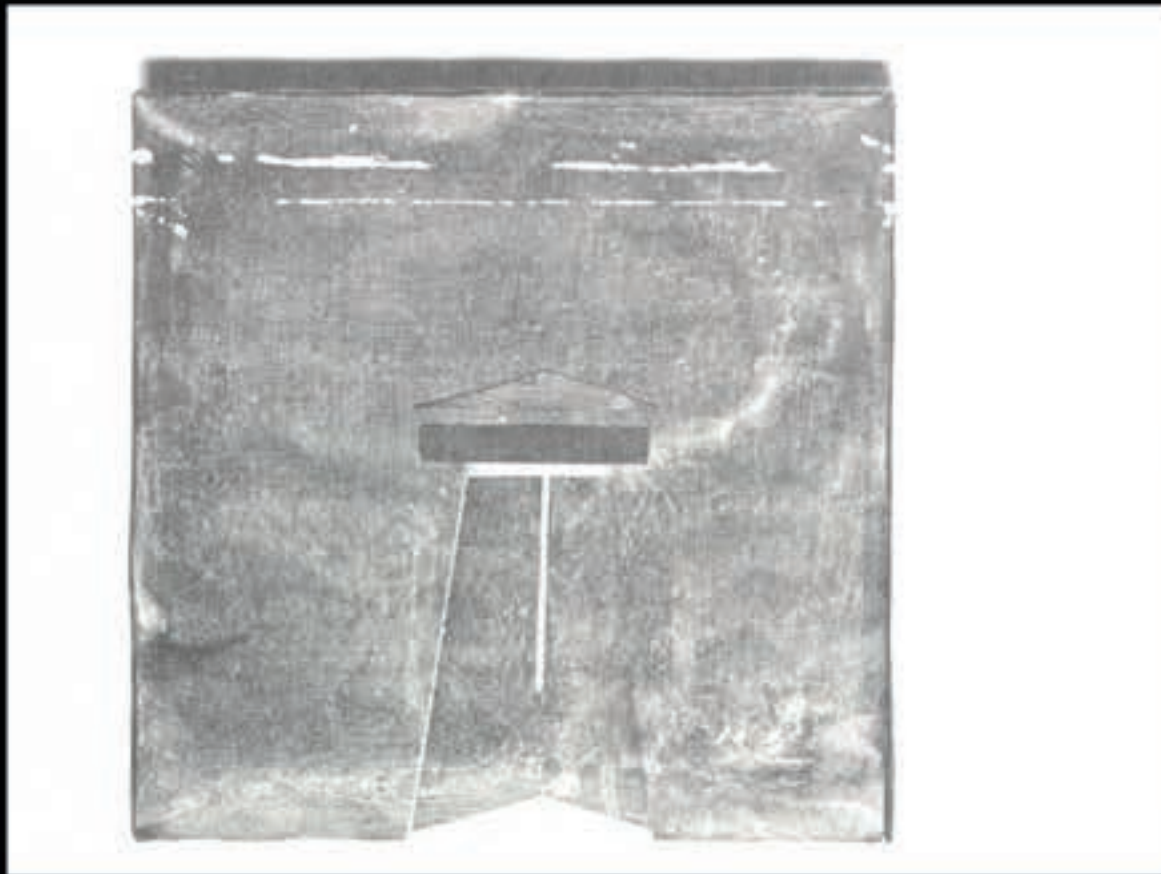
7. On my fourth and final visit, I look at VAM's museum files. Belatedly, it occurs to me that since Ang's work appeared in eight museum acquisition shows, Ang's work must be in the museum. Three works were acquired in 1991, 1994, and 1996: *Portrait of a Young Man* (1991), *Portrait of Two Boys* (1991) and *Portrait of a Man and Woman* (1993). *Portrait of a Young Man* was loaned to the Hague for *Peiling '91* and *De Appel for The Spine* in 1994; there are no details of any other loans. Last exhibited as part of VAM's new building display in 2004, and the *NL Not NL* show in 2005, it appears that these works have been sitting in the depot ever since.

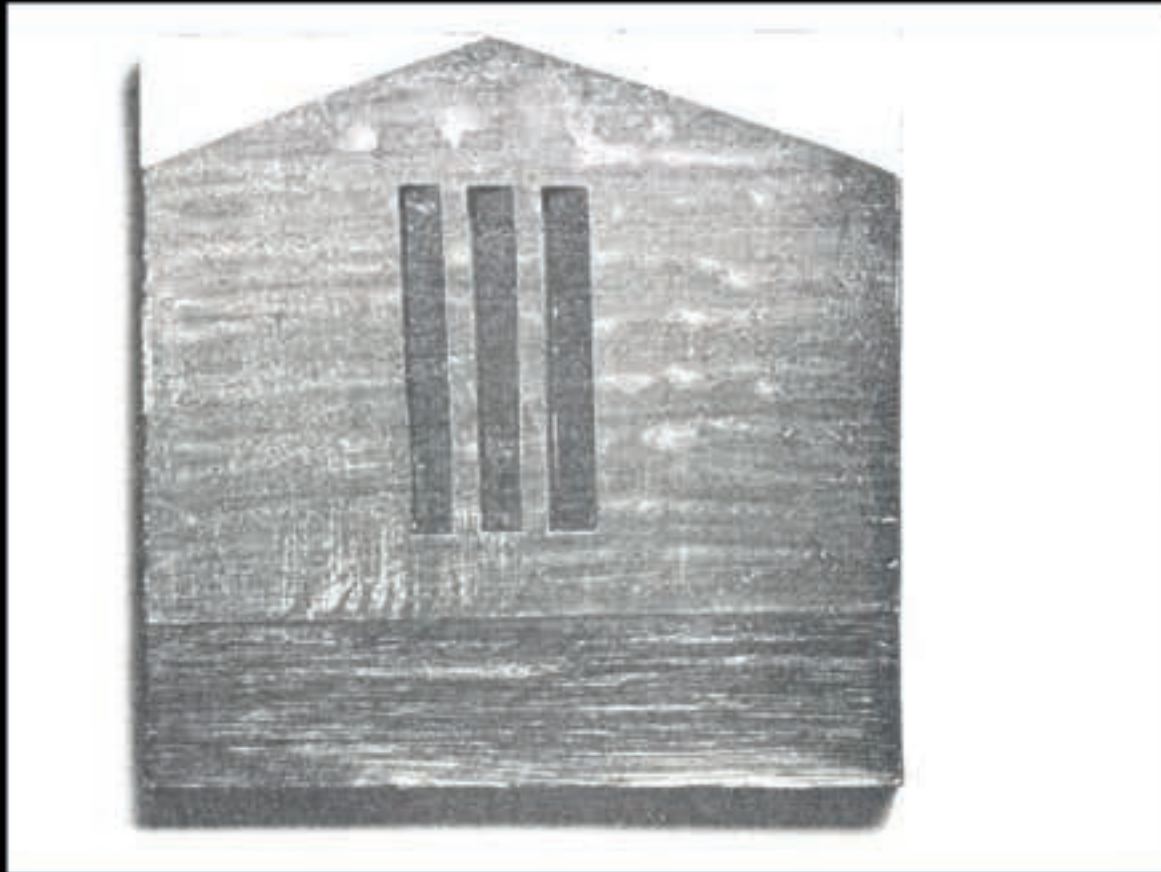
8. It strikes me that Ang's is a deviant practice, paradoxically typified by atypicality, exceeding and defying both collection and archive. Perhaps the continuity (if continuity is desired) is in the schism. The medium criticality of his early works expanded into critiques of visibility and visuality: engaging global, local and transitional visual cultures; through architectonic and scenographic tropes, and parodies of form and performance.

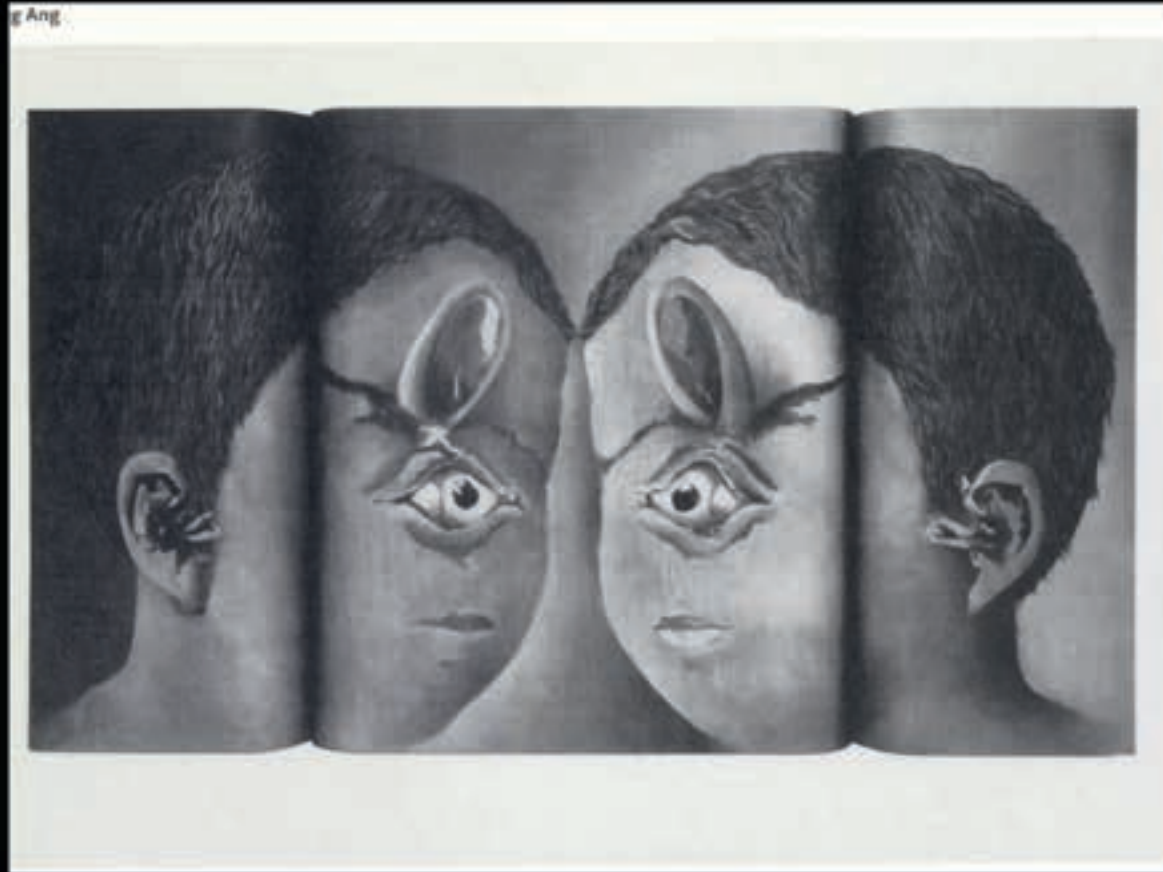
Across Ang's intermittent series of sparse yet dense artists' books – *Toerist* (1986), *Tiong Ang* (1990), *Initiatie* (1992), *Prothese (N)* (1992), *Not Dark Yet* (1998), *Underworld* (2001) and *Prisoners* (2003) – we might identify a trail of clues pointing towards 'not-seeing', a sequence of cues for refusal, and props for wandering and dreaming.

9. Ang joins me on my last couple of days with the collection. We compare shadows, new potholes and rabbit-holes appearing. Of course, the Gate / VAM archive is incomplete, always already *an-archive* – lacking, missing, without – *an-archive-not-archive*. How might the museum move to re-position Ang's work? How might Ang's work potentially re-position the museum? We might adapt another cue from Ang (Slager 2017, p. 34): "Avoiding the cumulation of learned experiences into routine", each may be pursued along "an itinerary of the unexpected".















Film still, an(g)archivery, susan pui san lok, 2018





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Medina, G. 2014, *Still at the Gate*, exhibition leaflet, VAM, Eindhoven.

## NOTES

1. In this paper, we make reference to my " 'archivery' intervention, *Making Ways*, collaged from images of [Mike] Dibb's personal *Ways of Seeing* project archive... which had been literally buried under the floorboards all these years". *Making Ways* was a series of images published in a special issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* (Lok 2012) and a limited edition set of risograph prints. Art Vapours is an occasional collaboration between J.C. Kristensen and I: "Anarchival in approach, we understand Art Vapours as a potential space of counter-knowledge production, a dynamic that seeks to unlock the archive and expose its aporias... We like archives and fevers. We might liken our project to archiverish archivery".

2. My previous projects with archives include *NEWS / REEL* (2005), with the Media Archive for Central England, as part of Arts Council England's Necessary Journeys programme; *Faster, Higher* (2008), commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella and the BFI Southbank Gallery, working with the Olympics Archive held at the British Film Institute; and a Chinese Embassy news and documentary archive in London.

3. *Gate Keepers* explored links between the so-called "non-Western artistic world and the Netherlands", involving "a presentation of (parts of the) archives by invited guests from those regions in the world represented in the Gate Foundation archive as well as those who [were] not"

4. It is much later that I remember the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, founded in 1996 to archive the web itself. Here, I uncover snapshots of the Gate's homepage with the strapline, "The World of Art Has Many Capitals". Infrequent updates (quarterly or sometimes annual) offer a schematic picture of the Foundation's activity between 1999 and 2006. The final update links to a press release, dated 8 September 2006: "The board of directors is very pleased to announce that the collection of the Gate Foundation has been donated to the Van Abbemuseum [VAM] in Eindhoven. The Artists Archive and Art Library will be integrated into the collection of the VAM and therefore will remain accessible to the public. Since the State Secretary for Culture Medy van der Laan decided to stop financial support from the government as of 2006, the board of directors placed all of its energy on keeping the activities of the Gate Foundation alive. During the last months, after many meetings with various institutions, such as the Stedelijk Museum, Wereld Museum, Leiden University, a.o., the Gate Foundation collection [the Artists Archive and Art Library] have finally found a new home in the Van Abbemuseum". <https://web.archive.org/web/20060815082131/http://www.gatefoundation.nl:80/>. Accessed 22 August 2017.

5. IAS (International Institute for Asian Studies) was established by KNAW (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen / the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences), VUA (Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam / Free University of Amsterdam), and RUL (Leiden University) in 1993, now based at Leiden University.

6. Online, the IAS makes available annual reports going back to 2000; it is noted that, "Until cooperation with the Gate Foundation ended in December 2002, the Gate functioned as the Asian Art & Cultures correspondent". [https://ias.asia/sites/default/files/IIAS\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2002.pdf](https://ias.asia/sites/default/files/IIAS_Annual_Report_2002.pdf) Accessed 7 September 2017.

7. The print is by Deborah Aschheim, a US-based artist.

8. "The archive is open to everyone. If any curator wanted to do something with these artists, they are welcome, and they are helped by the staff and myself. The archive is important because it's a collection of reproductions by these artists – many of whom have been neglected by institutions" (Lopez 2001).

9. For Ken Lum, there are 18 items; for Bhupen Khakhar, 10; for Hong Hao, 5; for Tariq Alvi and Wang Du there are 4; for Ding Yi, 3; and for Yee-Ling Tang and Sikay Tang, there are none. Though Tang's name does turn up on a Gate flyer among the uncatalogued boxes, for a project called *Archives: On the Index*.

10. Ang cites Havana as a key moment that "changed my entire outlook... that made me radically change my practice about a year later". Conversation with the artist, VAM, 13 July 2017.

Thanks to the Van Abbemuseum, Nick Aikens, Diana Franssen, Willem Smit, Relinde ter Borg, Odilia Roij. Special thanks to Tiong Ang.



# Notes on a Dictionary:

## a polemic approach<sup>1</sup>

Charl  
Landvreugd

The discussion on cultural and ethnic diversity in the Netherlands takes its lead from English-speaking examples in Britain and America. Paradoxically, therefore, the ethnic and racialised history of these examples sets the tone in an environment that prides itself on the idea of non-racial, societal equivalence.

As a research fellow of the Deviant Practice programme, interested in the Van Abbemuseum's exploration of how an institution could contribute more holistically to the production and empowerment of plural subjectivities, I decided to look into the museum's 2008 *Be(com)ing Dutch* exhibition archive and the art magazine *Kunstbeeld* between 1976 and 2008. The focus was on the Dutch particularities of art critique, exhibition histories, public policies and museological curatorial practices. The research took issue with the relation between prevailing institutional tools, the idea of diversity in the arts and set out to look for specific deviations in the Dutch language that could aid in the development of theoretical frameworks that take into account the specificities of the Dutch artistic landscape and how it is embedded in local sensibilities. I authored a day, called 'Krut'krutu', during the 2017 Caucus discussing the outcomes of the research.<sup>2</sup> This paper explores a few of the issues that emerged during that process.



## EXHIBITION HISTORIES

Starting with an investigation into recent exhibition histories it became clear that the Netherlands moved from an interest in the ‘transcultural’ to a full-blown discussion about ‘diversity’ in the course of three decades. In 1988 it is stated in an exhibition catalogue that: “problems too often obstruct the positive sides of a multicultural society. Positive is truly: getting acquainted with each other’s culture” (Baartmans-van den Boogaart 1988, p. 3). This was uttered in line with the construct that: “Good quality art with an ethnic tinge, also gives the unemployed foreigner something to be proud about and to recognize oneself” (Mensink 1988, p. 4). What the research shows, and some Dutch readers may know, is that art made by ‘foreign’ artists was part of *welzijnswerk* [well-being / welfare work]. This work is aimed at participation in society and social cohesion by means of development and growth among other things. In the same 1988 catalogue it is argued that: “In the field of food, drink and sports the inherent qualities of migrants have long been recognized. ... But recognizing [and acknowledging] of idiosyncratic artistic qualities in the area visual arts is still a cumbersome process. Separate exhibitions of allochtonous artists therefore are the safest way. With that benevolence is demonstrated and the issue (of art) itself is circumvented” (Egbers 1988, p. 34).

The question of artistic quality is illustrated a year later in the 1990 bilingual *Black USA* catalogue in a text on the sculptor Martin Puryear. Concerning his education, the English text says about his time in Sierra Leone that: “He became fascinated by the craftsmanship and feeling for materials possessed by the local woodworkers” (Beek 1990, p. 73). The Dutch text adds a clause: “die met primitief gereedschap gebruiksvoorwerpen

maakten” [who produced utensils with primitive tools] (p. 72). This is contrasted to his time in Sweden where he learnt the “subtleties of cabinet making” (p. 73). In the essay his work is associated with magic and ritualistic purposes and the idea is put forward that the work “evokes confusion in the eyes of a Westerner, because, in Western culture, the function of nearly every object is fixed” (p. 75). In the late 1980s, the argument of quality, which is the false binary between ethnicity and quality of art production, comes into full view. When this argument is combined with the *welzijnswerk* motivation of benevolently appreciating art made by ‘foreign’ artists in the Netherlands, the stage is set for the coming two and a half decades. In other words, based on a historical colonial view of the ‘other’, the frame through which to see and approach artists with a migrant background in the Netherlands was formulated in this period.

In the 1991 *Double Dutch* catalogue, Ulco Mes questions this relation between the artist’s cultural identity and style.<sup>3</sup> He notes that in years passed several exhibitions took place in which the cultural identity of the artist took central stage.<sup>4</sup> In these exhibitions, “the organizations, often tacitly, assume that cultural elements, in one way or another, are visible in the artworks and that information about cultural backgrounds increases insight into the artworks” (Mes & Faber 1991, p. 16).

To analyse these exhibitions, Mes uses the concept of *De Derde Golf* [The Third Wave] by Alvin Toffler as described in the book *Met vooruitziende blik* (1984). This concept describes a radical change in society, similar to that which took place during the agricultural revolution and then the Industrial Revolution. Toffler argues that cultures are identification models and the future will lead to a much larger diversity of identifica-



tion models with a pluriform and multicultural society as its result. This process, he argues, is accelerated by the 'demassification' of media: "The Third Wave civilization therefore will look like a constantly changing mosaic of subcultures". Understanding this, Mes questions whether thinking "in terms of a singular mass culture with one central norm as departure point" is still useful. He uses *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris, 1989) as an example of an exhibition in which "non-hierarchical thinking and letting go of linear Eurocentric cultural perspective" enters the curatorial process as a "conscientious effort" (Mes & Faber 1991, p. 16-17).

In her PhD thesis, Eltje Bos gives a thorough analysis of the cultural policy that was designed around migrants. The framework for this came out of ideas around *welzijnswerk* and not from cultural policies. She writes that: "It is only after 1987 when the pursued [cultural] policy is transferred to the Art board in the general board of Culture that the tension between the existing cultural policy and the one designed around migrants becomes clear". Bos explains that it was a certain ambivalence in the governmental intervention, as well as the approach that focused on quality, the removal of assumptions and participation. Cultural expressions coming from immigrants were positioned somewhere between amateur and professional, which not only named them as a "separate category but also excluded them from the facilities that were in place for professional arts and artists". Apart from institutes for artistic development and amateur art, other art institutions, such as museums, were not included in the execution of policy even though they were named in the programme. Since 1987 policy makers were looking into cancelling the specific approach towards artists and citizens with a migrant background and integrate them into the more general facilities. It will take until the 1997 [cultural] policy paper, *Cultuurnota 1997-*

2000, *Pantser of Ruggengraat* [Armour or Backbone] for this to happen. Bos states that "realising the intent to promote intercultural expressions through regular facilities" did not work out well. "The cause of this is that the state secretary [Van der Ploeg] did not take measures to ensure that this intent can be realised. In the execution this leads to the decision to end the specific policies and to establish a separate arrangement circumventing the official circuit". Bos concurs that "because it exists (for a long time) and specific arrangements have settled, it seems like the specific policy impedes the realisation of its own objectives" (Bos 2011, p. 72).

## LANGUAGE

It took about another ten years before government bodies actively encouraged museums to tackle the issue of integration with the *Stimuleringsprijs Culturele Diversiteit* [Prize To Stimulate Cultural Diversity]. The Van Abbemuseum won the open call with their proposal for *Be(com)ing Dutch*. In their application they identified six core questions which directly addressed language and discourse. They included: Does art speak across boundaries of space and national culture? How is it effected or made possible by historic colonial relationships or a complete sense of otherness? How can artworks and/or exhibitions function as sites of discourse, education and the expression of alternative models of social change? ... In 2007, the museum acknowledged that these questions can only be answered provisionally but will "continue to inform the Van Abbemuseum research" in the future.<sup>5</sup> In a 2008 interview Charles Esche stated that discursive practices would always require a kind of non-metaphysical 'leap-of-faith' – a secular belief that they will change our imaginations – and subsequently the way



we look at the world and interact with other people. Furthermore, this leap of faith must be taken by artists, curators and public alike” (Byrne 2008, p. 24). I believe that language is one of these tools that can change the imagination. By looking into the kind of language and definitions that were constructed around artists of colour in the Netherlands my larger research is taking a shot at imagining alternative models of social change in the visual arts.

### PRESS TALK: on *Be(com)ing Dutch*

The 2007 press release for *Be(com)ing Dutch* quoted Louk Hagendoorn: “If anyone offends them [The Dutch] or their country, the Dutch are quick to defend it. They do care but don’t want to show it. (...), the collective urge to conform is greater than people believe. This is one of the explanations of why there was such a dramatic swing from notions of tolerance and multiculturalism in the Netherlands to a fear of the other and worry that Holland is full”.<sup>6</sup>

The press had a field day discussing the *Be(com)ing Dutch* project. Rutger Ponzen noted: “Did Gitta Luiten not say during the distribution of the Stimuleringsprijs Culturele Diversiteit to the Van Abbemuseum in 2006 that museums have to adapt to the fact that the Western world is not white [blank] anymore?” (Ponzen 2007, p. 2) As a critique of the project and the exhibition Wouter Welling stated that, one can only play in “our cold white temples when you employ our visual language precisely. A normal modernist point of view with a fundamental dichotomy at its centre.” He continues by saying that the pioneering work should be left to the ethnographic museums. Through this strategy, autonomous art with roots in the artists, non-Western culture will automatically be part of the mainstream.

“Then true acknowledgement of cultural diversity will be reached: not an imposed multicultural theme but one that departs from the art itself” (Welling 2008, pp. 60-61). The question is asked if one should make place in a museum for work that does not meet a particular aesthetic or production standard (the quality argument)? (Limburg 2008). Critics point out that “elitist and Western as it is, it is arrogant to think that a museum can make the world a better place. (...) some modesty concerning the enormous complexity of the social [*sociaal-maatschappelijk*] issues and it would be better if it [the museum] concentrated on what it is established for, art itself, whether it is socially engaged or not” (Ruyters 2008). Carina van der Walt states that: “This politically correct rejection of political correctness prevents (...) careful interpretation and analysis of the exhibition” (2008, p. 26). Recurring in several positive reviews is the echo of unintelligibility and friendly allusion to the quality argument. In the positive critics own words: the “intensity, impenetrability and heaviness” of the exhibition needs “sympathetic consideration and patience of the visitor to fathom the underlying histories which are fundamental for a better understanding of the art works” (Rijn 2008, p. 86).

### DEVIANCE

In 2008 Wouter Welling remarked upon the post-colonial puzzle and the fact that even though many panel discussions and exhibitions have good intentions they struggle with the notion of identity and political correctness: “[B]ut is there actual acceptance of diversity? Or is it more compulsive assimilation which renders the otherness in others harmless?” (Welling 2008, p. 58). During an infamous study day, titled “Modern Art in Developing Countries” organised by the Tropenmuseum in 1985, Jan Debbaut said of art discourse:



“It is a very specific discussion, self cultivating, rooted in a very specific Western tradition. What is relevant in this discussion is shown in museums. (...) There are artists that are aimed at the Western discussion; others are looking inwards, to their own culture. This last [group] needs more information and is better suited in an ethnographic museum” (Welling 2008, p. 61). Twenty-three years later, Welling repeats Debbaut’s argument in his critique.

How then, now in 2017, do we deviate from the practice of centralising the idea of the West as a uniform entity? In 2007, during the *Be(com)ing Dutch* project, Sohelia Najand proposed “to develop a contemporary grammar of communal thinking and the active production of knowledge about new forms of cultural citizenship.”<sup>7</sup> The word *glokalisering* [glocalisation] was introduced as a process: “where the relation between the central state, globalisation and local processes can be re-imagined for a new form of (cultural) citizenship... in art”.<sup>8</sup> Taiye Selasi reiterated the idea of *glokalisering* during her talk *Don’t ask me where I am from, ask me where I’m a local* when she said: “What if we asked, instead of ‘Where are you from?’ -- ‘Where are you a local?’ This would tell us so much more about who and how similar we are” (Selasi 2014). In 2008 the aim of Sohelia Najand and InterArt was to develop theory, as a form of action, parallel to their research. It was “Reflecting on already existing ideas such as democracy, identity shaping, policy and art, interculturality and (post)hybridity”.<sup>9</sup>

### (POST) HYBRIDITY / Daar-droom

The word ‘post-hybridity’ is an understanding of the self and society as an articulation put forward by Gloria Wekker. In *One Finger Does Not Drink Okra Soup*, she explains that the “I” in Surinamese (working

class) creole subjects is conceptualised as a multiplicity. One is partly biological and partly spiritual. One’s Kra (immortal soul that consists of a male and female element) is bestowed upon the physical body by one’s male and female *Dyodyo* (parents in the world of the gods) at birth. These four elements are conceived as personalities with their own characteristics. Together they define one’s [or society’s] personality, intellect, consciousness, character traits and mind. Their individual agency is reflected in the different ways one can speak about the self or act in different situations. A person [or society] thus is physical and spiritual, male and female and all combinations thereof. This conceptualisation gives an entry into understanding the multiplicity of this sense-of-self [where the] I [or we as society] is a “kaleidoscopic, ever-moving sequence” (Wekker 1997, p. 336) that is always multiplicitious (Landvreugd 2016, p. 42). This approach shifts the focus from that of a fixed cultural identity to understanding both the artist and the context as inherently layered and beyond the post-colonial discourse of hybridity. It refers to a space where they are evident to themselves rather than in relation to that from which they supposedly deviate.

On the subject of art production and its critique, this calls to mind the idea of *daar-droom*, the ‘there-dream’ put forward by Ad van Rosmalen in 1991. He argues that the use of motives that are not so-called culturally native, give the imagination an extra dimension (Mes & Faber 1991, p. 25). Speaking about the collaboration between two artists he writes:

If one could speak about cultural influence it could be an influence that is not so easily characterized as ‘here and there’. Both [artists] are ‘here’ while ‘there’ roughly plays an equal part in the daily experience. It is pointless to make distinctions in

degrees of origin of who is more from 'there' and who lives more 'here'. What one could say is that just the fact that the artists see each other as from 'there' is of greater importance than the fact that they both maybe only have second-hand experiences located in the country of origin. The question becomes topical what the nature is of that 'there'. Possibly these artists are each others 'daard room' and there is less a question of cultural influence but rather personal and reciprocal influence that is common to artists.  
(Mes & Faber 1991, p. 21)

### **BLANK: Decontextualised Art**

Another word that continually appears in research on art in the Netherlands is 'blank'. It constructs Western artistic subjectivity with such a 'natural' transparency that it becomes practically invisible. Writing in English forced a translation. As it does not translate well it became a point of interrogation. In today's climate, all my interviewees when speaking about white artists or colleagues use the word 'blank' which is exchangeable with white. The word 'white' only appears in catalogues and reviews when they are in English. However, 'white' and 'blank' do not mean the same thing. Dutch dictionaries explain *blank(e)* as: "bright white, unsoiled, uncolored: the blank race, submerged under water". For white people in general it is the preferred denomination, one that is perpetuated in the media. In art critique in the Netherlands, 'blank' as unsoiled and objective is a constant metaphor for 'Western'. NRC's chief editor wrote in 2005: "According to our style guide, when using 'blank' or 'white' we stick to general social use. We do not write about white people but about blanks. (...) The style guide associates the term 'white' with the world of welfare in which everybody

who is not specifically blank is referred to as black".<sup>10</sup> Here it becomes apparent why direct translation from the English-speaking context obscures particularities in the Dutch context and why investigating the Dutch particularities can lead to new insights. Taking the word 'blank' out of its native Dutch context to look for meaning in English becomes a tool to unpack a seemingly harmless way of speaking. With "empty or clear, or containing no information or mark".<sup>11</sup>

Going back and forth between Dutch and English provides the opportunity to give new meanings to words. Due to the social meaning of the word, 'blank' can acquire meaning as an artistic tool in English texts that would be hard to theorise in Dutch. With the meaning of the word alluding to an artistic subjectivity that is so transparent that the context from which it emerges becomes hardly visible, we could re-enact the Enlightenment philosophers, and the conceptualists for that matter, only now from an inclusive point of view departing from a post-hybrid position. The big question then, as an artist and researcher, is whether it is possible to create a 'blank' work of art?



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## NOTES

1. This text is an edited version of a paper presented during the Deviant Research Symposium, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 21 September 2017.

2. <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/becoming-more-27-may-krutkrutu/>

3. The *Double Dutch* exhibition was a project concerned with transcultural influence in the visual arts. It paired Dutch artists with an artist who was based in the Netherlands but came from a different culture.

4. Examples are: *Schakels* [Links], Museum voor Volkenkunde Rotterdam, 1988; *De stad een wereld* [The city a world], Amsterdam 1989/1990; and *Het Klimaat* [The Climate], Leiden, 1991

5. Van Abbemuseum, The Van Abbemuseum Proposal for "Stimuleringsprijs Culturele Diversiteit", 19 April 2006, Museum archive Van Abbe Museum, Symposia; Be(com)ing Dutch, Voorbereidingen, Algemeen, 2007, p. 5.

6. Van Abbemuseum, Press release, November 2007, Museum archive Van Abbemuseum, Symposia; Be(com)ing Dutch: The Caucus, Persberichten, 2007.

7. Van Abbemuseum, The Van Abbemuseum Proposal for "Stimuleringsprijs Culturele Diversiteit", 19 April 2006, Museum archive Van Abbemuseum, Symposia; Be(com)ing Dutch, Voorbereidingen, Algemeen, 2007, p. 11.

8. Van Abbemuseum, Appendix 3 – Re-Imagining the collection, The Van Abbemuseum Proposal for "Stimuleringsprijs Culturele Diversiteit", 19 April 2006, Museum archive Van Abbemuseum, Symposia; Be(com)ing Dutch, Voorbereidingen, Algemeen, 2007, p. 33.

9. Van Abbemuseum, Appendix 3 – Re-Imagining the collection, The Van Abbemuseum Proposal for "Stimuleringsprijs Culturele Diversiteit", 19 April, 2006, Museum archive Van Abbemuseum, Symposia; Be(com)ing Dutch, Voorbereidingen, Algemeen, 2007, p. 34.

10. "Volgens ons stijlboek houdt de krant zich bij de keuzen 'blank' en 'zwart' aan heersend maatschappelijk gebruik. „We schrijven overigens niet over witte mensen, maar over blanken. ... De term 'wit' associeert het stijlboek met de welzijns wereld waarin iedereen die niet specifiek blank is, als zwart wordt aangeduid."

11. *Cambridge Online Dictionary*, viewed 27 March 2018, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/blank>.





# Separatist Tendencies

Eimear Walshe



## SEPARATIST TENDENCIES

This research grew from a fascination with separatism as an impulse. For the purposes of this paper, separatism can certainly be regarded as a type of deviant practice, as it signals a break away, withdrawal, secession, or renouncing which implies a deviation from certain conventions or orthodoxies. At the same time, I will argue, the logic of separatism is more ubiquitous, and indeed, more central to hegemonic logic than might first be expected. The research began in 2015, then concerned with gender separatism in the women's movement, outlining the motivations, methodologies and contestations in women organising for and by themselves. Then, during the phase of research at the Van Abbemuseum, I turned attention towards the notion of queer separatism. Though my focus in this research has been on gender and sexuality, I have tried to open up the structure of the discourse in such a way that it might serve some use in thinking through separations, distinctions and divisions through a wider range of identity classifications.

My original case study was the separatist feminist social movement as it proliferated in the US and UK in the late 1960s and 1970s. Many of these groups operated off the belief that sexism was the primary



source of their oppression, and that the solution was to remove from their lives everything that effected or symbolised masculine domination. This anti-assimilationist position seemed at first to have a basis in understanding sexism as socially constructed, however, much of the material I encountered from this period holds entirely essentialist, biologically deterministic, binary and often arbitrary standards for what constitutes a woman. Deviation in this case became a highly regulated mode of conformity, and ultimately a reproduction of the systems and values they designed to escape from.

For my purposes in this paper then, it is important not to attribute a definitively positive moral character to the notion of 'deviance' or 'separatism'. For example, 'feminist-gender-separatism', (e.g. a women's publisher) is formally similar to 'sexist-gender-segregation' (e.g. gender segregated schooling), the difference being located in whose interests the separation serves. Similarly, observing how a discourse, invented for the liberation of oppressed people, has been appropriated for fascist ends, and its capacity to turn marginalised groups against one another, meant my own thoughts on the subject changed several times throughout the period of research. What I remain interested in however, is the legacy of this mode of thought, this gesture of withdrawal, this element of separation as it exists, implicitly or evidently, in my own thinking and in contemporary principles for organising social space, categorising knowledge, and means of relating to others. The topic very often brings up many pressing and contradictory convictions, so I wanted to bring these ideas to a more public discussion through the Van Abbemuseum's Deviant Practice programme, and the museum's mediation department.



Despite becoming unconvinced by and resistant to what I originally understood as separatism's radical potential, my then anti-separatist position was consistently challenged by the presence of the 'principle of separation' in feminist thought, a lot of which I was sympathetic to. Separatism in its orthodox form operated on multiple levels, socially, sexually, economically, mentally, culturally, as a means of empowerment or taking back space, and not just as a philosophy of domestic or social practices. And many of these separatisms, or let's say, micro-separatisms remain in contemporary discourses and contexts. So it seemed premature to consign separatism to a specific misguided moment in the history of feminism, but rather a phenomenon to remain attentive to today. Certainly, contemporary intersectional approaches in understanding compounding identity-based oppression bring us a way towards addressing the problem of separatism's simple reductive categorisation. However, intersectionality still relies on increasingly complex combinations of what remain normative categories, and does not ever entirely escape the problems of essentialism, binarism and exclusion, and contemporary arguments in feminist discourse continue to reflect this.

To bring this dilemma to the subject of sexuality, it might be useful to think through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's use of minoritising vs universalising conception of sexuality, a comparison which is helpful in this paper. The minoritising conception of sexuality emphasises that a distinct minority of people in the world are queer. However, the idea that queerness only affects or describes a minority may very easily not be the case. The universalising conception, which holds

that queerness concerns or describes everybody to some extent, equally has the problem of neglecting the fact that some people in particular are oppressed for being queer. Separatism aligns with a minoritising understanding of sexuality, another important factor in thinking through its limitations, but we might also think about as separatist the implicit minoritising conception in political claims made in the name of queer liberation as claims made on behalf of a specific (finite, separated) group of people, in contrast with the universalising conception, which might argue that queer liberation benefits everyone.

It is with this in mind that the research project 'Examining Separatist Epistemologies' was undertaken. In the Van Abbemuseum I set up The Queer Reading Group, which was 'queer' in the sense that its remit was to read work by queer authors, but the only criterion for participants was that they were interested in the subject. In this way we were conscious of the presence of separatist thought as implicit in the material being studied, and even in the means being used to study it, but the exercise was not itself separatist. Another factor at play in this research was on the level of knowledge-production, my work is dependant on the prior existence of separated categories of theory – gender studies and queer theory. So for the author, what was at stake in the research was also the premise of the research itself.



The reading group offered an introduction to what I had taken from feminist epistemology as the starting point for the discussion. It combined three key concepts towards a proposition that could then be supported or contested in response to the readings each week. To summarise, firstly, 'standpoint theory' tells us that an individual subjected to a given system of oppression has a special knowledge and insight regarding that system, secondly 'situated knowledge' gives us a means of complicating the idea of objectivity, through the understanding that all knowledge as biased, partial, and coming from or situated in a particular body, in a particular history and time, and finally Miranda Fricker's notion of 'epistemic injustice', which means that often those with subject positions with greater insights, where those insights are the result of oppression, are given less credibility.

This 'credibility deficit', as Fricker describes, creates a self-perpetuating system of injustice where those with specialised experiential knowledge are dismissed as subjective in-particular, which creates a prejudice in the way that knowledge is attributed, validated, categorised. Not only is this a compounding ethical wrong, which often leaves people without the means to interpret or describe their experiences, it also constitutes a huge epistemic loss to society, as our collective knowledge, language and interpretive strategies suffer.

So for the reading group I proposed we engage with the work by queer authors through a definition I gave for 'separatist epistemology': the deliberate emphasis on otherwise neglected areas of knowledge through

extracting and separating it from the mainstream, which functions as a means of generating, preserving and making knowledge available and thereby empowering people. For example, historically, the format of the feminist consciousness raising group was a form of separatist epistemology, through which women could come together and form new languages for articulating their under or misrepresented experiences, with then-new concepts such as 'sexual harassment' and 'post-partum depression' having their origins in these spaces. The contemporary equivalent of the use of 'safe space' or 'safer space' online and has also generated new knowledge and languages. Each reading group session focused on sites where knowledge is produced, the campus, the library, the club, and the family.

I wanted the reading group to be accessible to people with different educational backgrounds, and people working in their second language, while at the same time being able to address these theories. With this in mind the subjects each week covered a wide variety of media including essays, fiction, artworks, music and Internet content. Each session started with an introduction to the material, so there was no obligation to have done the reading in advance. The sessions went on for 4 weeks with group numbers ranging between 8 and 20 people.



The works were selected for reading based on their focus on moments of contestation, where the presence of an implicit separatism was made visible by an instance of someone finding themselves in conflict with a separatist partition-line. These moments can manifest as a crisis or conflict in the text. Here is a selection of

what the extracts addressed: racism in lesbian social space in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, the 'partition' of LGBT sections of bookshops in Casey Plett's *A Safe Girl to Love*, the refusal of male children from a lesbian separatist conference in Audre Lorde's *Man Child: A Black Feminist's Response*, the nuclear family as separatist state in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth*, campus debates concerning Trigger Warnings in Sara Ahmed's *Against Students*, online debates as to whether to include S for 'Straight' or A for 'Ally' in the LGBTQI+ acronym. In looking at the above and many more examples, there were some questions to bear in mind:

- What is the rationale for the drawing of this line of separation?
- Does the drawing of this line undermine or reinforce existing power relations?
- How permeable is this boundary and how long does it last for?
- If this separation has an entry/ exit point the who are the gatekeepers?

In each case there was an an acknowledgement of the function that separatism served in the theories or worlds of the text, as well as several repeating problems. Firstly, a misuse of standpoint theory, for example, that only a queer person can understand, or has the right to speak about homophobia, which often goes along with a misinterpretation of identity politics (that identity equals/ is the direct causation of political interests). These assumptions cause problems in that they underestimate the potency of empathy-across-identities, which is a very important and powerful social and epistemic force.

Secondly the misunderstanding that gender and sexuality are fixed, and the sometimes-accompanying binary classification of gender and sexuality also



proved a problem. Because these identity categories are various and can change over the course of a person's life, they don't lend themselves effectively to the either/ or structures that is inherent to separatism. For example, during my graduate studies, my awareness of the gender bias in the curriculum led me to a strategy to correct the prejudice of my knowledge, I would make my thesis with a separatist feminist epistemologic methodology. I would cite only women authors, artists, and theorists and ignore the over-saturated male-dominated part of my knowledge. This of course proved to be a deeply problematic process, not least because half way through writing my thesis, I stopped identifying as a woman myself, compromising my strictly-enforced methodology, effectively writing myself out of my own work.



As mentioned above, separatist epistemology has the capacity to effect ethical and epistemic good for the participants in the exercise, but furthermore it also has the capacity to return and distribute this knowledge on a wider scale. An optimistic reading on this might suggest this process of knowledge-return compensates to some extent for the sometimes inaccuracy of it as a process. However, this is dependant on the above described separatist-attentiveness, as well as the consideration that while credibility deficit might be temporarily alleviated in a safe space or consciousness raising group, and this may be an effective way of generating new knowledge, this does not guarantee that that knowledge will be received in wider society; the credibility deficit may remain.

It was significant then that the Van Abbemuseum was the host that enabled this research and the conversa-

tions in the reading group to take place. I understand the undertakings of the Queering the Van Abbemuseum programme, its influence on the collection display, the institutional infrastructure, and the events it runs, including the Queer Reading Group, as a cause for this optimistic reading.

Queering the Van Abbemuseum uses a universalising approach towards queering in that it doesn't wish simply to include more LGBTQI+ constituents or artists, but to think of the museum as queer, with its own queer history, and to consider the issues that come up when thinking about queering as issues that concern everyone. In the Van Abbemuseum this is reflected in how even smaller research projects in the institution facilitate and effect change in the entire system of the museum's infrastructure and methodologies across the board, from its curatorial processes to its bathroom policy.

However, if these processes were replicated in a simply tokenistic capacity, without an attentiveness to the mechanisms at play, and without the listening practices and credibility-redistribution that is central to the Van Abbemuseum's remit, it would run the risk of reproducing the same systems of exclusion and hierarchy. Worse still, this model can even be abused to create a dynamic where the burden lies in the hands of oppressed people to do the labour of producing and distributing knowledge for the common good. The responsibility of education and representation may very well be a secondary concern for those whose oppression has rendered them unable to access credibility. Further, it is important to acknowledge outer limits to this concept, as it does not work on the level of global exchange, many people being beyond access to lines of self-representation contingent in participating in this process. Therefore, there is a modest but



still notable extent to which separatist epistemology can radically alter hegemonies of thought.



Undertaking this research and initiating the Queer Reading Group through the Van Abbemuseum's Deviant Practice programme led to distinct insights into the complex and dialectical nature of separatist epistemology. Through the above examples it has been helpful to think about this issue in terms of a constant struggle between competing needs: the need for normative categories in order to describe the structural prejudices, and the need for it to be acknowledged that these categories often fall short of representing our social reality. Where inequalities remain in place, it remains an ongoing conversation of considerable sensitivity, only resolvable through repeated teaching and learning, articulation and listening, a complex and often high stakes exchange dependant on modesty and trust.

It is necessary also to be alert to the problems of essentialism, binarism, exclusion and gatekeeping, and the reproduction of oppression in this format of thinking. This was the remit of the Queer Reading Group, as well as, on the epistemological end, how the above process affects the production of knowledge in social, political, domestic and educational spheres. The nature of speaking about such variable categories as gender and sexuality lends itself well to the reading group format, as it allows for the necessary contribution of multiple voices. The model of the reading group also has the advantage that it can be replicated, at the Van Abbemuseum and elsewhere. To this end, an illustrated summary of these theories, the reading list, and questions surrounding separatist epistemology will be

published and distributed as a learning tool for the Van Abbemuseum, and other art and educational institutions, which I hope in turn can be used independently by people to facilitate their own research projects or reading groups.

It is impossible for me to hold a definitive separatist or anti-separatist standpoint in all cases. Instead what this research concludes is that what is needed is an attentiveness to separatist epistemology as a tendency, and a means for identifying it, including a consciousness of this tendency in one's own thinking and in principles for organising social space and in categorising and attributing knowledge. My proposal is that we aim to employ separatist epistemology with due caution, and be equipped with its precedents and an awareness of both its potential empowering and marginalising potential.



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**The Van Abbemuseum Queer Reading Group core reading list:**

### Clubs

Feinberg, L. 1993, *Stone Butch Blues*, Chapter 12, [lesliefeinberg.net](http://lesliefeinberg.net).

### Libraries

Plett, C. 2014, "Real Equality", *A Safe Girl to Love*, Topside Press, New York.

### Families

Lorde, A. 1984, *Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response, Sister Outsider*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley.

### Campuses

Ahmed, S. 2015, "Against Students", *Feminist Kill Joys*, [feministkilljoys.com](http://feministkilljoys.com).



# Constituencies- Art-Nexus:

## The Bródno Sculpture Park Case

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Our feasibility study contributes to ongoing debates in institutional practice related to notions such as the deviant museum, museum 3.0, conspiratorial institutions and curatorial open form (Esche 2010; Hudson 2015; Wright 2013; Carrillo 2017; Szreder 2017). These debates are unfolding in reference to such umbrella projects as L'Internationale or the Association of Arte Útil, tackling more general questions on the relationship between public art institutions, constituents and users. Our feasibility study is a continuation of research initiated during the 2016 exhibition *Making Use: Life in Postartistic Times*.<sup>1</sup> That exhibition featured a plethora of plausible art worlds (Basecamp Group & Friends 2013) and cooperative networks; artistic activities offering alternate ways of conceiving what art is, how it is imagined, produced, distributed and appreciated.

With *Making Use*, we actualised in institutional practice a 'curatorial open form' (Szreder 2017), a concept inspired by the work and theory of Oskar Hansen, a visionary architect from Poland, active from the 1950s to the early 2000s. Curatorial open form bends the institutional apparatuses that regulate





exhibition-making, catering instead to art practices that function beyond the gallery-exhibition circuit. The current research project carries on with this basic intuition – of opening up institutional structures – by reflecting on the case of the Bródno Sculpture Park, an experimental, open-air project overseen by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, located in a suburban housing district in Warsaw.

As we will argue, this case engenders the transformation of institutional procedures, which, in order to maintain relevancy, have to deviate from the normative routines of the white cube, embedded in the conventions of modernist art and late capitalist art markets alike. In other words, the connection formed between artistic institutions and constituencies or users prompts processes of institutional experimentation, otherwise difficult to fathom. Just as Jesús Carrillo outlines in the Glossary of Common Knowledge,<sup>2</sup> one can't expect that the organisational mechanisms embedded in the modernist tradition or the art market to be reformed from the inside, criticality or good will is not enough. For institutions to radicalise, they must reach outside, open themselves up to the modes of sustaining artistic activities compatible with constituents who are unfamiliar with the conventions of contemporary art.

We started our research with the notion of deviant art worlds, trying to unearth institutional alternatives which emerge in opposition to the global artistic circulation; alter-institutions of artistic dark matter imagined as temporary autonomous zones of unbridled social creativity, floating beyond the radar of the institutional art world.

But in the process of our research, we arrived at the notion of a constituent-nexus – a phenomenon with the power to transform even core institutional

procedures such as collecting, a statutory function of many museums with the potential to hybridise in negotiation with non-specialist constituents. The Bródno Sculpture Park case furthers ongoing reflection on experimental modes of collecting, tested at the Van Abbemuseum and other partner institutions of L'Internationale. We hope that our study will develop methodologies that can be applied elsewhere, inform further theoretical inquiries, and undermine what Stephen Wright calls the 'conceptual edifices' of contemporary art (Wright 2013); moving beyond the narrow confines of objecthood, ownership, uniqueness or authorial attribution. Such experiments test in practice what collecting in and for the public domain entails: embedded in constituencies and users and not in markets, fairs and financial oligarchies.

## BRÓDNO SCULPTURE PARK

Park Bródnowski was designed by the architect Sylwia Traczyńska in the 1970s. Then, the surrounding area was a commuter town, intended for workers travelling to the other side of the Vistula river, to the city centre of Warsaw. The area was semi-rural, with orchards and agricultural plots, as well as a few simple wooden cottages. The fruit trees – apple, walnut and cherry – are still visible in the park, lending the place its cobbled-together appearance. Today, the park counts 25.4 hectares and is surrounded by residential housing blocks. There is one small commercial shop on site, typical park infrastructure such as benches, rubbish bins and water sources (in this case artificial lakes), as well as recreational infrastructure including a volleyball court, basketball court, ping-pong tables and bike paths.

Paweł Althamer, a social sculptor, spiritual traveler, local animator, and long-time resident of the district





Figure 1 Paweł Althamer, *The Garden of Eden*, 2009, Bródno Sculpture Park, photo: Bartosz Stawiarski, courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

came up with an idea, in 2009, to create an ‘eden’ in Park Bródnowski: a garden sculpture built with the cooperation of friends, family members, the art community, and Bródno residents including children from local primary schools. Composed of various species of tree and shrub, the unassuming sculpture can easily go unnoticed. In the same year, the Bródno Sculpture Park was inaugurated.<sup>3</sup>

*The Garden of Eden* set the tone for the entire initiative. Between 2009 and 2017 some twelve works were introduced to the Bródnowski Park, including commissions by Monika Sosnowska, Jens Haaning and Susan Philipsz. It should be stressed that the park is defined as an exhibition; one that is available all year round. The duration of the project remains unknown and is subject to annual negotiation; at the Museum, the process of expanding in situ projects is considered to have an expiration date of ten to twelve years. The intention is, however, to maintain the final constellation indefinitely.

The term ‘sculpture park’ is misleading. Not all works are tangible, visible or permanent. So far the formats tested include a procession, squatting, New Age music jam, workout and yoga classes, gardening, camping, dance performances and gondola rides. Each of the works presented in the Bródno Sculpture Park has a different character, durability and level of social usefulness.

### A COLLECTION IN A PARK

All but two of the twelve sculptures currently in the park are part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. As it has been and so it will be until the construction of the museum’s building in 2020, the sculpture park remains the only site exhibiting any part of the museum’s permanent collection.

Each of these works presents a case for how a collection, or part thereof, intersects with its live unfolding as an exhibition. A case in point: Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled (overturned teahouse with coffee maker)*, which also goes by the name, *Teahouse*. The ‘teahouse’ dates from the first cycle of activities in the park (summer 2009). Counter to other works commissioned then, this sculpture was a recycled object (first made in 2004) and came from the warehouse of Tiravanija’s Berlin gallerist. Despite the name’s promise, there was no coffee maker inside the sculpture.

Following the opening, the work was subject to the common public sculpture reception of vandalism. There was talk of removing it completely from the park. On the initiative of Michał Mioduszewski, an artist, social psychologist and animator of cultural activities, as well as Bródno resident and long-time collaborator of Paweł Althamer’s, an idea arose to replace the original cube with a copy overseen by



Figure 2 Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (overturned tea house with the coffee maker)*, 2010, Bródno Sculpture Park, photo: Bartosz Stawiarski, courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

Althamer – a modified ‘functional work of art’ complete with a coffee machine upgrade. Mioduszewski’s mandate was that the sculpture should be a meeting place. The museum instigated the conversation on an adaptation and Tiravanija accepted (Sienkiewicz 2017).

In 2010, the work was remade with one major structural alteration: the cube was fitted out with a modulating side, a wing that pops open to form a veranda and to allow access to a ‘service’ window and stairs. The *Teahouse–Teahouse* was born.<sup>4</sup>

The second, third, or certainly acquired life of the *Teahouse*, was thus marked by its co-producers agreement on an explicitly sociable purpose. Payment for goods from the sculpture was structured around the pay-as-you-can model. This transaction was also divorced from a purely financial one – it is permissible to trade a painting for a cup of tea.

Operational in the summer months, the *Teahouse* requires mediation by museum staff from the Depart-

ment of Education, who maintain a roster of workers. Some volunteer their time whereas others are paid for their labour. There are creative workshops such as ceramic schools and children’s lectures, but programming is also pragmatic – for example, the teahouse has been host to council-led discussions on the municipality’s future, including consultation on the extension of the metro line to the district.

## ARCTIC CIRCLE

The 2017 edition of the programme – informed by the Deviant Research framework – was founded on a simple notion: to help the park’s constituents (amongst whom we count museum curators, educators, neighbours, tourists and recreational users of the place) get to know one another better and, in so doing, to think critically about the functioning of the sculpture park and its role as an outdoor, plastic extension of the museum’s collection and education programmes. *Edition IX* carried the moniker *Use It Again*, and did not feature a new sculptural commission – instead the park became a testing ground to rework inherited practices, recycling, repurposing and reevaluating past example for future use.

We came up with various tools for collecting data. More than thirty ‘deviant’ sessions were organised in the park including walks from the Museum on the Vistula (the new seat of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw) to the Bródno Sculpture Park (inspired by Situationist drifts); social consultations; a flying academy hosted at the *Teahouse*; a series of lectures and workshops in the women’s prison; as well as tours led by artists who had realised their works in previous editions, accompanied on occasion by experts such as a geologist or a dietician.



Figure 3 Reenactment held as part of *Use it again*, Bródno Sculpture Park, 2017, photo: Michał Rumas, courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

Key to this action-oriented research and consultation was the establishment of a reenactment group tasked with recreating works of art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in the spirit of a living history lesson. The programme drew from artistic resources kept as instructions at the Museum of Arte Útil, maintained at the Van Abbemuseum, and other sources.<sup>5</sup>

For the conclusion of the reenactment programme – and as an exercise in public museum exchange, restoration and the dissemination of artistic concepts, heartily encouraged by the Van Abbemuseum curator, Nick Aikens – we took on the task of reconstructing a work by Rasheed Araeen: *Arctic Circle*, from 1988. In an email approving our proposal, Araeen provided the instructions: “collect some bottles, make a circle”.

*Arctic Circle* was itself conceived as a reconstruction and critical appropriation of another artist’s work, namely *Circle in Alaska* by Richard Long from 1977 – a work prepared as a circle of driftwood, arranged in situ, overlooking the Bering Strait on the western coast of Alaska. Rasheed Araeen made his own version of the work for an exhibition at The Showroom in London in 1988, out of empty wine and beer bottles – a reference to the high incidence of alcoholism among Aboriginal Canadians on reservations. It was a bitter satire directed at the British artist Long, whose work is oddly apolitical, betraying no allusion to the local context or issues. This work by Long was executed around the same time, in 1977, as another of his works, *Wood Circle* (being almost its replica), which has been on loan to the Van Abbemuseum since that date, and famously saved in a crowdfunding campaign initiated by the citizens of Eindhoven.

The reconstruction of Rasheed Araeen’s work was executed on Saturday 9 September 2017, with the participation of art students, passers-by, parents who took their children to the park, infants playing with bottles, dog owners and representatives of the Warsaw art crowd, who came from the city centre with bags full of empty fancy liquor bottles.<sup>6</sup> Preceded by two short lectures and a question and answer, the reconstruction took less than an hour to complete. The whole process was documented by a drone buzzing above the crowd of accomplices.<sup>7</sup>

## THE METHOD

We consider this project to be the exploratory phase of a more considerable research project. It is a feasibility study that draws out research methodologies, enabling us not only to think about a collection from a distant, academic perspective, but also to act through direct, self-reflective and pragmatically-oriented action research, the aim of which is to inform future developments in institutional practice and to engage in public advocacy for such change. To facilitate this aim, we need to develop a mixed methodology, consisting of methods embedded in both the field of contemporary art and contemporary social theory. Consequently, we have implemented in our research practice methods related to artistic research, action research, pragmatically-oriented sociology of art worlds, and, a critique of both social ontology and political economy of contemporary artistic circulation. We will present them here consecutively, in a logical order, for the sake of clarity, but in research practice they are more enmeshed, overlapping in a process of practice-led inquiry.

As George Yúdice observes in *What's the Use?*, artistic practice has the unique capacity to conduct an epistemic operation of 'abduction' as theorised by Charles Pierce, and similar to how Kant understood imagination (Yúdice 2016). Abduction is a force capable of initiating new, previously inconceivable links between objects, perceptions or ideas. It is a mode of forging new hypotheses, which are not deduced from already existing laws or formulated on the basis of empirical research, putting forward new perspectives on the world, our lives and societies. In the case of conceptual experimentation and our project described earlier, the fundamental hypothesis 'abducted' by artistic research is, to cite Rasheed Araeen:

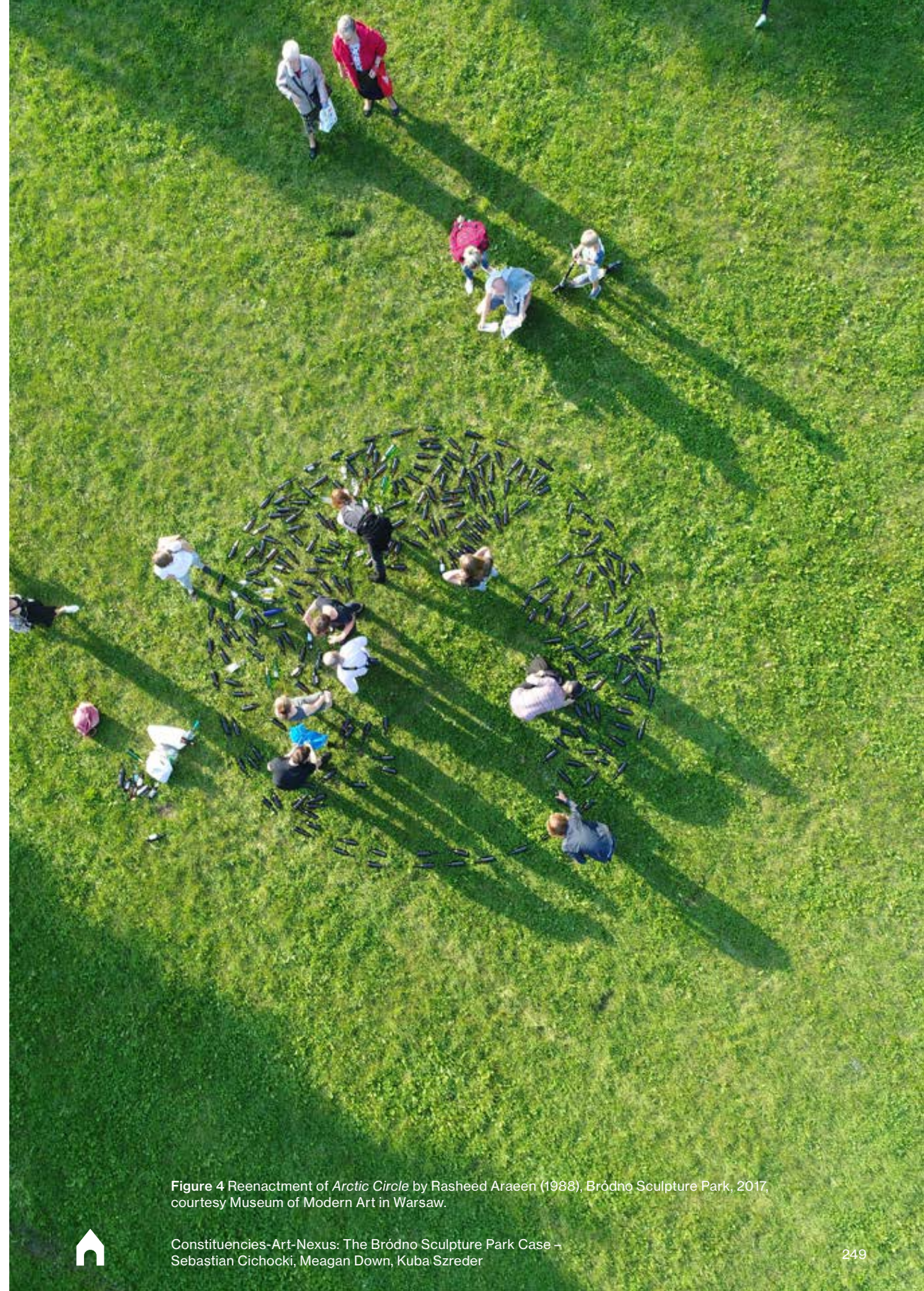


Figure 4 Reenactment of *Arctic Circle* by Rasheed Araeen (1988), Bródno Sculpture Park, 2017, courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.



Figure 5 Reenactment of *Arctic Circle* by Rasheed Araeen (1988), Bródno Sculpture Park, 2017, courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

Ideas as knowledge can never be trapped as the property of an individual or the institution. They can always salvage themselves, give themselves a new context and move forward within the dynamic of new time and space. They can indeed perform a radically new transformative function in dealing with today's situation. But for this art must go beyond what prevails as art and integrate itself with the collective struggle of life today to recover its true social function and become a radical force of the twenty-first century. [...] It is in fact artistic imagination, not the art object, which once freed from the self-destructive narcissist ego, can enter this life and offer it not only salvation but put it on path to a better future. (Araeen 2010, p. 158)

**Blinded by the commodification of art (its presupposed elitism or subsumption to late capitalism), we frequently forget the simple truth that – at least in some contexts – art can become a communal luxury (Rifkin 2016), a form of really useful knowledge (Byrne 2016), a critical spirit embedded in everyday life, a mode of infinite ideation (Roberts 2008), a kind of pragmatic idealism, which is not simply conflated with social practice, but can offer something unique to engaged constituents (even by provoking them). This kind of power can be actualised only in specific circumstances, when institutions hybridise with constituents, when they open up to users, when they devise institutional procedures of sustaining such modes of practice.**

**By adding these conditions, we arrive at a more specific hypothesis, informing the action research part of our process. This hypothesis states that art institutions can and actually do devise institutional mechanisms of collecting in and for the public domain by becoming not owners but custodians of artistic ideas, which can be applied in social praxis by various constituents and**

users. Action research itself is a form of sociological research which aims to enhance the reflectivity of the agents involved, with a clear orientation towards the processes of social emancipation (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). According to the methodological premises of action research, the research is conducted in close cooperation with the institutions or communities involved, critically and reflectively supporting the development of social practice, in our case the practice of collecting.

Obviously, the question is how to track this process. What happens when artistic ideas intertwine with social practice? In keeping with developments in research methodologies, our proposal is to engage hybrid methods of art theory, pragmatist sociology and contemporary ethnography (Rakowski 2013; Sansi-Roca 2015). In the case of this sculpture park, we created a mixed group of art historians, sociologists, curators and ethnographers, who together conducted qualitative field research, embedded observation, critical auto-ethnography, and qualitative interviews. Combined, this constitutes a pragmatist sociology of emergent art worlds – a chart of emergent artistic and institutional practice from the worm-hole perspective of artistic activities and the people involved in them.

However, the research should not stop at this point, as we would risk idealising on the ground operations at a micro level, while in fact every institution, every artist and every constituent partakes in the wider field of social forces, both internal and external to artistic circulation, such as authoritarian politics or the financialisation of the global economy. For this reason, the pragmatist sociology of art worlds should conclude with a critical phase, scrutinising both the political economy and social ontology of artistic circulation,

which can illuminate viable modes of rearranging institutional practice. To facilitate free movement in artistic ideas – as described by Rasheed Araeen – one needs to come up with ways of sustaining the public domain in which our ideas are embedded. Critique supports conceptual developments, which overcome the conceptual edifices of contemporary art, freeing artistic agency from its entanglement in concepts like objecthood and ownership, which ossify artistic facts as collectible objects and support the art market.

Only through practical and theoretical work can an institution establish itself as a custodian of ideas, embedding them in the public domain, facilitating their flow, tending to their application, and informing their constituents about the wealth of artistic imagination to be made use of. As Araeen has written, such modulation of institutional practice can sustain aesthetics for the twenty-first century: artistic imagination becoming life itself to cope with a triple disaster of fascism, neoliberalism and ecological meltdown.

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## NOTES

1. *Making Use: Life in Postartistic Times*, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 19 February–1 May 2016, curated by Sebastian Cichocki and Kuba Szreder, shadow curator Stephen Wright, research Meagan Down, Szymon Maliborski, Szymon Żydek, <https://makinguse.artmuseum.pl/en/>.

2. The Glossary of Common Knowledge is part of a five-year programme *The Uses of Art – The Legacy of 1848 and 1989* led by L'Internationale, a confederation of museums: <http://glossary.mg-lj.si>.

3. The collaboration is mediated by three parties: Paweł Althamer, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, and the Targówek City Council. *Editions* (during which new sculpture projects are introduced to the park) take place yearly, in summer. From 2011, the museum began to formalise the acquisition of sculptures in the park. Budgets are negotiated between the museum and the City of Warsaw's Bureau of Culture, yet funding for public programming has on occasion come independently from small NGOs.

4. By November 2011, the work had been formally acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, entering the collection as a donation from the artist, Paweł Althamer. The work, nevertheless, remains attributed to Rirkrit Tiravanija. In gathering materials on the Bródno case, we remained close to the institution, reviewing practice by way of anecdote and recollection from the curator, producer, administrator, conservator, educator and collection manager; by reading the artist's instructions; by cross-checking our own historical field work; and by reviewing the contractual documents drawn between the institution and the author. Here, a debt is also acknowledged to Karol Sienkiewicz's recently published *Patriota Wszechświata. O Pawle Althamerze*, a meticulously crafted account of Althamer's practice and persona.

5. Reenactments included Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Little Sparta* (1966) and Sol LeWitt's *Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but Little Value* (1968), amongst others.

6. Again, the context of the reconstruction in 2017 was different and we were surprised by the outrage this exercise provoked. We were accused by town hall officials of making a critical comment on the alcoholism amongst local inhabitants and the misuse of the park features as a hidden drinking spot. The action, one of several in the public programme in the park that year, was considered to be an unlawful assembly, but in the end it wasn't stopped by the authorities.

7. It is worth mentioning that some of the participants were members of the Consortium for Postartistic Practices, a loose association of artists using their competence to contribute visually and acoustically to political protests in Poland. In August 2017 members of the group reconstructed a performance by the Polish performance group Akademia Ruchu (Academy of Movement), from 1980: *Justice is the guarantee of strength and endurance in the Republic of Poland* in the front of the Presidential Palace. Documentation of the reenactment can be viewed on "Protesting Images", *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, no. 17, 2017, <http://www.pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/524/997>.

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# Authors' Biographies

**Nick Aikens'** practice encompasses curating, editing, writing and teaching. He is a curator at the Van Abbemuseum (since 2012) where he leads the Deviant Archive research programme. He is a Research Affiliate, CCC at the Visual Arts Department, HEAD, Geneva (since 2016) and a member of the editorial board for *L'Internationale Online* (since 2013). He is a course leader at the Dutch Art Institute (since 2013) and was recently a tutor at the Design Academy Eindhoven (2015-17).

**Michael Karabinos** is an archival theorist based in Amsterdam. He received his PhD from Leiden University in 2015. Combining questions on the nature of archives with their role in the decolonisation of Southeast Asia, he has had work published in *Bijdragen tot de land- taal- en volkenkunde*, *Information & Culture*, and the *Journal of Contemporary Archival Science*, amongst others, and is co-editor of the book *Colonial Legacy in Southeast Asia: The Dutch Archives*. He is a former visiting fellow at Nanyang Technological University (Singapore) and previously served as the director of the National Geographic Map Collection in Washington, DC (USA).

**Petra Ponte** is a freelance curator, cultural producer and researcher based in Amsterdam. She holds a BA in Theatre Studies and an MA in Contemporary Art History from the University of Amsterdam. Her recent projects include: *Museum des Geldes. Musée des sacrifices. a gathering* (Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 2018) *A Rap on Race Revisited* (das weisse haus, 2016, Read My World: Black USA at Framer Framed, 2017) *prospects. a recital* (Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 2015).

**Winnie Sze** is a freelance art curator, based in Cape Town, South Africa. Previously she ran a project space in London, U.K.

**Sara Giannini** is a semiotician, curator and writer based in Amsterdam. Her engagement with the curatorial arises from the desire to enable autonomous spaces of artistic expression and disciplinary transvestitism. Long term projects include 'the VOLUME project', (Beirut, 2013-2014), the web-publishing platform *Unfold* (2015-), and the series 'Heterotropics' (Amsterdam, 2016).

**Brook Andrew** is an interdisciplinary artist who examines dominant narratives, often relating to colonialism and modernist histories. Through museum and archival interventions, he aims to make forgotten stories visible and offer alternative choices for interpreting history in the world today. Apart from drawing inspiration from vernacular objects and the archive he travels internationally to work with communities and various private and public collections.

**susan pui san lok** is an artist and writer based in London, working across installation, moving image, sound, performance and text. Recent exhibitions include *Diaspora Pavilion* coinciding with the 57th Venice Biennale, and the 1st Asia Biennial / 5th Guangzhou Triennial. Solo shows include CFCCA, QUAD, BFI Southbank and Beaconsfield (all UK), and MAI (Montreal).

**Charl Landvreugd** examines the visual strategies used by Dutch Afro artists with a focus on the production of cultural citizenship. He argues that the dialogue dominated by postcolonial theory is not always adequate to describe the specific nature of Dutch and continental European Afro art production. He argues for a local language and concepts which recognises the sensitivities and artistic expression which are typical of the region. As an artist/researcher, Landvreugd creates sculptures, installations, performances, photographs, videos, texts and exhibitions. Since 2009, his work has been presented in the US, UK, the Caribbean, Senegal and the Netherlands. He is published in magazines such as *ARC*, *Small Axe*, *Open Arts Journal* and several catalogues. Landvreugd studied at Goldsmiths College, London and Columbia University in New York.

**Eimear Walshe** is an artist and writer from Longford, Ireland, and holds a BA and MA from NCAD, Dublin. Walshe's work seeks to reconcile queer histories with personal or local narratives through a diverse engagement with academic research, critical art writing, biography, museum mediation, and activism, informed by their background in sculptural practice.

**Sebastian Cichocki** is a curator, writer and art critic. He is chief curator of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and curator of the Sculpture Park in the Warsaw district of Bródno. From 2005 to 2008 he was programme director of the Contemporary Art Centre in Bytom. Cichocki's main focus is the conceptual reflection in art, land art, and the book as a form of exhibition. He has curated a number of solo and group exhibitions including Monika Sosnowska's presentation in the Polish Pavilion at the 52nd, and Yael Bartana at the 54th Venice Biennale. He has produced a number of experimental exhibitions in the form of books, as well as residency programmes and staged lectures. Cichocki lives and works in Warsaw.

**Meagan Down** is a graduate of the University of Melbourne and Deakin University. She is an editor in the publication department at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. In 2016 she was part of the research team contributing to the exhibition *Making Use: Life in Postartistic Times*. In 2015 she co-authored the Collection Documentation Project (with Katia Szczeka and Agnieszka Wielocha), devoted to conservation-oriented research on the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

**Kuba Szreder** is a graduate of sociology at Jagiellonian University (Krakow). In 2015, he was awarded a practice-based PhD from Loughborough University School of the Arts. He works as Lecturer at the theoretical department of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. In his interdisciplinary projects he carries out artistic and organizational experiments, hybridizing art with other domains of life. In 2009 he initiated Free / Slow University of Warsaw, with which he completed several inquiries in to the political economy of contemporary artistic production. He is editor and author of several catalogues, readers, book chapters and articles. In his most recent book *ABC of Projectariat* (2016, Polish edition), he scrutinises economic and governmental aspects of project-making and their impact on an 'independent' curatorial practice.

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