

Curating the Stedelijk Collection:

A Roundtable Discussion

Present are Beatrix Ruf (Artistic Director, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam), Bart van der Heide (Chief Curator, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam), Bart Rutten (at the time of the roundtable Head of Collections, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, currently director of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht), and Margriet Schavemaker (curator and Manager Education, Interpretation, and Publications, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam). Moderated by Fieke Konijn and Rachel Esner, editors of this issue of Stedelijk Studies. Transcript and edits by Christel Vesters.

This roundtable discussion was organized in December 2016 on the occasion of the current edition of *Stedelijk Studies*, which centers on the theme of *Curating the Collection*. Increasingly, museums, both nationally and internationally, are formulating new ways of engaging with their collections and showing them. Currently, with plans to rehang its own renowned collection and introduce an ongoing, research-based program that will critically reflect on and continuously (re)contextualize the artworks and themes it represents, the Stedelijk Museum provides an interesting case study in relation to the topics discussed in this issue. While reading this transcript, it is important to keep in mind that the conversation reflects discussions that took place early in the re-installation process.

The new collection presentation, called *Stedelijk Base*, will occupy the whole of the museum's new wing. As its name suggests, the installation includes the most important and popular pieces from the collection. Renowned architect Rem Koolhaas/OMA has been selected to design a scenographic display in which a chronological reading of the collection is juxtaposed with a more associative encounter. In the museum's new setup, the ground floor of the historic building will be dedicated solely to the exhibition program *Stedelijk Turns*. Taking the collection and *Stedelijk Base* as its starting point, *Stedelijk Turns* will consist of exhibitions that vary in size, along with lectures, symposia, performances, and a wide range of educational activities. The collection display and the research-based *Stedelijk Turns* will be complemented by a third strand of programming, *Stedelijk Now*, comprising temporary

exhibitions. All three strands promote an interdisciplinary approach and aim to engage a wide audience.

The following discussion is divided into three parts: the first addresses the meta-subjects and points of departure that informed the Stedelijk's plans for its new collection presentation; the second poses questions about the more concrete form, content, and mode of display; and the third examines the position of the Stedelijk within the current debate on art historical canon, curatorial strategies, and the role of visual culture in society.

1. New Ways of Curating a Collection

Fieke Konijn / Rachel Esner:

As mentioned in this issue's editorial, there is a visible trend that collection presentations increasingly have the character of exhibitions that are on display for an extended period. The Stedelijk Museum is also working on a new display for the collection. Where did you find the inspiration for your way of working?

What are your examples? And what distinguishes the Stedelijk Museum itself? In other words, what makes the new collection presentation of the Stedelijk Museum so special?

Bart Rutten:

During this process of rearranging, we have definitively been inspired by the examples of other museums. I have always looked with great interest at the Centre Pompidou, and what happened there in the field of collection and collection presentations, although their collection presentation is very large in scale and therefore perhaps too much of a maze. What I find sympathetic with regard to our plans is that the collection continues to be presented in different configurations: you keep the highlights, shown in a unique display, as a core and—at the same time, at a next level—we have made a circular movement around the collection through active research. This way makes it possible that, as a visitor, you are able to constantly see different angles and perspectives.

I believe it is precisely this connection between the “slow line” of the collection presentation, on the one hand, and the exhibitions and presentations with a more inquisitive and discursive approach to the collection, on the other, that activates the collection.

Rachel Esner:

How did you arrive at your selection of highlights for *Stedelijk Base*? What narrative, what parameters, did you follow?

Bart Rutten:

When selecting the highlights we were not only looking at the “masterpieces” based on the number of times they have been depicted in art historical publications, which is a slightly old fashioned way to determine the meaning and value of an artwork. Instead, we asked our tour-guides and education and communication staff members about the audience’s favorite artworks, and we also researched search commands online to see which artworks from our collection have been looked up by the audience the most. Through these paths you get different indications than through traditional means. In our selection of core works, the so-called *Stedelijk Base*, not only did we integrate the canon-confirming structures, but also a number of works that are favored by a wider audience. This way, we determined a list of twenty-five “highlights” with which we formed clusters. Each cluster has been formed around the question of how each work relates to the rest of the collection and what the specific stories are that they tell.

Rachel Esner:

Can you give examples of artworks that at first were not being considered, but are now? What new stories are coming to the surface through your research method?

Bart Rutten:

A good example is the *Knotted Chair* by Marcel Wanders from 1995–1996. Many of the curators found this a peculiar work in the selection, because they did not consider this work to be one of the highlights. It was included in the selection not because of its importance to the history of design, but by popular demand.

Fieke Konijn:

The popularity of this work can also be explained because it has been exhibited in the museum over the past few years, and there were posters all over the city. Therefore, in this case, the popularity is to a great extent dependent on the recent visibility of the work. Have you also taken this into account?

Bart Rutten:

Yes, that’s right, but it does not only apply to the *popular* vote. When Ann Goldstein was director, she always showed a painting by Charley Toorop, *Working Class Woman* (1943). When an artist or a work is brought to the surface again, this invites people to relate to them in a new way.

Fieke Konijn:

The 1970s model of a frozen canon representing one vision—a single perspective on the development of the visual arts—has of course been criticized for a long time from different perspectives: global art, naive art, feminism, etc. But a counter-narrative is still a narrative. So the

question I am interested in is, what is the narrative or counter-narrative that you are proposing in the new collection display?

Beatrix Ruf:

Since the end of the 1990s and during the 2000s, museums like the Centre Pompidou have tried to look beyond the classical canon presentation and experimented with different formats like the thematic, period-based, monographic or chronological. We can learn from that, because every model has its limitations. Numerous ways of breaking away from the linear approach of the canon have already been “tested”; some are successful, others may be less so.

Bart Rutten:

In a way we also grappled with this notion of the canon, but we didn't want to discard it. The canon of Western art is undeniably part of our collection, but our collection is not a one-on-one representation of the canon either. There are plenty of artists and art movements that are not represented in our collection.

For the Stedelijk, the collection is part of our DNA; it is the Stedelijk's own version of the history of modern, predominantly Western, art. It was formed by the preferences and interests of the various directors, and the local and international artists and art movements that have been closely related to the Stedelijk in the last century.

To be honest, I don't know if it is still constructive to think along the lines of narrative and counter-narrative, or in terms of adaptation or modification of the existing canon. I also think that one of the obstacles is the transformation of a collection and the history of art; namely, that art history can be compelling in its dictates as to what is “good” or “not good” art.

Beatrix Ruf:

It's a merger. Our research into the collection, specifically into the question of what works of art are canon-affirming, revealed a plurality of histories and a plurality of perspectives. All of these histories together form the collection of the Stedelijk Museum and represent its DNA.

Fieke Konijn:

I think what is typical or characteristic of the Stedelijk's collection, or its DNA, is that there are obvious gaps; for instance, Surrealism is hardly present in the collection. But, on the other hand, under the directorship of Edy de Wilde (1963–1985), a lot of space was dedicated to Art Brut and Dubuffet, whose works haven't been on display as part of the collection for a long time. Different parts of the collection reemerge at different moments and disappear again later.

Bart Rutten:

Those tendencies we know, of course, and those changes often have to do with what is happening now, in art or culture in general. Therefore, I don't believe that collections or collection presentations should be fixed for the next hundred years; they are living organisms.

Margriet Schavemaker:

Exactly, that's why it is so important to look at *Stedelijk Base* in dialogue with the *Stedelijk Turns* program, in which these issues will be constantly questioned and in which we, together with partners from outside the museum, can point precisely to the multiplicity of the stories in the collection, but also to its aberrations and blind spots; and, most importantly, can react to contemporary issues. The program provides various counter-narratives, which can then possibly lead to a change in the collection display in the lower-level gallery—for example, by adding a different cluster or replacing certain works, or by organizing a symposium or creating another exhibition within the *Stedelijk Turns* program. In this respect the collection display, including the highlights and the thematic clusters, forms the foundation of the museum, while *Stedelijk Turns* can be seen as the engine that continues to animate and activate the collection.

Rachel Esner:

So, if the collection is a reservoir of stories and ideas, and consists of different perspectives, what role does the split between abstraction/expression/social engagement (as introduced in the visions of assistant director Jaffé and director Sandberg, in particular) play in the collection presentation and the *Stedelijk Turns* program?

Beatrix Ruf:

This trio of terms—abstraction/expression and social engagement—functioned as a starting point for our process of rethinking the collection, but we let go of them along the way. Yet all three of these concepts, in varying degrees, have been significant in the history of the museum and go back to museums' engagement with avant-garde movements like De Stijl. Rather than thinking in periods or categories, we want to explore what lines we can draw from those early examples of art and social engagement, or abstractions, to contemporary art.

Fieke Konijn:

I am still wondering what the narrative thread is in the story you want to tell about the art of the twentieth century. Is it, despite the new setup and the experimental *Stedelijk Turns* program, not simply inspired by the classical modernist narrative around formal and artistic innovation? The artist who always keeps innovating? Or the artist who is engaging with society?

Beatrix Ruf:

Indeed, there are always different aspects to one story, and it is the obligation of a museum to communicate these, because we are also an educational institution. We approach education from this plural perspective: you can confirm the canon, but you can also explore other things that can be read or said about and through that canon.

2. Questions of Display and Mediation

Rachel Esner:

Can you tell us a bit more about what this means for the new display of the collection? Based on the plans we have seen so far, it looks as if you have abandoned any chronological ordering.

Bart Rutten:

This certainly applies to our overall view of the collection, but *Stedelijk Base* will work with chronology. The exhibition on the ground floor is arranged in such a way that when you enter the room, to your right you first encounter some of the oldest works in the collection and then, as you go around, along the outer walls of the hall, you are chronologically led by the collection, ending with the most recent works. The art from the 1950s to 1970s has been given an important role, because this art has been released from its status as object and is much more about processes, interventions, and performances. This moment in the history of art is also an important moment in the history of the Stedelijk Museum itself.

Fieke Konijn:

Can you say something about the way in which you formatted the so-called *clusters*, the groupings of artworks and design objects that occupy the space in Rem Koolhaas's design of freestanding walls? There seem to be three different types of clusters: some are based on movements like Bauhaus or Abstract Expressionism; others are grouped around formal or material aspects such as "objet trouvé" or "movement," and there are still other clusters that focus on bigger and broader themes, like "gender", "waste" or "portraits of violence." How did you come to these themes, and how are they still developing? And, as a second question: how do you deal with the limitations that are involved in these kinds of thematic frameworks? It seems that one can often place work in more than one theme.

Bart Rutten:

The so-called clusters were formed over a long process of thoughtful deliberation, not just with the collection curators. We also discussed them together with all of the departments, because one of our goals was to approach these specific points of focus in the collection from an

interdisciplinary perspective. The clusters need to be seen in relation to the highly dense, chronologically ordered storyline that is shown on the four walls of the exhibition space. The groupings of artworks in the inner space are curated along different storylines, placing different accents: they can offer a more in-depth view into one specific oeuvre (monographic); focus on a regional or historical context (geographic or historic); or a genre (formal category) or movement within modern and contemporary art. All of the clusters will have a semi-permanent status, and new information and insights inspired by the different research projects of *Stedelijk Turns*, or acquisitions from *Stedelijk Contemporary* exhibitions, may prompt modification of their composition.

Beatrix Ruf:

We are very aware of the limiting aspects of thematic categories, and this is something we really try to address and break away from in the *Stedelijk Turns* activities, as well as in the clusters. One way of doing that is by regularly changing and updating the clusters, and by examining how a thematic category may—temporarily—limit the interpretation of a work.

Bart Rutten:

OMA's unique "open and dialogical" design of the *Stedelijk Base* presentation creates the possibility to view the artworks in different relations to each other. The exhibition model breaks away from traditional linear ordering and creates new, multi-perspective encounters across stylistic periods and disciplines.

Fieke Konijn:

How are you planning to inform visitors about the different storylines and relationships in the collection?

Margriet Schavemaker:

There will be wall texts and audio-tours in which attention is given to the general art historical background information and that also offer more in-depth information from curators. It is precisely the open nature of the floor plan that makes it possible to establish various visual links between the works, some of which are further illustrated in the audio-tour and in the wall texts. For a museum it is very important that you communicate on different levels about the work using approachable, accessible, and challenging content, so that different audiences are attracted.

Rachel Esner:

But how do you prevent a certain arbitrariness in the combinations?

Margriet Schavemaker:

I don't think that randomness is an issue or a risk. It's just to tell stories; in this case, the different stories that are raised by the Stedelijk's collection and the institutional history of the Stedelijk itself. It's always "our" story. And besides that, the chronological circulation of the work on the outer walls remains a good guideline.

Rachel Esner:

So this means that works of art, like, for instance, a painting by Marlene Dumas, can change position? If you intend to show all disciplines together, how will you deal with different display requirements?

Beatrix Ruf:

Luckily, museum technology has improved quite a bit, and today we can create and adjust lighting conditions in the museum that are suitable for all types of art. In fact, even now there is no daylight entering the rooms. All light you see is artificial.

And with regard to the different display modes of a chair, an object on a pedestal, or a painting on the wall, there is a lot of room for experiment here. We are examining different options as we speak, but sometimes we also have to choose the conventional option, because it is simply the best way to show that particular work of art or design.

Rachel Esner:

Can you tell us something about the process and the people involved in the concept for the redesign?

Bart van der Heide:

This has been a process of research and discussion where all disciplines within the museum, the curatorial teams responsible for paintings, video, photography, design, textiles, etc., but also the departments of education were involved. This way, many things came to the fore that we would otherwise not have anticipated. Integration is an important focus in the new way of working that we have implemented in the museum. We not only see this integrated vision applying to the way in which we deal with our collection, but also within the structure of the organization and in our cooperation with other institutions.

Margriet Schavemaker:

This integrated approach is also reflected in our thinking about audiences. Throughout our entire program the variety of audiences has been key; this means that we not only develop niche projects for the experts, but we also show highlights from the collection, as the largest museum for modern and contemporary art and design in the Netherlands should. The Stedelijk is a kind of "mother museum" in which we bring multiple audiences and voices together.

Fieke Konijn:

Maybe this is a good moment to talk about your plans for the *Stedelijk Turns* program, which, if I understand correctly, will be based on longer-term research into the collection, which can then be presented to the public in different formats, like exhibitions, seminars, or publications. Can you say something about the ways in which research is at the center of this strand of programming, and how it relates to the exhibition of the collection?

Margriet Schavemaker:

The *Stedelijk Turns* initiative centers on approaching, interpreting, and presenting the museum collection in an experimental way, with no distinction between art and design. Not only does the program examine different artworks, bodies of work, movements, topics, and narratives that are represented in our collection, it also explores the rich history of the institution and its archives. In this way the collection will be activated, constantly, from different perspectives and with topics that are urgent today. In a way the *Stedelijk Turns* program is very much based in the here and now, in the issues and topics that are currently pressing in our artistic and social landscape, with the historical collection as our main sparring partner. Current artistic and sociopolitical issues are the resource for the presentations; the collection will be used to shape a theme or issue, rather than the other way around. Another important aspect of the *Stedelijk Turns* program will be the collaborations with other (art) institutions, universities, researchers, curators, and experts outside the artistic field. They will play an important role in the development of the program by bringing new knowledge and perspectives to our collection, and by expanding the research of our collection beyond the walls of our museum.

Fieke Konijn:

Can you elaborate on the notions of “trans-historicity” and “trans-disciplinarity”? How are these important to both the *Stedelijk Turns* program and the *Stedelijk Base* exhibition?

Margriet Schavemaker:

The research-driven *Stedelijk Turns* presentations will be interdisciplinary at their heart, but certainly also trans-historical. We will look at the collection from the standpoint of current issues and themes, such as “migration,” and discover new storylines and relationships between structures and practices over the years.

Bart Rutten:

These concepts are certainly leading to exhibitions and similar projects to be developed within the *Stedelijk Turns* program, but also for the exhibition highlights, though perhaps somewhat less explicitly. All these storylines, through histories, geographies and disciplines gain meaning

when they are shown next to each other and in relation to one another. In that sense you could call the *Stedelijk Base* exhibition both “trans-historical” and “trans-disciplinary.”

Bart van der Heide:

This is also one of the reasons why we have chosen to move the collection presentation from the historical building to the new building; the architecture of the historical building, with its succession of galleries, is designed for a linear presentation of the collection. The new arrangement makes it possible to roam visually and physically through the space.

Beatrix Ruf:

I think we are living in a time when we need to tackle our own dogmas, and maybe chronology is one of them. Don't get me wrong: chronology is useful in order to read the moment before, and the one before that, and to understand how certain steps have been taken. To understand what they—artists, among others—picked up in terms of ideas, positions, practices, techniques, etc., and what they left behind. All of those things are important aspects of a chronological reading. But maybe there are other, different readings that are possible as well. Until now, the reading of the collection in the *Stedelijk* has been a one-way street, moving from one formalism to the next.

Trans-historicity doesn't mean that you have to lose or abandon chronology. You can still read linear histories, be it in the collection or in individual artists' practices, but it also means that you can go beyond them. I think this is the attitude we are adopting throughout the institution: for *Stedelijk Base*, *Stedelijk Turns*, the changing exhibitions, and for our education and interpretation programs.

Another one of these loaded terms that we may have to give up is “interdisciplinary.” It is really old-fashioned, I think, because it presumes that the disciplines continue to exist as they are in the exchange. I think when you break open the disciplines you break open our way of thinking in disciplines. Then you have to let go of the ownership, authority, and hierarchy that comes with this way of thinking.

3. The *Stedelijk* in Context

Fieke Konijn:

This seems like a major change compared to the traditional position of the *Stedelijk* Museum, which has always been very artist-centered—an “artists' museum.” Do these new plans mean that the notion of the artists' museum will disappear in favor of the public museum?

Beatrix Ruf:

Actually, I don't believe that there is such a thing as an artists' museum or “artist-driven museum.” The best thing a museum can do is to be informed by artists and by what

artists do. *Artist-driven* in the Stedelijk means that we work very closely with artists, and these close collaborations and dialogues have informed our vision and ideas for the current reconfiguration of the collection. Ideas regarding the post-medium condition, or contemporaneity, come straight from the artists' practices we engage with as a museum. The Jon Rafman and Jordan Wolfson exhibitions that were on display in 2016 and 2017 are good examples in this regard. But we also shouldn't ignore or undervalue the work that is done by a museum and its staff, be they curators, educators, etc. An artist-driven museum means that we must be highly professional in translating artists' practices, and not necessarily give them *carte blanche*.

Rachel Esner:

So the point is that everything is always a bit curator-driven in a museum anyway?

Beatrix Ruf:

Yes. But I think the important question here is: how does an institution act? For instance, the yearlong "exhibition" program we did with Tino Sehgal could only have happened here, at the Stedelijk Museum. No other museum could have done that, or would have taken that on. So yes, the Stedelijk Museum has a history, or a DNA as we like to call it, which is open to being changed or influenced through its artists. But, again, I think that is something different than being an artist-driven institute.

This new *modus operandi* that we are trying to establish within the museum is not only informed by the artists we work with or artists' practices today, but also by being in contact with the way the world is now: aspects like post-mediality, and shared or collective creativity; these are the conditions of reality today. So the conditions of everyday life—not only the arts—are entering the museum.

To come back to the question of "medium," and the notion of trans- or post-mediality: what we are trying to do goes much further than breaking down the barriers between visual art, design, and graphic design. I think it is also important to look at the notion of contemporaneity and facing the contemporary condition in the visual arts. How do we deal with specializations or the organization of institutions in different media departments, and with the authority and expertise they claim? I think that the common understanding today is that specialization is good, but that there is no such thing as ownership by the departments anymore.

This is why it is important to encourage communication between the different specialisms, the different departments, which, on the scale that the Stedelijk Museum operates, is a much easier task than at the MoMA, for instance, where every discipline and department has its own head and senior curators. The Stedelijk Museum is a much smaller and more flexible organization in that respect.

Rachel Esner:

Does this mean that your aim is to present a new vision—or reading—of the art of the twentieth century? One that is not determined by disciplines, but in which there is also still use of a chronological order?

Beatrix Ruf:

I am not saying that at the Stedelijk we have found the golden rule, but we have really invested in looking at, and learning from, our “easy tricks,” by breaking up the ways in which we are conditioned to work and think.

Bart van der Heide:

Another important point is the legitimacy of the museum today, in society. As an institution, we need to keep an open attitude towards society and be open to current developments and issues in the community you are engaging with. That way we can let go of our (supposedly) authoritative position.

Margriet Schavemaker:

Indeed, and this open attitude is mainly embodied in the *Stedelijk Turns* program, in which we, in collaboration with various partners from the academic and cultural fields, look at the collection of the Stedelijk in relation to contemporary issues. The permanent collection presentation forms the basis for this more dynamic and flexible approach to the collection. I think that it is this very dichotomy and exchange that makes it strong.

Stedelijk Turns has a different educational approach. For the *Stedelijk Base* exhibition we envision to show the public's favorites and place them, in an associative manner, within fields of potential new connections. On the other hand, for the *Stedelijk Turns* program we choose to emphasize more discursive forms of research.

Bart Rutten:

In that respect our approach fits with the expectations that the public poses to a museum today; the public has become much more vocal and, in some senses, better informed; a museum that directly says: “This is how it is, and no further questions” simply does not answer to these expectations. Museums must continue to reinvent, and I think the Stedelijk Museum can be a leader in this.

Fieke Konijn:

How does the Stedelijk Museum position itself internationally with these plans?

There was a time when the Stedelijk was expected to operate on the same level as the so-called “Big Three” (MoMA, Tate and Centre Pompidou), but I don't think that's realistic these days. Not only because of scale and budget, but because the Stedelijk's collection is really specific to the

museum and cannot be compared with those of the other museums.

Beatrix Ruf:

If I look at the history and the DNA of the Stedelijk, then it has always been considered an international museum—a museum that both projects and attracts internationally. The reason why the Stedelijk has been mentioned in relation to the Big Three, so to speak, is because it has always been an example for those museums. It has always been a kind of model museum in terms of the experiments it allows itself to engage in, the risks it allows itself to take. So, in that respect, it is in the same line as the Tate, MoMA and Centre Pompidou, but it is on the margin of that line: small enough to be experimental, and big or heavyweight enough to be of importance. That's a very precious position to be in.

The other museums are thinking about the same things, especially with regard to their collection and collection displays, but because of our unique position and DNA, the Stedelijk can be much more experimental and take more risks. I believe this is the same with our position in the Netherlands. We are in a way both a model museum and a national “mother museum.”