



Commotion in the arts

Changing Europe, Changing Arts #1

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The world would not look the same without art. But this observation does not answer the question of how art manifests itself in society, or how artists take account of the environment in which they work, let alone what the current state of social acceptance of the arts is. The new SICA EUNIC series *Changing Europe Changing Arts* investigates the role and significance of the arts in present-day Europe by presenting artistic initiatives that take a changing society as their starting point. The first edition focused on the Rumanian project laBOMBA and the Dutch Van Abbemuseum.

On the surface it may seem pretty clear cut: LaBOMBA in Bucharest stands for accessible ‘active art’ for and by inhabitants of the Rahova-Uranus neighbourhood. In contrast, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven is a prime example of an institute dedicated to modern and contemporary art. A community centre versus a temple of art: it appears to be a perfect illustration of the separate worlds of community arts and the art establishment. But on closer inspection the dividing line between the two is not as clear cut as it might seem.

A creative war of attrition

LaBOMBA operates in a neighbourhood of Bucharest that has been left the worse for wear by the twentieth century and whose inhabitants only rarely fit in with the lofty plans of the authorities. Neither do the present-day inhabitants conform to the ideal of wealthy citizens that the local authorities project these days. As a result, the threat of mass evictions looms over them. The plight of these people drew the attention of a group of artists who took up residence in an empty discothèque in the area. Together with the inhabitants, they started to develop projects in a variety of artistic disciplines, including dance and music sessions with children and catwalk shows featuring clothes designed by the model’s mothers and aunts and by other women in the neighbourhood.

The idea behind it is that jointly determining the course of something ‘larger than oneself’ helps boost moral and helps the people in the neighbourhood to develop strategies to avoid being left empty-handed in confrontations with the local authorities. For example: how do you start a dialogue with a mayor who is not really interested in your problems, let alone prepared to take any responsibility for them? The solution? Stage a disturbance by positioning a tank lorry in the middle of a busy crossing, with a woman on top threatening to blow herself up, and record the ensuing events with a video camera. Mobilise people and use theatrical methods to steer a situation in your favour as an unadulterated piece of active art.

LaBOMBA creates commotion and attention, for the moment at least. But there are doubts about the long-term effect of the actions. Maria Draghici and Irina Gadiuta of laBOMBA acknowledge that there is always a risk of disappointment, because the projects can never fulfil all the expectations of the participants in the neighbourhood, which makes it hard to keep everyone involved. Perhaps the best way to describe laBOMBA’s offensive is as a creative war of attrition for the artists involved.

Masks off!

Taking a position and provoking reactions through artistic interventions also generated newspaper interest in the Van Abbemuseum's project *Be(com)ing Dutch* and even led to questions being posed in parliament. Two years after the project finished, curator Annie Fletcher looks back on the events. Much has been said and written about *Be(com)ing Dutch*. Fletcher has the feeling that it came to "stand for something much larger than it probably was in reality": it grew into a symbol of the creaking debate regarding diversity in the museum world and beyond.

Identity and globalisation

Be(com)ing Dutch was a series of activities that culminated in an exhibition held in the Van Abbemuseum in the summer of 2008. Artists, theoreticians and other participants tried to survey current movements and variations within society by way of questions including 'what is the significance and value of national identity, citizenship and social cohesion in an age of globalisation and migration?' and 'what happens when those values stop serving as a primary point of reference in a society?' The Van Abbemuseum managed to stimulate the imagination of artists and the public using research, seminars, publications, work sessions and public events. At certain points this touched a raw nerve, as Fletcher illustrates by showing a clip from a video interview with the artists Petra Bauer and Annette Krauss.

A critical outside perspective

'Read the masks. Tradition is not given' is the title of Bauer and Krauss's notorious contribution to *Be(com)ing Dutch*, in which they initiated a debate about the purportedly innocent character of the Dutch feast of St Nicholas, and especially about the role of *Zwarte Piet*, or 'Black Peter', in all this. At the same time, this was also an investigation of the degree to which Dutch society is receptive to critical perspectives on its own traditions from relative outsiders – relative, in the sense that one of the artists has lived in the Netherlands for quite some years and experiences the festivities annually at her child's primary school. You could add the question of whether it makes a difference who voices the criticism: a local anti-discrimination collective or two artists who are facilitated by a 'highly important' (Bauer) art institution. In other words: what is the role of the artist in a public debate and where do the responsibilities of a museum lie?

An outcry followed the announcement of a march through the centre of Eindhoven protesting against *Zwarte Piet*. This prime example of performance art evoked such a menacing response that, in the end, the Van Abbemuseum decided to cancel the event. Instead, a debate took place in the museum in which, says Fletcher, 'a very diverse group of people took part and in which coloured people finally found the courage to say they felt pretty offended by the *Zwarte Piet* phenomenon.' *Be(com)ing Dutch* won the Van Abbemuseum a new group of visitors, but it also resulted in the loss of some of its loyal visitors, mainly those who thought 'that whole *Zwarte Piet* business was much too radical.'

Different paths

The differences between laBOMBA and the Van Abbemuseum are probably greater than their similarities, but both organisations allow themselves to be guided by the view that their relevance follows from the way in which they relate to today's social issues. One of these issues is the significance of identity and citizenship. The search for answers in Bucharest looks different to the one in Eindhoven. In the case of laBOMBA, the aesthetics are not meant to get in the way of the message. You get the feeling that the people there have a coffee together before getting down to work. The Van Abbemuseum raises the conceptual bar somewhat, carrying out a preliminary

theoretical exploration first. But this does not preclude their arriving at a point that is very similar to laBOMBA, i.e. that of artists instigating commotion on the streets and in the media.

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