

Museums and Public Participation

Report of a debate on 20 April 1994
at the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, Amsterdam
organised by the
Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, The Hague
in collaboration with the
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Museums

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To the Reader

The theme for the 17th ICOM General Conference in Stavanger, 'Museums and Communities', is also a topical issue in the Netherlands, as manifested, for instance, by the symposium organised in April 1994 on 'Museums and Public Participation'.

The subject appeared to be very much alive among the museums represented at the debate and the other representatives of culture and the media. Without an audience there will be no theatre, no concert, no museum, and certainly no applause.

Integrating museums into society is imperative, now more than ever. In saying this I am not referring to the increasing extent to which museums in Europe have to fight for their own finances. What is really at stake is the participation of the public: as visitors, as customers, as Friends and other individuals involved in the ups and downs of 'their' museums, as the legitimisation of museums. For museums can rely less and less on local and central governments, and have to make ever greater efforts to obtain the social backing they so desperately need in order to fulfil their specific responsibilities.

This challenge on the eve of the third millennium will, sooner or later, concern all museums in the world. It is a gauntlet we shall all have to pick up.

As the trend described above can be observed all over the world, the ICOM Nederland Committee has decided to offer the report of the Dutch public participation debate to their international colleagues on the occasion of the 17th ICOM General Conference. It is our privilege to do so, not because we think that our exchange of views might be normative or prescriptive, but because we are convinced that the discussions held in the Netherlands may inspire and stimulate others, as they have inspired and stimulated us. And this may promote a continued debate, on a national as well as an international level.

Presenting this publication to you would not have been possible without the support of the Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst and the Nederlandse Museumvereniging, and, of course, the collaboration of the speakers and participants of the symposium.

To all of them our heartfelt thanks.

BEN KOEVOETS,

Chairman Icom Nederland

Amsterdam / Stavanger, June 1995

Introduction

In the government memorandum 'Opting for Quality' (1990) Hedy d'Ancona, then Minister of wvc, considered cultural transfer one of the core tasks of museums. Museums were to give a new meaning to the aim of disseminating culture to all strata of society. 'Participation' became one of the keywords of wvc museum policy, requiring specific attention for groups that rarely, if ever, visit museums. Immigrants and the less well-educated are explicitly mentioned as exemplifying the underprivileged sections of society.

According to the memorandum, the underlying aim is 'to promote social integration by strengthening public participation in social life'.

The initial response of the museum world was confusion, even scepticism. Did the Minister intend to cast the educational dissemination-of-culture ideal of the seventies in a different mould? Were museums – after the no-nonsense policy of the eighties – suddenly expected to try to lower their thresholds again, so that their visitor profile would increasingly reflect that of the actual population?

Or was it, after all, a matter of visitor numbers? Should museums attract more visitors in future? What economic aspects were involved, especially in the light of the autonomy of the national museums?

And should museums take any notice of this policy, or just ignore it?

As ideas on public participation and the actual implementation of this policy were still in the initial stages of development, criticism was informal and non-committal. It seemed a good idea to give the museums an opportunity to discuss the above issues and to invite them to formulate an answer or underpin their criticism with arguments. The Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, in its capacity as mediating body, with participation as one of its focal points, took the initiative for an afternoon session to discuss the matter. This was organised in collaboration with the Nederlandse Museumvereniging, which promotes the interests of its 400 associated museums. The discussions were held on 20 April 1994, in the large auditorium of the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, Amsterdam. Dutch museum staff, cultural specialists from the political parties, staff members of various ministries, representatives of minority organisations, educational institutions, and marketing experts were invited to join the discussion or to delegate – preferably high-ranking – colleagues. The afternoon was earmarked for policy makers in the Dutch museum world: those responsible for the substance of public participation.

More than 150 representatives of museums and other related sectors were present at the debate, which was partly subsidised by the then Ministry of wvc.

The keynote of the gathering consisted of three panel discussions, led by Peter van Ingen, editor-in-chief of vPRO-tv. The audience had been advised beforehand that their comments, their ideas, their pros and cons would be an essential part of the afternoon. Van Ingen, veteran tv presenter, made things hot for the audience as well as the panel members. His provocative questions and quick pace produced an exciting and stimulating session, with a number of comic one-liners, as for instance when Ronald de Leeuw, director of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, asked by Van Ingen why his pager was bleeping, retorted that a new target group was entering the museum. The tranquility for a truly indepth discussion was, however, lacking at times, and because of the many divergent issues discussed, not every panel discussion was equally well-structured. Nevertheless many useful remarks and comments were made, interspersed with criticism and opposition. Yet it will cause no surprise that not all museum directors who rely on the wvc coffers for their sustenance, uttered their innermost thoughts in a meeting swarming with wvc civil servants.

In the course of the afternoon the actual meaning of ‘public participation’ was queried. The various definitions of the term indicated that it is a difficult-to-define subject with many ramifications, for which ready-made solutions will be hard to find. The audience also cast doubts on the intended target groups of the policy, notably immigrants and the less well-educated. Surprisingly, these groups were quietly relegated to the background as the debate went on.

In his opening speech Robert de Haas, director of the RBK, The Hague, declared that participation threatens to become a ‘container concept’, a concept where anyone can dump whatever comes to mind. It is, however, his firm belief that participation will continue to play an important role in the future, no matter who the new Minister of Cultural Affairs may be in the future. He therefore urged the museum world itself to determine the actual meaning of the concept as well as the priorities. ‘We must avoid a situation where, as a result of a wvc-imposed policy, museums have to perform a volte-face from collection management to participation.’ He proposed that the actual contents of the policy should be given its ultimate form in collaboration with the parties which are to abide by it. He went on to stress that ‘in the eyes of the RBK participation is an important issue.’

The three panel discussions clearly revealed the differences in the interpretation of ‘participation’.

Henk van Os, director of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, indicated what, in his view, participation certainly did not imply: ‘It does not mean “selling the

place”. How to get as many people into the museum as possible is marketing, participation is concerned with how we can induce people to go to museums and benefit from such visits. Dissemination of culture cannot simply be replaced by marketing. Unfortunately we have to conclude that museums have little interest in working from such an ideal.’

Hans Bakker, director of the Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum, Amsterdam, is diametrically opposed to this view. He feels no moral obligation to ‘do something with participation’, but wants to combine the concept with a market-oriented approach. His mission: catering for a wide audience.

For Hein Reedijk, director of the Museum voor Volkenkunde, Rotterdam, a customer-oriented approach is essential if the museum wants to respond to changes in society and by doing so justify its existence. ‘Not in the sense of request programmes like “Anything goes”, but rather: we have to make our choices within the boundaries of our specialisms and would like to incorporate your wishes and preferences.’

To writer-journalist Anil Ramdas ‘perspective’ is the operative word in the participation debate: museums must show that they are aware of the angle from which they present their subjects. He considers the visualising of cultural pluriformity by museums far more important than their attempts at representing various different identities.

Alexander van Grevenstein, director of the Bonnefantemuseum, Maastricht, terms participation a stopgap to obscure a failing education policy, and he sees the immigrants participation policy in particular as the seal on a failing minorities policy. ‘Why do we keep hearing the terms education and participation whenever the non-museum-visiting 50% of the population are mentioned? The fact that they do not visit museums is due to a lack of relevant prior knowledge. And schools are not able to provide this.’

In short, as summarised by director Bloemen of the Natuurmuseum, Enschede, participation is an ambiguous, still evolving word. It runs the gamut from ‘knowing something’ to ‘getting involved’ through ‘having one’s say’ to ‘playing a part in decision-making’. What, he asked was the form of participation at present being discussed? ‘Are we talking about the ideal of “playing a part in decision-making” or is it sufficient if people can read about it in the papers?’ A definitive answer was not forthcoming.

Before the panel fireworks started, Ton Bevers, Professor of Art and Culture at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, gave a historical survey of Dutch cultural policy with regard to cultural participation. He underpinned his sketch of the present situation with hard figures – the result of years of research – and lucid descriptions of participating and non-participating groups. His most important conclusion was that cultural preferences and cultural behaviour appear to be

strongly anchored in people's mentality and way of life according to their belonging to a particular group. Bevers ended by giving the museums an assignment to take home: to find a balance between their cultural tasks and their market-oriented operations. Efficiency will continue to play a part in the cultural sector, according to Bevers, but the participation norm should be applied very carefully, for popularity is not the final criterion for culture.

His paper was immediately followed by the first panel, which precluded any chance of discussing Bevers's pithy propositions. But his figures on museum visits kept on buzzing through the auditorium all afternoon. The fact that more than half the population never visits a museum, and that most of those who do, visit only twice a year, was a matter of concern referred to by several panel members.

Another crucial point from his paper, that in the past art policy had proved unable to influence the dissemination of culture, did not get the attention it deserved. In fact, nobody returned to it to make a link with the present ministerial cultural-dissemination policy regarding immigrants and the less well-educated.

The three panels, each consisting of two or three members, gave their points of view on concrete problems that are also being referred to over and over again in publications on the participation policy. For the purpose of the afternoon was to hear the opinions of the museum world on these policy aspects.

The subjects discussed by the panels ranged from the more reflective to the decidedly practical issues.

The first panel discussed the museum's task of transferring values and standards of Western European culture. Was it, for instance, a good idea to interest immigrants in this culture through museums, and if so, what were the practical implications?

The second panel dealt with the question of whether all types of museums are equally able to attract broad target groups, and to respond to social developments. It will come as no surprise that in this debate the art museums appeared to have a different conception of their duties from the cultural history museums. Legitimation of the museum in a fast changing society was the underlying idea.

The third panel discussed participation in the general sense of the word. A wide range of questions was discussed. How does a museum attract a maximum number of visitors? What about rivalry between museums, and what about the pressure of attendance figures? What is the role of the media, notably television, in promoting art and museums?

Frans Grijzenhout, Adviesgroep RVK, had the final word when he concluded the afternoon with some light, yet critical remarks. In his summing-up of the panel discussions one conclusion was particularly striking: he queried whether the existence of museums should be taken for granted in a society that is changing so rapidly.

In the present publication Ton Bevers's introductory paper and Frans Grijzenhout's closing speech have been printed in full. The panel discussions have been summarised.

Will 'public participation' become the buzzword of the coming year? We don't know what the future has in store, but one thing became apparent during the afternoon: the idea of participation is gradually becoming a live issue in the Dutch museum world.

RIET DE LEEUW

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Cultural participation: history and future of the research

Cultural participation: a historical survey

The ideal of social cultural dissemination has – with varying degrees of emphasis – received full attention in the history of Dutch cultural policy. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the debate on state care for the cultural field (museums, performing arts, media) has been dominated by this ideal.

Art, it was generally believed, belongs to the beautiful, the elevated, and the good things of life. Art transcends the ups and downs of daily life, and whoever is touched by it will feel liberated, freed from the yoke of day-to-day routine, and will become a better human being. The upper middle classes, supported by parliament, whose members were also recruited from the upper social echelons, launched many initiatives to bring art to the common people, especially to those with little income and little education, the social underclass that is deprived of art.

But there were more reasons for the culture-loving upperclasses to support the ideals of educating the common people. Cultural participation was also promoted as a way of keeping the lower classes away from the popular but less esteemed forms of entertainment offered by the products of mass culture. This paternalistic and moralistic urge to educate and civilise dominated pre-war cultural policy and still made itself felt for a considerable time in the post-war period when cultural policy was being developed and expanded.

From the 1960s onwards the idealism of cultural dissemination changed. Cultural policy was less focused on spreading the traditional elitist art and based more on the principle that all people have a right to their own culture, that all cultural expressions are equal, and that art should be socially relevant, if it expects priority in receiving government support. Dissemination of culture should be subservient to the democratic ideal of diffusion of knowledge, power, and income. Whatever the outcome of this policy, the result was at any rate a sharp increase in the number of artistic manifestations and a modified policy involving promotion of cultural pluriformity, which, in a sense, amounted to a recognition of all possible kinds of art, regardless of where it was made or by whom, provided it was of a sufficiently high quality.

Taking stock of the cultural policy of the 1960s and 1970s, three facts spring to mind.

Firstly, it was especially the better educated middle classes who most benefited from it, since such people take the making and enjoying of art for granted. They consider it to be a birthright, or something which they acquire through training, career, and the relevant social network.

Secondly the ideal of downward dissemination of culture, i.e. of a culture modelled on that of the higher classes, was no longer appropriate in a democratised society in which manifold cultural expressions were recognised side by side.

And finally belief in the ideology of cultural dissemination was also undermined by the results of the policy based on that idea. A policy which had apparently not succeeded in winning over the art-deprived sections of society to art, as has been shown over and over again by research into cultural participation.

Cultural participation: research results

The cultural dissemination policy was, and still is, one of the pillars of official Dutch policy on art. And rightly so; although this policy is changing as it adapts to new developments and ideas in this field, which is also as it should be. Parallel to this policy, and often at the behest of the policy-making bodies, cultural participation has always been a much-researched subject in the Netherlands. Suppositions on cultural participation can be tested by research, which also serves to stimulate debate on the dissemination of culture and to provide empirical data. Every now and then we congratulate ourselves or are congratulated by foreigners on the efficient infrastructure for art and culture existing in our country. Such compliments should certainly extend to our cultural statistics, which in a sense are as good as our art.

There is a plethora of publications on 'cultural participation' – from the 1980s to this very day – by the same authors writing on the same subject with almost invariably the same results. To name but a few:

- Although cultural participation, when considered over a longer period of time, has indeed increased, cultural statistics reveal that more than three quarters of the population (over 12 years of age) never attend a play, a concert, a ballet or a cabaret. And more than half the population never goes to a museum or a cinema.
- Looking at and listening to art, being actively involved and interested in culture (in and outside the home) are behavioural characteristics of people with a fair level of education, often with a substantial income as well. This is only a broad outline; within this outline the cultural behaviour of specific groups can be further analysed.
- We know, for instance, that between 1950 and 1990 the number of museum visits increased considerably, that a sizeable number of new museums

emerged and that more visits per museum were recorded. We know that about half the population of the Netherlands (46%) never sets foot inside a museum, that the other half – with a higher level of education and on the whole a higher income – visits a museum on average twice a year (48%), and that some 360,000 people (the remaining 6%) accounts for one fifth of the total number of annual museum visits. *Ergo*, these museum addicts together account for four million visits: an average of one or more visits per month. With the help of various additional information the profile of the museum visitor and consequently that of the non-visitor can be drawn in greater detail.

A more sophisticated and specific profile can, of course, be drawn by focusing research on particular forms of art (mime, electronic music, poetry reading) and particular audiences (immigrants, amateurs, inhabitants of individual towns). But this will add little to the information on cultural participation already known, which basically amounts to the fact that there is a difference in the cultural preferences of individuals and groups of people, and this difference has a certain regularity and system: Certain cultural facilities are enjoyed more especially by a well-educated public. People prefer going out with others to going out on their own. More people are reached through the media (sound and vision recording media) than through actual visits to cultural institutions such as theatre, cinema, and concert hall. Family background is one of the factors determining cultural interests and preferences. Another important frame of reference is the age group to which people belong.

Researchers – in the Netherlands Ganzeboom and Knulst among others – have developed theoretical models based on numerical data collected over many years, which allow statements (interpretations and prognoses) to be made on cultural behaviour. Consumer and spending patterns, leisure activities, eating, drinking, and clothing habits, philosophy of life, voting behaviour, aesthetical preferences, manners – all these behavioural characteristics that can be observed on the surface and are readily subject to change, are considered lifestyle elements. And they include cultural behaviour. Such external lifestyle characteristics are easy enough to measure. But researchers want to go further, of course, and explain their measurement results. In other words: what are the determinants of cultural behaviour? Regularly as clockwork research yields the following list (in order of importance). Visits to museums and performing art venues are determined by:

- 1 the nature (i.e. the degree of difficulty) of what is offered (the supply) and the competence of the public: the more difficult and complex the cultural supply, and the more prior knowledge the public needs to have, the less interest there is;

- 2 the lifestyle and standards of behaviour of certain groups and the corresponding reputation of the cultural institutions: the less at ease people feel in a certain ambiance, the greater the chance that they will stay away;
- 3 the time that is required and available: the busier people are, the harder it will become to be actively involved in cultural manifestations or to visit performances that are tied to a particular time and place;
- 4 the price of what is offered and the amount the public can afford to spend: the more expensive the supply, the more exclusive the public;
- 5 the location of the venue and the mobility of the public: the greater the distance to the cultural facilities, the less enthusiasm there is to leave home and attend.

To summarise, cultural participation is determined by: training and education, social network, money and distance. Of course you already knew that before the research, but these are the facts on the surface, and not an explanation of cultural behaviour. The latter requires more: a theory about the intrinsic differences in cultural behaviour. A plausible theory, in which the facts already known to you have been taken into account, is the following: the position of people in social reality is determined by the kind and amount of capital they have. The French sociologist Bourdieu has contributed considerably to this theory, not least by his metaphorical use of 'capital'. The combination of economic capital (income, possessions), cultural capital (knowledge and skills), and social capital (relations, networks, friends in high places) determines what people are and how they behave. And how do we get such capital? Much of it comes to us by birth and the rest we owe to training and education. People get to know (usually without being explicitly told) the value and meaning of the different capital goods (money, knowledge and contacts) and how adequately to deal with them. Conversely, people reveal their position on these capital markets by their attitude and their behaviour. Economic, cultural, and social capital form the main issue of the rivalry between individuals and groups of people. Their positions must continuously be defended and confirmed, and the prestige and status of the different types of capital play a crucial part in this struggle. Wittingly and unwittingly cultural behaviour is at the same time product and producer of social differences. Cultural competence is indissolubly linked to social competition: willy nilly the culturally trained distinguish themselves from those who are less competent.

Why this theoretical intermezzo? Because this theory concerns both the interpretation of the results of the research into cultural participation, and any policy aimed at promoting such participation. If cultural preferences and cultural behaviour are so strongly embedded in the mentality and way of life of

people belonging to a particular group, then the scope and limits of disseminating culture and the underlying policy are also delineated by it.

Thus, the greater the distance between people in mentality and lifestyle – i.e. the greater the difference in economic, cultural and social capital – the more difficult it will be to transfer or adopt cultural values, standards and preferences.

Experience and research have heightened the understanding of the possibilities and limits of social cultural dissemination. True, central government and the relevant parties in the art world still strive to promote cultural participation, but the cultural-policy idealism of the past has now been superseded by a pragmatic and realistic approach, based on the understanding that cultural interest and behaviour are part of people's lifestyle. Due to increased prosperity and a higher level of education there has been a dissemination of culture right across the middle classes. This is not primarily the success of a policy to disseminate culture, but rather the result of a spontaneous process of such dissemination: a certain measure of cultural interest is inherent in the behaviour and lifestyle of the middle classes. They possess cultural capital, that has usually been acquired through education.

There is so little disagreement among researchers about results, theory, and methods used that one wonders whether there is anything left to be desired for research into cultural participation. We can safely say that the harvest of cultural statistics has, after years of registration, now been reaped.

Of course, a continuing supply of core figures about cultural participation will remain necessary to determine trends in cultural participation (increase or decrease of interest per sector) and to give rough indications as to the composition of the public.

But we are approaching the boundaries of cultural participation research when we try to convert each question into testable hypotheses and then try to solve them by quantitative methods.

Cultural participation: different policy, different research

Artists and cultural institutions try to curry favour with the public with a range of offerings that is growing faster than that public itself. This situation forces them to intensify competition and to increase their attempts to acquire, hold and, if possible, enlarge their public. This makes other demands on the government and the art world with regard to the advancement of cultural participation. They need to know the profile of the visitor, obtain more information on potential visitors, and put more work into publicity and advertising. Halls must be filled to capacity and the product must be sold as advantageously as

possible. Visitor surveys are no longer aimed at learning the effects of the cultural dissemination policy – is the art world reaching sufficient people from the art-deprived strata of the population? – but have become part of the management of cultural institutions. They are undertaken in order to gain more insight into the market and to facilitate obtaining subsidies from government and private funds.

Of course it is important for cultural institutions to know which publics are entering their doors and how often, how they like what is on offer, how to hold on to them, how to find new visitors, etc. An adequate policy of promotion and visitor acquisition requires factual knowledge. This in turn requires the registration and analysis of visitor data: fluctuations and effects must always be measured, annually or for special events, or in relation to specific changes, such as price increases, changes in opening hours, or extra amenities. All this is required for each institution and ‘company’ data of this nature are, of course, important for any organisation, certainly for ‘Nederland-Cultuurland’. Although such general information, which allows us to keep a finger on the pulse, is useful for policy decisions in the case of new orientations, it does not actually add to existing knowledge.

Fortunately cultural institutions will soon find it easier to collect such data themselves. *Handleiding publieksonderzoek culturele instellingen*, a practical DIY-guide to conducting visitor surveys – destined, I feel sure, for the best-seller list – explains how to carry out a random sample survey, how to make a questionnaire, how to analyse all the collected data statistically.

Such is the body of literature about cultural participation that the authors of the *Handleiding publieksonderzoek* even suggest starting with a preliminary study of what has already been published. This may yield so many insights and opinions that a visitor survey in one’s own institution seems superfluous. Visitor surveys, if they are to be useful, must be clearly part of a broader marketing plan: what is the institution’s target group, what is its market, and what is the envisaged approach to this target group, this market? We observe a professionalisation of the cultural participation issue, in other words, institutions are increasingly aware of and knowledgeable about their potential public.

Since we have liberated ourselves from the limited approach towards the subject of cultural participation as determined by the idea of social cultural dissemination, other relevant questions may receive more attention in the future. For instance, what is a particular individual’s cultural development? How do people become regular visitors of art events? What kind of information provided by museums does indeed take root? How do people behave in museums?

Where and how do the worlds of professionals, amateurs and interested lay persons meet? What expertise may be expected of cultural staff members with special responsibility for the transfer of culture and cultural education?

I would like – not for the first time – to make a plea for more research into the *behaviour* of museum visitors and I would like to see whether it is possible to draw up a typology of the museum visitor: the professional, the daytripper, the interested amateur, the loner, the couples, the families, the groups.

To conclude, competition for public favour will increase, certainly in a country with such a high density of cultural facilities. Cultural consumerism will be professionally stimulated. This in itself is no bad thing, but it does mean that cultural institutions which have a lot in common will increasingly become each other's rivals, just as broadcasting companies, newspapers, tv programme-makers, universities and faculties have to fight ever fiercer campaigns to remain in the running. Participation as a standard will have to be applied with great care, for popularity is not the ultimate criterion of culture. But I am convinced that in the cultural sector, as in many other fields, market forces as well as the values of effectiveness and efficiency will play a lasting role. This implies that public-oriented tasks and visitor research figures are bound to be an integral part of the management of cultural institutions. Let us hope that this will not hamper cultural institutions in finding the balance between their cultural brief and market-oriented performance. At any rate, cultural institutions such as museums and performing arts institutions in the Netherlands have also shown good customer awareness in the pre-market-oriented period.

Apropos of the *Cultural Policy in the Netherlands* report, the international researchers at the Council of Europe observed that our national structure of financing and policy implementation has not encouraged the institutions to take public-oriented initiatives. But this is facile and surely inaccurate. It also conflicts with the conclusion that, internationally, the Netherlands scores well in terms of cultural participation, with the highest number of museum visits compared with the United Kingdom, Sweden, and France. I do not therefore quite understand why the review committee for the cultural sector advocates a National Participation Plan, a kind of new 'Delta Plan'. But in view of the consensus on the overall importance of cultural education and participation, I do endorse the recommendation that clear and measurable targets and practical programmes be drawn up for the advancement of participation.

TON BEVERS

Professor of Art and Culture, Erasmus University, Rotterdam

The panels

Summary of the debate

Panel 1 'Values and standards'

panel members Henk van Os and Anil Ramdas

The museum's identity was the theme of the first round of talks. It was based on the idea that museums represent values and standards stemming from the history of Western Europe, from Christianity, Humanism and the Enlightenment. Museums are also the products of the nineteenth-century belief that the knowledge of objects of national, regional or local pride has a salutary influence. Visitors identify themselves with the values and standards which the museum is propagating. If the public can not sufficiently identify themselves with the supply of values and standards, cultural participation is out of the question.

Should museums wanting to attract visitors outside their usual target groups (e.g. immigrants or the less well-educated) change their identity so as to allow these potential new visitors also to identify with their programmes? Or should museums, as instruments in a new 'civilising offensive', try to integrate these groups by transferring the very values and standards of our own culture? And how should this be done? By improving customer care, and developing special projects? Or would it suffice to translate the labels into Turkish or Moroccan? Or should, perhaps, completely new museums be founded for these groups? The discussions arising from this topic have been arranged by theme and summarised below.

The first panel was formed by Henk van Os, director of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and Anil Ramdas, columnist for the quality paper *NRC Handelsblad* and the opinion weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer*, and author of the tv programme *In mijn vaders huis*, a discussion with western and non-western intellectuals about the so-called beneficial influence of western civilisation on the developing world. As a Hindustani of Surinam descent he is, according to van Ingen, the classic example of the highly-educated, critical immigrant, who comments on the 'cultural changes in the Netherlands'.

The museum's identity

To Henk van Os the museum is a public institution. He quoted Neil McGregor, director of the National Gallery in London, who had recently given a lecture entitled *Museums for whom?*. In his lecture he explained that the National Gallery had been founded in the nineteenth century for all those who did not

have the financial means for a private collection of their own. Every three years a random check was carried out to see whether all population groups were paying sufficient visits to the Gallery. When it was discovered in 1893 that visits by the London barbers did not come up to expectation, the National Gallery took specific measures to entice this target group inside its doors. According to Van Os such visitor awareness is still the premise of the National Gallery; hence admission continues to be free.

Van Os wholeheartedly subscribes to this premise. Museums like the Rijksmuseum are public institutions, government institutions, not arbitrary private institutions. The museum should therefore be available to those who pay for it, without of course losing sight of its preservation tasks. These are the values and standards according to which the Rijksmuseum tries to operate. But this is unusual in Dutch museums, according to Van Os. Museums are often more like private collections open to the public, with the director as head of collections.

Anil Ramdas wondered whether participation by 'the other half' (who never visits a museum, as mentioned earlier by Ton Bevers), the commercial-tv watching public which occupies its time with sitcoms and soccer, is actually appreciated by the museums. By participation Ramdas means more than just 'coming to the museum', he is referring to true participation, which involves recognising one's own values and standards.

Van Os agreed: museums, as public institutions, should be as accessible as possible. 'But in our museum the mere preserving of the objects for posterity is such a gigantic task that we simply have to make choices in what else we can do to make the museum performing adequately as a public institution.'

Van Os is convinced that museums, if they want to continue to perform adequately for the public, need to make continual changes, because the public is continually changing. This applies especially to the levelling of unnecessary barriers, such as too many or too few labels near the objects, for they are barriers between the public and the museum.

'Should museums indeed run so fast after all kinds of social changes?', Ramdas wondered. Museums are by nature somewhat lethargic, quiet, antiquarian institutions, that are simply not as nimble as television in jumping on the bandwagon. So they should not run panting and puffing after all those visitor groups, trying to represent all their identities.

Van Laarhoven, director of the Bijbels Openluchtmuseum, Heilig Landstichting, argued that museums are quite capable of exhibiting subjects to which society is susceptible. 'In our museum nothing was shown about Islam sixty years ago. Now there is. More and more museums have noticed that society is interested in it and feel bound to deal with the issues of our time. We have given Islam a permanent place: our museum now focuses on three holy books instead

of one. This is the way to promote participation, you not only make the material available, but you also make a very clear choice as to *what* you want to show.' When asked about the underlying aim, he indicated that his museum had set itself the task of making Dutch people acquainted with 'the other cultures'.

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Immigrants in museums

According to Ramdas there is an enormous distance between immigrant groups and museums. 'The other day I asked a man in a mosque if he knew that some of the most beautiful Persian rugs in the world were hanging in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. He looked at me, flabbergasted. "No, I always buy my carpets at the hypermarket", he said. Clearly not the way to reach immigrants.'

But how do we reach them? Ramdas showed us the wrong way. 'If museums fail to enter into the way of feeling and thinking of other cultures and fail to identify with the people concerned, they will not succeed in making these people enter their buildings. You may go in for marketing strategies, you may put some objects in storage and replace them in your displays by others, but the result will be nil.'

As an example of how well-intended initiatives aimed at newcomers can fail, he mentioned a Hindustani film festival recently organised in the Tropenmuseum. This festival was meant to convey something of the lifestyle of the Hindustani, who are great watchers of films. The target groups were the Dutch and the Hindustani, but the latter were conspicuous by their absence. Ramdas: 'Although the Tropenmuseum tried to understand the cultural customs of a group, this was again based on the usual perspective of the dominant group. A perspective far removed from that of the Hindustani, one which reduced them from subjects to objects, to people being watched. Which is why they didn't come.'

To Van Os's suggestion that it might have been better to involve Hindustani representatives in the project from the start, Ramdas shook his head. 'It has really and truly been tried and I have seen it fail.'

Ramdas also criticised the Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum in Amsterdam. 'What I miss in the story told in this museum is the realisation of what those ships eventually did to us and to our culture. They were built in a special way so as to enable them to carry as many of our ancestors as possible, all hunched up in their holds, and this context is missing.' In short, it is Ramdas's opinion that whatever they do, Dutch museums should not focus exclusively on the high points of Dutch history, like the Golden Age, 'for that is exactly what hurts immigrants.'

Later that afternoon Hans Bakker, director of the Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum in Amsterdam, answered Ramdas's criticism, stating that in the museum's new multi-media theatre attention is definitely given to 'how things

really were in the *voc*'. And even the old permanent exhibition has a small room where visitors can see the chains used on slaves and the stowage plan of the ships, Bakker told us. To Van Ingen's suggestion that this is perhaps not sufficient to provide real insight into the situation, Bakker answered that there is indeed a world of difference between the old display and the plans for the future.

From this point of view the logical conclusion would be to 'reconstruct' the Department of Dutch History of the Rijksmuseum too. Van Os voiced his doubts about this, 'There is a much more elementary problem: people don't know their own country's history any more. Does anyone still know the meaning of Van Oldenbarnevelt's "stokje", the stick which supported him to the very end when he climbed the scaffold? Instead of using it as an illustration it must now be displayed in such a way as to make it evocative.'

Is there a way to use presentation to promote participation? According to Van Os it is 'immensely difficult to make a good anthropological presentation. In the Department of Asiatic Art we have opted for displaying "the most beautiful Persian rug". We have deliberately exhibited it as a work of art, because that is a link between the various groups of visitors. That feeling of being "looked at" has gone because such a presentation transcends any particular culture. But it means falling back on the old ideal of wanting to connect all groups through the higher arts, and you fail to represent everyday life. Which leaves the problems unresolved.'

Rob Berkel, director of the Scription in Tilburg, gave practical comment from his former job as staff member of the Soeterijntheater, Amsterdam. 'Museums are in a far more difficult position than institutions representing music or films, which are media in which it is much easier for people to pick up each other's languages; and these media can become vehicles for acquainting the public with non-western cultures. The Soeterijntheater draws visitors from both groups, Dutch people and newcomers, with films, music, and performances. Although when I worked there films from India also failed to attract a Turkish audience.'

According to D66 (Democrats '66) Member of the Upper House Tiesinga, chairwoman of the Rijkscommissie voor de Musea, there is a practical problem involved in participation: only museums with a solid budget can afford to take visitor preferences into account. The resulting murmurs of disapproval indicated that few members of the audience shared this view.

Should immigrants be persuaded to participate?

The debate subsequently focused on why immigrants should participate. Hein Reedijk's view is that 'immigrants should not be persuaded to enter museums simply because they are immigrants, but because some of them are typical potential museum visitors, albeit with a different interest. And museums that want to survive in the future cannot ignore such interests'.

Henk van Os agreed that the museum's public tasks should be assessed and if necessary adjusted – with preservation of the objects as a precondition – but that it is 'not necessary that *everybody* likes the museum. It is there for those who are interested.' In other words, an immigrant-oriented policy is not a priority for the Rijksmuseum. Is it also undesirable? The question remained unspoken.

Manus Brinkman, director of the Nederlandse Museumvereniging, wondered why participation was so strongly focused on immigrants. 'My dentist is an immigrant, who often visits the Department of Asiatic Art of the Rijksmuseum. But I also know a lot of people who are immigrants and not interested in going there. Why target people because of the fact that they are immigrants? One is either interested or not', he agreed with Van Os.

According to Anil Ramdas we 'should not say goodbye to the old concept of cultural paternalism, it is certainly the task of museums to civilise the people. Culture should be propagated and disseminated. The task is twofold: preserve valuable objects from different periods and different people, and use them to tell the history of the development of a community.'

Van Ingen suggested that the idea underlying participation might be that immigrants should visit museums to become more familiar with Dutch culture, as Liberal-Democrat leader Bolkestein is fond of saying.

Ramdas agreed that 'it is indeed necessary for immigrants to familiarise themselves with Dutch culture, which is new to them. But it should not be a matter of one-way traffic. The prevailing attitude is: Dutch culture is ours, and if only you would come and have a look, you'd be better Netherlanders. Dutch culture is changing and acquiring a new form because of the contribution of immigrants. This interweaving, this cultural pluriformity of Dutch culture is what people want to see.'

Panel 2 'Which museums / which target groups'

panel members Hein Reedijk and Alexander van Grevenstein

Are museums the appropriate instruments to integrate individuals and groups into our society? Are the different types of museums equally capable of meeting the demand of attracting a wide public, or enticing the underprivileged to cross their thresholds? Does it make sense to require this, for instance, of art museums, which are traditionally fairly daunting institutions? Are not

museums with a cultural-historical collection better equipped to zero in on social issues so that the visitors will more easily identify with our cultural values and become involved in them? Shouldn't education play a larger role in this matter and try to establish increased cooperation with museums?

This issue was discussed by the second panel: Hein Reedijk of the Museum voor Volkenkunde, Rotterdam and Alexander van Grevenstein, director of the Bonnefantemuseum in Maastricht.

The task of museums

Frank Lubbers, deputy director of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, expressed the wish to clarify his earlier statement: 'We get so few visitors that we know them all personally.' In his opinion the rationale for his museum is first of all art, secondly the artists. 'We mount exhibitions that we ourselves consider beautiful, and anyone who shares this appreciation, may come and look. Of course we would prefer it if all those who might appreciate it did indeed come, but we lack the means either to actively induce them to come or to educate them. The latter should actually be done at primary school, so that we could breed our own elite.'

Hein Reedijk categorically disagrees: 'Such an attitude is indeed possible, but does it warrant the millions it would require? If you look at the true range offered by the museum world, you have at one end the ethnographical museum or the natural history museum, at the other the art museum which, in its traditional form, is exclusively object-oriented. If a museum propagates the idea that it exists for art, for the intrinsic values of the art object, you make things very difficult for the public, you reduce the flow of visitors. This is a deliberate choice, but not the only one. In the past the Van Abbemuseum had completely different ideas as to what its tasks were. On the whole, these art museums still attract the higher educated. But I am convinced that every museum is able to set up interfaces between the object of study, i. e. the museum's own in-house knowledge, and the expectations of the public.'

As an example of a successful approach to the target group Reedijk referred to the Surinam exhibition organised in 1992/1993 at the Museum voor Volkenkunde. 'Contrary to what Anil Ramdas told us about the Hindustani film festival, this exhibition was very well received by the target group. As is our usual procedure, we contacted representatives of that group. We checked the draft with our colleagues in Paramaribo and the Surinam community in the Netherlands. This had the additional advantage that the Surinam elite already knew about the exhibition. The result was a public composed of 60% 'black' people and 40% 'white'. The latter percentage was disappointing, since the exhibition was also intended for whites. But the people whose culture was the theme of the exhibition have greatly benefited from it, their identity was boosted.'

Van Grevenstein fully agreed with the statement that museums are public institutions. 'We believe in treating our public well. If you stick to that, things will start rolling automatically, and you can expect more visitors. Such processes should evolve organically and not be imposed by the powers that be, as was the case in the 1960s. Apart from some PR activities and two press agents in Belgium and Germany, I don't do much in the way of visitor acquisition, but once they are inside the museum, visitors are given a warm welcome. People must have the opportunity to get information, but' – responding to Reedijk's view that the museum must take the visitors' level of knowledge into account – 'in object-oriented museums I simply loathe walls with more information than objects. And as far as I am concerned ethnographical museums may also retrieve more objects from their storage rooms.'

His next statement underlines the fact that Van Grevenstein's first interest is the art object itself. 'Art museums have developed from the need to stand eye to eye with unique art objects. A museum is the place *par excellence* where the original eclipses all derivatives.' Consequently Van Grevenstein takes a critical stance with regard to what he calls the 'pedantic participation policy', which, 'just like the pedantic education policy is doomed to die.'

The changing task of museums

Reedijk disagrees. He is a staunch champion of radical change in museum country. He emphasised in his statement that museums stem from a different time, 'when man collected the world for his own academic benefit. Museums existed first of all for researchers and for collectors, and art museums for artists. But the museums of today and tomorrow exist to enable us to learn from the past, to acquire new insights, to dream, or simply to enjoy ourselves.' In short, they exist for the public.

Reedijk stressed the fact that cultural changes in the information era are quick as lightning, and that the population structure is also changing. 'The cultural elite of the future will have a different structure and different interests from the cultural elite of the nineteenth century, the age which gave birth to the museum. For strategic reasons museums must not be static institutions, but dynamic, changing with the times, for they are part of the social fabric.' He is greatly worried as to the social support for museums in the future. 'How long authorities will continue to tolerate an attitude such as that of the Eindhoven Van Abbemuseum is already a moot point.' According to Reedijk, not only the composition of visitor groups and social classes is changing rapidly, but also their behaviour. 'People no longer read books, they zap, and this should be reflected in the museums' programmes, in our products.'

Van Grevenstein's reaction was clear and outspoken: 'Changes in society will not be evident in our museum. As an art museum, our display is focused on the changes and accelerations in art. For we are, after all, a different kind of museum. We must hang difficult things on our walls.'

Reedijk: 'That is an attitude, an approach, not an imperative. We all have difficult objects in our museums. You can either leave them difficult and show them as such to those who have been trained in the subject – our colleagues, artists and collectors – or you can consider it a challenge to be an intermediary, to interest a maximum of potential customers in your product with all the professional means available, while still preserving the object's inherent quality. I fail to see why this is different for art museums.'

Van Grevenstein: 'I did not say that we are not making attempts at such an approach, but it is more difficult for us to get television coverage. You can't ignore the fact that there is a difference between a Robert Ryman painting and an African mask.'

Reedijk: 'Why should there be? Aren't they both objects made by an individual, for a purpose? You can exhibit the object as it is, but you can also show something of its context.'

Van Grevenstein: 'Ryman refuses any context for his painting, while the mask was made because of a context.'

Reedijk: 'Then you should ask yourself if, in a publicly accessible, subsidised museum, you should hang an artist who refuses to reveal more than his own work *per se*, who does not allow any context.'

Hendrik Driessen, director of the De Pont Stichting, Tilburg, a contemporary art foundation financed privately, supports Van Grevenstein. 'What matters, is art. We are in the fortunate position that we do not have to measure our success by visitor numbers. What counts is the visitor's experience. You do not detract from the essence of the mask if you tell the story around it. You could also say something about Ryman, as part of our culture, but the few sentences just spoken by Van Grevenstein might be the end of that story. What can be said, will be limited to the field of modern painting.'

According to Hans Bakker art museums should actually be spared being dragged into the participation discussion. 'You can't play jokes on true art. Art museums should be left alone, they are a class in themselves.'

Remarkably enough, Reedijk's point on the legitimisation of museums in contemporary society was left undiscussed. As so often before, attention was drawn to the premise that art museums are 'essentially different' (a premise seemingly difficult to accept), and thus to the different ideas on public approach held by these institutions.

Yet the ideas put forward by Reedijk are very much alive, for museums as well as for government, and this is not restricted to the Netherlands. The very fact that, in a debate like this, people go back to discussing basics and first principles, indicates that a discussion on public participation is an extremely under-developed area which has yet to acquire critical depth.

Education

Van Grevenstein's statement that 'in the museum prior knowledge is the key to understanding' and that 'participation is a stopgap to gloss over a failing education policy' formed the overture to a heated discussion rife with misunderstanding, as a conclusion to the second panel.

In reply to the spontaneous outcry from the audience that the rationale for museums is education, and that education is free to use museums, Van Grevenstein explained that he does not consider museums to be educational institutions. 'The fact that 50% of the population never visits a museum is due to a lack of prior knowledge. And this knowledge should be provided by education. But education is a prime target of financial cuts. And if we are to be forced to play the school role, we should also be granted the necessary resources, financial as well as in terms of personnel. But that is not what is happening. In fact, we even go so far as to provide free coaches for school visits ourselves.'

Anne-Marie Boer, curator of the Museon, The Hague, was amazed by 'the great efforts' implied by Van Grevenstein's words: 'In The Hague we have done so for years. The municipality pays for the coaches, and this brings 100,000 pupils inside the Museon. Thus we are quietly raising a public that already knows the museum when they are older – so there is a low threshold – a public that enjoys coming back for another look at the objects that were dear to them in the days of their youth. Our task is to move with the times and to exhibit those objects in ever new contexts. Moreover, 60% of the pupils in our classes nowadays are immigrant children, so they also become acquainted with our museum from the very beginning.'

Van Grevenstein: 'I never said that it was not worth the trouble. But the objects in our museum require prior knowledge. That has nothing to do with being elitist. But one does get frustrated if it proves necessary to reel off the same old abstract and figurative story over and over again. That is not the task of the museum. If only that could be taught at school, we would gladly pick up the story from there.'

Panel 3 'The approach: An inside view / an outside view'

panel members Hans Bakker, Arthur van Schendel, and Piet Erkelens

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The Ministry requires museums to offer exhibitions that meet standards of high quality and diversity, while simultaneously promoting greater public participation. How can this be achieved? Should museums try to attract a maximum number of visitors? Should they concentrate on selling their 'products' by means of clever marketing strategies? Should they, perhaps, switch to completely different products that can compete with the consumption patterns of the general public? And if museums were to go in for such a drastic change in this direction, would it not result in their alienating themselves from their traditional visitors? To what extent can television contribute to wider cultural dissemination?

These were the questions tackled by three panel members: Hans Bakker, director of the Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum, Amsterdam, Arthur van Schendel, director of the Amsterdams Uit Buro, and Piet Erkelens, head of Music and Dance, NOS television.

Competition?

Competition is a dirty word for many museums. Van Ingen's opening question: 'How do you compete with other museums?' met, on the whole, with evasive answers. According to Maarten Bertheux, head of the Communication Department of the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art, Amsterdam, his museum 'relies heavily on repeat visits, but we jealously observe the day-trippers on Museum Square, trying to get them into our doors as well.' The Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, does not go in for competition, according to Antoinette Visser, head of Education. 'If you want to reach your public, and you make this clearly known to the target groups, they will come. Take, for instance, "Tulpomania binnen en buiten", a recent exhibition on the cultural history of the tulip in the Netherlands; what we did, was to ask Turkish representatives how we could reach the Turkish community. It worked, a large section of that community has visited the exhibition.'

Ronald de Leeuw, director of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, compares Museum Square with 'a good shopping street, where clothes shops are also found close to each other, thus all contributing to a broad range of their branch.' The Van Abbemuseum objects to 'the rather limited concept of competition' used by Van Ingen: 'Our competitors are the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York.' Hilarity all around.

Jos van Veen, director of the Stichting Museumjaarkaart, considers competition 'nonsense'. 'Every museum has its own product and its own target group. Visitors who have enjoyed a certain exhibition want to see more, for instance in

other museums: good museums are addictive. Whether far or near, they enhance one another. So there is no need to fear a too-limited public.'

To this Ben Koevoets, director of the Nederlands PTT Museum, The Hague, adds the 'boarding-theory'. According to him 'a lot of museums, instead of being rivals, are mutual promotors: easily accessible museums attract first-time visitors, who will then want to "board" other museums, that are more difficult.'

Hein Reedijk, however, wipes the floor with these statements. 'Of course there is competition, competition for the time of the customer, who only visits museums six times a year. If the museums make a total of twenty exhibitions that are interesting to the customer, you have to be more clever and attractive than the others to lure that customer into your own museum.'

Museums and Marketing

How far can museums go commercially? Hans Bakker replied to this question posed by Van Ingen, that he would prefer the term 'market-oriented' to 'commercial'. With the former he wants to indicate that the quality of the product to be sold should always come first. This does not mean that quantity and quality are mutually exclusive; 'museums should embrace product innovation', according to Bakker. 'If you have an unimpeachable, inherently beautiful collection, it will provoke little discussion, but if like us you add, for instance, a multimedia theatre, you stick your neck out, and put yourself in a vulnerable position. You have your name bandied about.' If cultural history museums leave everything as it is, Bakker fears that before long nobody will know what their objects are all about. He sees it as his mission to make the use, the function of the objects visible again, and to communicate the underlying story to a large and broad-based public.

Hein Reedijk points out that not all people are equally interested in what a museum has to offer. 'But sometimes museums make life very easy for themselves and direct their customer-recruiting at the most obvious groups. With the result that the same limited number of visitors are tempted to make an even larger number of museum visits. For museums the marketing phenomenon is only in its initial stage, but we do try to put out feelers. And if, in addition, you also develop the instruments to locate and get to know new target groups, you can reach maximum results.'

Arthur van Schendel agreed with Reedijk, claiming that museums know hardly anything about marketing. 'Marketing of museums and exhibitions is exceptionally straightforward. Other cultural sectors observe this enviously. Exhibition programmes are known long in advance, it is known which objects will be on display, illustrative material is available far ahead of time, and the public can choose their moment for attending from a full three months. Just compare this to a theatrical performance, held for only one night, for which

tickets can only be sold once. In this respect museums have fewer barriers to overcome than the performing arts. It is a matter of efficient organisation.'

Moreover, he blames museums for violating the most elementary marketing rules: their product is beyond the reach of many. 'Opening hours practically preclude working people from visits. On working days museums already close at five o'clock. On Saturday most people have to do their shopping. And on Sunday mornings museums are also closed, which makes them packed and congested on Sunday afternoons. The tiny square in front of the Rijksmuseum is already crowded on Sunday mornings. Queues of tourists are waiting, for the city has nothing to offer them at that time. Even the Rijksmuseum, while pretending it wants to be available to society, does not open before one o'clock on Sundays. In other words, working people can use only 10% of the opening hours.'

The Rijksmuseum hastened to add that it will be open on Sunday mornings as from 1 January 1995. Evening opening hours will still need a lot of negotiations.

That's all very well, according to Van Schendel, but what about the position of the marketing officer, the education officer, the participation officer: the sales department? 'In many cases that is only one solitary individual, cold-shouldered by the academic staff, merely tolerated by the directors, but not really part of the business. I also come across this situation in theatrical circles.'

Hans Bakker wants to put this into perspective. 'In most museums the communication / marketing / PR department is now being boosted. It is imperative to show a museum in its most favourable light now that a battle for visitor numbers is on. Although new wishful figures keep cropping up, the pond in which we are all fishing together will not increase significantly. Therefore it is a matter of moving groups from one point to another. This doesn't have to be detrimental, if competition is fair and leads to an upgrading of quality. At any rate, we should always bear in mind that it is the visit that eventually determines the success of the museum.'

However, according to Steven Engelsman, director of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, marketing is still a novel and sometimes dirty concept in museum country. Marketing staff are a traditionally unknown quantity in museums. It will therefore take some time for museums to get completely used to them. 'Autonomy procedures for the national museums started in 1989. They were inundated by theories as to how businesslike they now had to be, how they had to think in terms of product-market combinations, etc. At the time many people were wondering, "how does that concern me? I don't recognise museums in such jargon." It takes some time to convert this to your own museum situation, to make it operational.'

Television

The relation between television and museums was the last point to be discussed. How sensitive this relation actually is, was apparent from the number of speakers rushing to grab the intervention microphone. The discussion eventually degenerated into a common complaint by the museums about the scarce television coverage they received, for, as Kinnema Drabbe of Rijksmuseum Paleis het Loo, Apeldoorn, remarked, even a short item on an exhibition in the current affairs programme *NOVA* can attract some 110,000 visitors, a figure otherwise impossible.

Van Ingen accordingly quizzed Piet Erkelens, responsible for *NOS* cultural programmes, about how the *NOS* would react to museums wanting to use television as a marketing instrument. Erkelens: 'We wouldn't comply with such a request. We make our own policy and apply our own ground rules.' But he went on to point out that the selection of exhibitions given coverage is determined by the somewhat opportunistic requirement 'that it is suitable television material'. 'Museums often think that once you have a nice product on offer, it is automatically a television item. But I am not going to let myself be used as an advertising pillar. I want a subject linked to people who are not afraid of facing the confrontation with television. They may be artists, but also art managers. We go for personality.' Just visiting a museum and neatly filming all its paintings simply doesn't work, 'for then television is merely a very poor substitute for the real thing. We have to offer emotion. That's why art does work in Sonja's talkshow. It is no secret that art is only for a small public. If you want to reach a larger public, you need the sandwich formula, as with Sonja, the news, and *NOVA*. But if you want to add depth, you have to choose another kind of programme, such as documentaries.'

Yet there were other voices. Hans Bakker put the effect that television is supposed to have on attendance numbers into perspective. 'Television is only one of the promotional means. Instead of concentrating on once-only visitors, we should propagate repeat visits.'

According to Jos van Veen, Stichting Museumjaarkaart, art museums in particular try to sell a wrong product to the general public through television. Television can achieve far greater effects in promoting amusement parks or open air museums.

Although Alexander van Grevenstein characterised fine arts and television as mutual enemies 'because the pace of looking is so different for both media', he does believe that museums would be helped enormously by brief, purely informative items on tv.

And this was supported by a large part of the audience. Especially the smaller provincial museums could profit from such coverage, according to Nicolette

Sluijter, director of the municipal museum Het Catharina Gasthuis, Gouda.

Sannette Naeyé, head of the Kindermuseum of the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, Amsterdam and former VARA output editor, explained to the audience that television 'puts a completely different interpretation on the figures: 100,000 visitors in terms of television means a 3 rating. There is no denying that museums have a greater interest in television than vice versa.'

Erkelens reacted irritably to 'the usual discussion': 'I am not concerned with ratings at all. What strikes me is that museums are always eager for coverage, but often do not dare to face camera confrontation.'

The suggestion that, with some effort, television journalists might also present their art subjects in an interesting way themselves, was left unspoken.

The conclusion was evident: a medium where time is big money, is eventually ruled by the power of the greatest common viewing denominator. And with 94% of the population never, or at most twice a year, visiting a museum, what can you expect?

Conclusions

I have been asked to give you a report, off the cuff, of an event to which you have yourselves been party.

I don't know how you react to a live programme of a sports event with spoken commentary. In my experience it hardly ever adds anything to what you are watching. Ideally the commentary provides light support to the emotion you feel as spectator, and I am already looking forward again to the 'oh yes' of the BBC commentator at a masterly winner by Stefan Edberg at Wimbledon, or the protracted 'goooooooooal' of the Brazilian football commentators at the coming world championships.

Far less annoying than most live commentary may be a short analysis of the game just shown, in the interval or after the match. My summing-up is meant to be just that. And I hope that I may be forgiven the personal element in the fragments selected for this recap.

It is no coincidence that I have imposed the comparison with sports upon you. Riet de Leeuw, who took care of most of the thematic and organisational preparations, and I took to referring to the three panels of this meeting as just as many boxing rounds. During the initial brainstorming about this afternoon with Manus Brinkman, the image very soon thrust itself upon us of three brief, exciting rounds in which well-matched opponents with their own particular style would take up their own particular position and come to blows intellectually. And perhaps sexism, which is so indisputably an aspect of the boxing ritual (I merely have to remind you of the girls walking through the ring with large placards announcing the next round) has taken possession of us to such an extent that we did not sufficiently realise that the women speakers on our original lists – who turned out to be otherwise engaged – had all been replaced by men, so that you have perforce been treated to a male-dominated performance. For which I offer our sincere apologies.

Another reason for my sports comparison – and this is a more substantial argument – is that there can hardly be any other activity in society so well able to induce a broad public into some form of participation. And that sport can also be a role model for social integration, inside as well as outside the lines (I would like to ignore here the complex stupidity of certain groups of fans) seems obvious to me.

Some museum people are daunted by the spectre of the sheer masses involved in sports events. Rudi Fuchs's renowned statement that he can't stom-

ach the idea of all those hordes with flags and club caps trekking past his Mondriaans, is an image that might have been taken straight from European Cup matches. As soon as museums visualise such mass participation, with all their concomitant problems such as crowd control, etc., everybody suddenly grows very restless. On an earlier occasion Henk van Os pointed out that in such a situation museum officers and a certain group of visitors immediately react according to the sociological principle known as the 'urge to stand out from the crowd', and I think he is right. Bevers's point about 'cultural competence and social competition', and Ramdas's quotation from Abram de Swaan's statement that 'quality is class', are strongly connected with this aspect.

I think that the discussion between Ramdas and Van Os has clearly shown that anyone visiting a museum is confronted by a certain system of values and standards. I believe that we must be continuously aware that museums as institutions have, ever since their origin in the eighteenth century, been completely interwoven with the ideas and backgrounds of the highly-educated, enlightened upper classes, who were characterised by a strong zeal to spread knowledge and culture. Neither museums nor the idea of cultural participation have ever been completely able to break loose from this background. And I think that museums should not bend over backwards to try to do so. Both Van Os and Ramdas have been quite clear about that. The cultural offensive must go on!

But nowadays museum people can no longer afford to take the premises underlying the traditional museum for granted. Museums still think in terms of visitors searching consciously or unconsciously for some kind of identification. This can be an increase in already existing knowledge, but also identification with a certain subject on display. The ability to identify depends to a large degree on the recognition of the visual and cognitive codes inherent in the objects and the way they have been displayed. In that sense museums are, as has been said, 'identity machines'.

However, validation of one's own identity can also – and in my opinion this point has not received enough attention – spring from a recognition of the distance between oneself and what is shown, from the realisation of what is characteristic of one's own culture through the confrontation with what is different, dissimilar. Quite honestly, it seems to me more likely that an immigrant visitor at an exhibition of Dutch landscape painters will take away a validation of his own 'difference' than that he would recognise himself in it. And the same applies in reverse to my visit to an exhibition about Islam. There's nothing wrong with that; on the contrary, it offers new perspectives. After all, what we are trying to do is to live with cultural diversity on the basis of mutual trust and understanding.

The problem for many of our museums – as Ramdas quite rightly pointed

out – is that they continue representing and reproducing an identity that no longer fits in with the identity of the visitor. And if a museum wants to try and do something about this, it runs the risk of viewing the non-regular visitor from the old, familiar, dominant cultural perspective: as an anthropological object to be studied. And making the presentation of historical and anthropological objects more aesthetical is no solution for this problem either.

In short, there is an important task for all museums in the Netherlands in the field of values and standards: to engage in some honest soul-searching, designed to keep us alert to a number of the questions posed above. Such a search will not, I hope, lead to a Dutch version of American political correctness, whereby the VOC ships in the Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum are shown exclusively as an instrument of the slave trade. What is happening in this field in various city museums throughout the western world – and the Amsterdams Historisch Museum is certainly not lagging behind in this respect – may also become relevant for all kinds of national institutions, notably the Department of Dutch History of the Rijksmuseum.

None of the speakers actually queried the generally accepted axiom that museums exist and will continue to do so. I have to admit that I wonder whether at a certain moment museums may not suddenly appear to be no longer in keeping with a constantly changing society. Just as they were established at a certain moment in time, they may also disappear again or be absorbed by other institutions. Changing technical possibilities (when will I be able to log into the virtual reality galleries of Museum Boerhaave in Leiden without leaving my house?), but also other, new social and cultural circumstances, may bring the life cycle of any cultural product and any cultural infrastructure to an end. If museums want to survive as institutions, they will have to adapt themselves to changing social demand and do so in perpetuity. And this demand might turn out to be that visitors are getting fed up with the values and standards imposed by museums – including the good intentions towards our less fortunate fellow man. And if museums do not succeed in finding answers to these new questions, perhaps they had better shut up shop.

Is it the task of all museums to provide optimum quantitative and qualitative public participation? Of course it is. The quantity and the quality of attendance is, for all institutions, the legitimisation of their right to exist. Alexander van Grevenstein and Hein Reedijk agreed about that, and who wouldn't?

Yet there is a world of difference between their views on the actual possibilities for cultural participation in the various types of museums. Reedijk sketched – very convincingly, I thought – the picture of a museum that has to attract and hold a number of visitor groups, not only for commercial motives,

but also based on the conviction that museums are institutions of and for the community. Such an approach must be purposeful and market-oriented. I am impressed by the range of products offered by Reedijk: small outreach, educational exhibitions, general exhibitions in the museum itself for a wider public of interested people, and specialist exhibitions opening up new horizons for the experts. I am not in a position to judge whether they were all equally successful, but that is not the point here. The point is that, based on idealism and a true Rotterdam sense of feasibility, his museum is trying to achieve a product diversification resulting in quantitatively as well as qualitatively improved public participation.

Yet, to expect from each kind of museum, let alone from each individual museum, a similar public participation strategy, seems unreasonable. It is the modern museum directors who have joined in marketing / management seminars and courses – that teach them to think in terms of product-market combinations, opportunities and threats, and strategic planning – who know only too well that not every product can be sold to every customer. In this respect I found Van Grevenstein's rejoinders to Reedijk absolutely clear. For museums primarily focused on the visual arts, and especially those concerned with modern art, public participation entails different possibilities and tasks than for museums of cultural history or ethnography. The self-contained, autonomous character of twentieth-century visual art is a handicap for any form of participation. I think that Van Grevenstein's assessment on this point is realistic. The 'urge to stand out from the crowd' mentioned above, is much stronger in these museums than in any other category. And besides, I think it is asking too much to expect museums to single-handedly make up for the shortcomings of Dutch education and to solve the problems inherent in the integration of immigrants and the less well-educated. Of course, art museums also have an educational task, but in a fairly narrow field.

I think that art museums are in for a difficult time, and this was corroborated by the audience response to statements by Lubbers, Driessen, and Van Grevenstein. After a period of disproportionate attention to art museums, I see a gradual change setting in, favouring museums of cultural history and other disciplines. The present one-sided flow of cash and publicity to the art museums will be increasingly and vociferously called into question. And a museum that has to fall back on the line of defence that modern art refers only to itself and its own tradition according to codes that can only be deciphered by the initiated, ('and that's the way it is') is not going to find life very easy in the next ten to twenty years.

The third round focused on how to promote public participation in practice. What can a museum do in-house and which means of communication can be used? Competition, business, and marketing were the key concepts in this part

of the discussion, notwithstanding the exalted ideas brought forward earlier. I don't believe I have heard the word 'participation' mentioned even once.

The most important point in connection with cultural participation which I would like to make here, with a nod towards Arthur van Schendel, is the need for a total quality offensive. For many museums there is a world to be won in the field of improved service at the entrance, in information, in presentation (just think of Folkert Haanstra's research) and in sales. And also, I would like to add, in the field of personnel, where perhaps the words 'equal opportunities' might be added when certain vacancies have to be filled. For you will also have noted that this debate is almost exclusively attended by white, native professionals. Who knows whether affirmative action in selecting personnel might not help museums to adapt their identity.

Secondly it is clear that the marketing idea has by now deeply penetrated into museum country. Museums will have to come up with a balanced package of products and a sound marketing plan. Like Van Schendel and Ramdas I believe that it is an illusion to think that this will reach the large group of non-visitors. But the groups of potential and once-only visitors could perhaps be approached more actively. The Ministry of wvc, the Projectbureau Verzelfstandiging Rijksmusea, and numerous other provincial and local authorities trying to get museums to think more in terms of being market-oriented and customer-friendly, will have to realise that such an approach might be at loggerheads with the ideological drive towards a certain form of public participation. For it is almost certain that one or more of the five marketing-P's will then come under pressure, that the subsidy mechanism will start up again, and that the museums' dependence on government will once again be strengthened rather than weakened.

Thirdly I would like to refer to the aspect of 'enlivening' the museum experience. Admittedly, I myself am not at all interested in being surrounded by soap bubbles as was done at the NINT in Amsterdam. Nor shall I easily forget the hilarity that overcame us when a colleague and I visited the outdoor presentation of the Zuiderzeemuseum, Enkhuizen. On entering one of the little houses we were asked by a living-history player: 'Has the boat put in yet?' Despite our mirthful reaction this approach does seem to work with many people, evoking questions that are much-needed in museums as educational institutions. And the aroma of spices that accompanied the opening of the Amsterdams Historisch Museum in their new accommodation, the polar wind that blew through the Rijksmuseum's Novaya Zemlya exhibition, the creaking ropes in the Scheepvaartmuseum, and similar synaesthesia were, and still are, delightful to me – and to a broad public.

And the more so, I may add, if they are combined with *real* objects from the past or the present. For this is, and will always be, the nucleus of the fascination

of a museum visit: the idea that you have authentic objects within reach, that you have an inkling of what they have meant, or sometimes still mean, but that they are at the same time incomprehensible and inaccessibly far away. Any attempt at a forced lessening of this tension – and living history is, in my opinion, a borderline case – does not seem to me guaranteed to boost the museum experience.

And I therefore think that Piet Erkelens is absolutely right in saying that television programmes on art are possible and necessary, but that they should be first and foremost television programmes. Television is a powerful medium, but anyone confusing its specific, strong points with the museum message, or wanting to make them subservient to this message, delivers the deathblow to its potential. One of the rules of the tv game is that for art programmes, even more than for museum visits, you need a compelling and enthralling guide. Only very distinct personalities, such as the presenter of the Dutch programme *Museum Treasures* Henk van Os, or the BBC presenter Sister Wendy, are capable of stimulating people, through the box, to active participation in museums.

Epilogue

When the Minister of wvc, Hedy d'Ancona, published her government memorandum *Opting for quality*, the participation concept was strongly promoted. Participation, as the Minister stressed on other occasions as well, not merely meant increasing the number of museum visits and stimulating certain target groups, but also improving the quality of museum visits. Manus Brinkman has again explained this very lucidly in the latest issue of the NMV quarterly *Museumvisie*. Brinkman predicts that participation will be the operative word in the years to come. I am sure that quite a few among you will be thinking: let's first await the election results and see what Aad Nuis (tipped to become State Secretary of Cultural Affairs) has to say about that. But I am convinced that this afternoon has shown that the participation idea is not some hothouse plant, occasionally watered by loyal civil servants for the benefit of Her Excellency. I think it is truly starting to grow, being shaped by the Dutch museum world, albeit perhaps in a way so typical of the Dutch: resolutely, but in moderation.

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Explanatory list of names

- Adviesgroep RBK*: RBK Consultancy Group
- Amsterdams Uit Buro*: Diversity in Cultural Services, organisation for cultural information and services for the benefit of arts supply and demand.
- Bijbels Openlucht Museum*: Biblical Open Air Museum
- Bonniefontenmuseum*: Limburg's provincial museum for fine art and archaeology
- Kindermuseum KIT*: Children's Museum
- Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen (KIT)*: Royal Tropical Institute
- Museum Boerhaave*: National Museum of the History of Science and Medicine
- Museum voor Volkenkunde, Rotterdam*: Museum of Ethnology, Rotterdam
- Natuurmuseum, Enschede*: Museum of Geology and Natural History, Enschede
- Nederlands PTT Museum*: Netherlands Post and Telecommunications Museum
- Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum, Amsterdam*: Netherlands Maritime Museum, Amsterdam
- Nederlandse Museumvereniging (NMV)*: Netherlands Museums Association
- NINT*: Technology Museum NINT
- NOS*: Dutch Broadcasting Foundation (the main coordinator and provider of cultural programmes, news bulletins, sports, and programmes for ethnic and cultural minorities)
- Projectbureau Verzelfstandiging Rijksmusea*: Project Office Maximum Autonomy (the executive bureau of the Ministry of Culture accompanying the national museums' independence)
- Rijkscommissie voor de Musea*: National Commission for Museums
- Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst (RBK)*: Netherlands Office for Fine Arts
- Rijksmuseum Paleis het Loo*: Het Loo Palace
- Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden*: National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden
- Scriptie*: Museum of Technology and Design for Script and Office
- Soeterijntheater*: Theatre of the Royal Tropical Institute
- Stichting Museumjaarkaart*: Museum Pass Trust
- VARA*: Dutch tv & radio broadcaster
- Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC)*: Dutch East India Company
- VPRO*: Dutch tv & radio broadcaster
- Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Cultuur (WVC)*: Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs (Cultural Affairs is now part of the present Ministry of OCW: Education, Culture and Science)

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