

Dutch government refuses to back down over huge budget cuts

Cultural funding to be slashed by one quarter; performing arts worst hit

By Gary Schwartz | From [issue 226](#), July-August 2011

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Vocal opposition: demonstrators march against cuts to the arts

AMSTERDAM. “Het moet niet gekker worden!” (“This is the limit!”) were the words spoken last February from the chancel of the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam at the annual Valentine’s day friends evening. The speaker was Ernst Veen, who for the past 30 years has been the director of this historic church which doubles as a venue for music and exhibitions. Veen is also the founder and director of the Hermitage Amsterdam, which opened in 2009 with no government subsidy, and is widely admired as an entrepreneurial cultural manager. “I am holding a letter in which the state secretary for culture, Halbe Zijlstra, urges me to think more like a businessman in raising money for our institutions. This is about as much as I can take,” said Veen, who announced in March that he is retiring from both roles at the end of the year.

Veen’s indignation is shared up and down the country by people working in museums and performing arts companies, and those in arts education, following the announcement in September 2010 that the new centre-right coalition intends to cut the arts budget by €200m—25% of current expenditure—as of 1 January 2013. Overall, the government is looking for reductions in public spending of only 16%: to compound the misery for art organisations, the government is also increasing the value added tax (VAT) on tickets for concerts and performances from 6% to 19% in July. The rise does not apply to several other forms of entertainment, including cinema tickets, zoos or sporting events.

Despite a wave of protests, the government remains unwilling to compromise. A demonstration, the March for Civilisation, took place on 26 and 27 June, before a

parliamentary debate on the cuts to the culture budget. The protest began on the island of Terschelling at the Oerol Festival, continued in Rotterdam on Sunday afternoon, with demonstrators marching 20km to The Hague and sheltering overnight in a number of participating theatres and venues, regrouping to lobby parliament the following morning. It followed other major protests in November last year, under the banner, The Netherlands Is Shouting for Art. The concern of arts institutions is shared by municipal and provincial governments, worried that the arts bodies will come to them to fill the financial gap.

The timetable for the changes is adding to the anger. The government first intended to raise VAT on 1 January this year, in the middle of the performing arts season. This was postponed to 1 July, only after the upper chamber of parliament threatened to vote down the entire motion.

Meanwhile, the Arts Council (Raad voor Cultuur), a government advisory body, recommended that the government softened the proposed €200m cuts, by reducing them to €125m and implementing them gradually between 2013 and 2015. The ministry of education, culture and science usually adopts the recommendations of the Arts Council, but last month Zijlstra submitted his final position, under the heading "More than quality: a new vision for cultural policy." This confirms the €200m cuts, as of January 2013.

Although few institutions know exactly how they will be affected, anger is directed not only at the cuts but at what is being widely perceived as government disdain for culture. This is especially insulting to institutions which, like Veen's Nieuwe Kerk, have for years been professionalising their operations and raising more money from sponsors and trading activities. While organisations including the world famous Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Rijksmuseum (indeed most museums in the country) and the Netherlands Dance Theatre will suffer only minor damage, the indispensable Netherlands Theatre Institute faces closure, the 140-year-old Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten may be decimated, and the Netherlands Institute for Art History, one of the world's leading art historical research centres, has been threatened with a forced merger with the Rijksmuseum.

Also see the editorial in the July issue of the Burlington Magazine and the discussion at www.artworldsalon.com

<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Dutch-government-refuses-to-back-down-over-huge-budget-cuts/24210>