Balance between old and new

Pieter-Matthijs Gijsbers

In his article Collecting the contemporary in the Imagined City Stijn Reijnders not only offers museums that are dreaming of a more outspoken social role a wealth of stimulating and useful thoughts and suggestions, he also reminds these institutions that the path of changing to an open and audience-centered institution is complicated and not without any risk. The risk involved being that such a focus on the contemporary may result in a commercial disaster: the traditional public, shocked by the new and unusual, turns its back on its once beloved museum while at the same time a new audience has not found its way there yet. Here, I propose a more tentative approach to the process of change, in which the collecting of the contemporary is mixed with the care and conservation of that what has proven to be successful. It is exactly this balance between old and new that made the recent 'reinvention' of the Netherlands Open Air Museum in Arnhem so successful.

Since the year 2000, the Netherlands Open Air Museum is changing itself step by step from a traditional open air museum with a focus on rural cultural heritage, into a museum in which a variety of aspects connected to Dutch daily life from the past and the present is presented. In this process the Netherlands Open Air Museum is not limiting itself to what Reijnders calls 'safe stories'. On the contrary, in 2003 it opened the 'Moluccan Barak', an original 1939 wooden barrack from the province of Noord-Brabant in which a theme closely linked to Dutch postwar decolonization is presented to the public: the transfer, in 1951, of thousands of men and women from the former Dutch colony in Eastern Indonesia to temporary settlements across the Netherlands, and the subsequent tensions between the Dutch and the Moluccans. In 2010, a reconstruction of a Chinese-Dutch restaurant from 1962 was installed in the centre of what most visitors consider a typical Dutch village: the Zaanse Buurt. In this presentation the museum dwells on the history of the migration to the Netherlands in the last 400 years in general and, more specific, of the Chinese migration, which started in 1910. The nucleus of this presentation is a moving filmed portrait of Mr. Lau, a now 91-year-old immigrant who arrived in our country in 1951 – intangible heritage in itself. Here the visitors become fully aware that the communication between immigrants and locals was very much influenced by mutual stereotypes and clichés. According to the Dutch the Chinese are unhygienic and they use dog meat in their menu; the Chinese were puzzled by the enormous size of the Dutch, the huge amounts of food they ordered and their stinginess. Here, in short, more than one voice is heard and both sides of the mirror are shown.

Netherlands Open Air Museum, Moluccan Barrack. Photo: Martin Wijdemans, Netherlands Open Air Museum.

Netherlands Open Air Museum, Chinese Restaurant Asia. Photo: Martin Wijdemans, Netherlands Open Air Museum.

Now, it is this – in Paul Scheffer's words – reciprocity that transforms the Chinese-Dutch restaurant from 'just fun' into a 'mirror'. A mirror which confronts the visitor with a view on the subject of Dutch identity and Dutch culture – a view which can be quite disturbing to some. This method – in my opinion closely related to the principle Reijnders calls 'Places of Imagination' – will also be used in the 'Westerstraat Amsterdam', the House of Migration, to be opened in 2012. Here, in two big city houses, moved from the Westerstraat in Amsterdam to the main square of the museum, situated directly behind the entrance building, the visitor is invited to investigate the relationship between – historic as well as recent – migration and his or her daily life. The story told here 'combines grand narratives with more intimate and personal perspectives, and shows how these public and personal realms are always intertwined' [Reijnders]. It is quite possible that this House of Migration, because of its sheer monumentality and prominent location near the entrance, is going to function as an overture to the museum. There, at the beginning of his walk through 'Holland', the visitor will be confronted with an approach that questions what is 'typically Dutch' rather than giving definitions and clear-cut answers to what should be considered true and authentic Dutch characteristics. After this, the visitor might not anymore be so sure about his or her concept of 'Holland'. Of course, the Delftse Molen (Mill from Delft) will remain the same; but the association with this image might change: 'yes, it is Dutch, but ...'.

It is very inspiring to think of the Netherlands Open Air Museum as a Place of Imagination [Reijnders], or as the 'mental map of our country'. A place, in short, where many aspects of Dutch daily life, culture and history, both past and present, are presented [note: Reijnders need not worry; 'conflict value' is guaranteed!]. These will function as instruments for further thought, enabling visitors to reflect on their own cultural biography, on the concept of 'Holland' and on the concept of 'Dutch'. The brand new Ruhr Museum in Essen, Germany, already demonstrates how to design an 'imagined city'. Here, in the UNESCO-listed Zeche Zollverein, Schacht XII, the phenomenon 'Metropole Ruhrgebiet' is presented to the public from many perspectives. It is more than a museum; it is the 'engine room' [Reijnders] that visualizes a complete region with 14 million inhabitants: 'Schaufenster und Gedächtnis'.

Personalia

Pieter-Matthijs Gijsbers (1964) studied Art History and Archaeology at the Radboud University Nijmegen, the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome and the Dutch University Institute for Art History in Florence. After working as a researcher at the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research and teaching Art History at the Emerson College in Boston/Well (USA), he was director of Museumpark

Orientalis, an open air museum about religion, from 2001 to 2009. In 2009 he became general director of the Netherlands Open Air Museum.

Address: Netherlands Open Air Museum, P.O. Box 649, 6800 AP Arnhem, the Netherlands