

The Unreconciled Ritual: Identity and Politics at the Museum

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We entered two Dutch museums and experienced the possible existence of two different narratives of national identity.

As we became acquainted with Dutch museums through these visits, we began to speculate on the museum as a site where people confront and explore their identities. While looking at objects representing the past, one is invited to think of those others to whom these objects link us. Walking through a museum automatically develops into a ritual through which we create ideas about ourselves and the groups to which we belong – whether we are aware of this ritualizing process or not.

A common perception exists that museums are only historical archives filled with dead, almost insignificant objects, mostly irrelevant for our everyday lives. Museums, including those containing contemporary objects, might still be more frequently visited by – and advertised for – tourists than by the general population. This is our first irony, for museums such as Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum are curated with a local community in mind: a deliberate attempt is nevertheless made to establish links between past and present, between the different constituent groups of Netherlands citizens, and the historical development which brought them to the place where they stand. The Tropenmuseum exhibits historical objects which have powerful implications for contemporary life in the Netherlands. Influencing everyday life is in nowise a conscious aim of most museums. The extent to which museums “seize the opportunity” depends on the specific way in which they curate or control historical issues, placing them in a relationship with contemporary political circumstances.

Within very specific present-day socio-political and ethical or religious contexts, museums could provide refreshing perspectives on problematic issues. In being a public possession, museums are – or should ideally be – designed by and for a public construed as broadly as possible. Holding with this view, museums could make a crucial (and deliberate) positive contribution to the establishment, fostering and nurturing of community values, e.g. mutual understanding. The way in which museums then accept responsibility for the powerful influence they most probably have, has far-reaching impacts on society. We cannot underestimate the contribution that museum exhibitions could make to exploring questions of multicultural understanding within Dutch society.

However, we are in the foggy territory where politics and culture intertwine, and even the most culturally sensitive exhibitions (such as those of the Tropenmuseum) must be viewed with a critical eye.

The Community and its Mirror?

To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the relative standing of individuals within that community. Carol Duncan stresses this in her book, *Civilizing Rituals* (1995:8) Yet the obvious point must be made: exhibitions in museums do not of themselves change the world. Nor should they have to. But, as a form of public space they constitute an arena in which a community may test, examine, and imaginatively live both its older, time-tested truths and explore the possibilities for new ones. (Duncan 1995:133). Museums are spaces in which communities can depict those values that identify them as communities (Duncan 1995: 134), also experimenting with ideals and suggestions about the directions in which society is headed. Museum policy, of course, must be made within existing political and ideological limits. These are limits that change of course, as quickly as the political scene around museums changes. Museums, which rarely display more than ten or twenty percent of their total exhibit holdings, are potentially as protean as their political environments.

Museums can claim and seize this opportunity, playing around with various suggestions and ideas about identity, values, morals, ethics, almost as though it were itself a religious institution. Museums are therefore products of political and sociological interests but also producers and presenters of ideological information, values, ethics and therefore – supposed or assumed – “truths.”

It follows then that, whatever the limitations of museums, however large or small they are, and however peripheral they often seem when compared to other budgetary expenditures, museum space is space worth fighting for.

Ritual

The *raison d'être* of the museum could be matched up rather closely to the kind of rationales often given for traditional rituals: revelation, enlightenment, spiritual equilibrium, rejuvenation (Duncan 1995:20). Rituals generally have religious connotations. Our supposedly secular, even anti-ritual, culture is full of ritual situations and events – very few of which (as the famous anthropologist Mary Douglas has noted) take place in religious contexts. Used as a descriptive concept however, ritual has a much wider application value. It could serve as a metaphor for the ritualized way in which museum exhibitions gradually influence or rather, engulf visitors with its carefully-devised exhibits and narratives; by inviting, encouraging, provoking and inciting them to participation and agreement.

The eventual understanding and characteristics of the ritualised museum-process might nevertheless still be strongly related to the religious origin of the concept. On the one hand, museums are sometimes described as a pseudo-sacred kind of place, experienced as filled with a ritual-like atmosphere. In addition, some museum representatives - for example,

Hester Poppinga of the Tropenmuseum, even (in a manner of speech) called the museum a “cultural temple”.

Museums are also ritual spaces in a broader sense. Rituals are involved in the production and staging of values and beliefs about social, political, civic, collective, moral, religious and sexual identity. In keeping with our first view of the connection between the museum and the community’s identity, we can see the museum as an engine of ideology. The ‘ritual spaces’ view of museums offers one way in which we can watch the engine function.

The museum has at least two features in being considered as a ritual space. In this ritual space, visitors are encouraged/prompted to act out, or rather to participate in rituals of viewership (examining artifacts) and to confirm the supposedly expected or anticipated visitors role/behaviour. This contributes to the dynamic, almost theatrical presentation, with which we are confronted in museums.

The museum provides an implicit ideological context as backdrop for the dramatic “truths” they perform. In this line of thought the museum serves as a stage for ritual(s). On the other hand, the museum becomes a marked-off zone of – and away from - mundane time and space. Visitors, removed from the concerns of their daily, practical lives, open themselves up to a different quality of experience. Provoking, inciting, causing, or at least, encouraging rituals, the organization of the museum setting can also be described as a kind of script or setting which visitors perform (Duncan 1995:20).

The dramatic displays are like permanent theatre pieces, fixed stage backdrops for audiences to engage in a drama about values and beliefs – involving the relation between themselves and what’s acted out/displayed – and the consequences for their identity. The audience use the props contained in the museum in a symbolic way to participate in ritual (symbolically) serving ideology and offering a vision of identity. The museum displays thus take visitors on a kind of mental / spiritual journey, a stepping stone out the present into a universe of timeless values’ (Duncan 1995:19).

Museums have the capacity to frame objects and manipulate situations, declaring them as being relevant or important knowledge. The objects are claimed for becoming part of new narratives which demand a kind of ritual attention. This process could entail the negation or obscuring of other, older meanings (Duncan 1995:16). In this sense, the assumed authority with which museums control the exhibition themes, could be compared to a kind of religious authority. Whatever narratives are presented then also possess mythical power, which could be explained in much the same way.

Furthermore, it seems that museums are excellent examples of the intimate and complex relation between different ideas about identity. Both its presentations, re-presentation, as well as its mis-representation suggest not only that the presentation of assumed identity might be wrong, misrepresented, but also the questioning of self-identity. Representations of this kind are powerfully handled by museums. Ideas and myths about identity are handled powerfully through museum displays – manipulated, created, confirmed, questioned or destroyed.

Whether a museum displays things about a “familiar” group, as in Gelderland’s Openluchtmuseum (National Heritage Museum) or about “foreign” groups as in the Tropenmuseum, the ways it represents the familiar and the unfamiliar are connected. The way the Tropenmuseum depicts the Dutch, whether Colonial or Contemporary, is tied to the way in which it represents the Surinamese and Indonesians; this museum, after all, creates portraits of the relationships between these groups.

Whether a museum is engaged in questions about a “familiar” identity, or in questions about the identity of others, the questions of representation of self and of others are intertwined and inseparable. One extreme form of this can be seen in 19th century travel literature: many British writers used their encounters with the Japanese to describe, through the device of contrast, the British. An exhibition on a “foreign” group may be an indirect way of talking about ourselves.

In the case of the Joods Historisch Museum, Jews can establish an (imagined) connection with the Jews of Amsterdam by examining the Hanukkha lamps (Menorahs) with which they are already familiar. The Tropenmuseum presents a more complicated picture of national groups, for the reason given above: even in its simplest descriptions of the Surinamese and the Dutch, the museum tells a story about many different peoples who imagine their identities in different - but related - ways. Dutch can imagine themselves to be part of a national community, a continuing one, which encompasses the people who colonized Suriname and Indonesia, but they must then see that, in making a picture of themselves as a nation, they have created pictures of other nations.

Identity and “ Its” Fragments: Displaying Charlotte

Identity is a term itself in need of some clarification, to say the least. Communal experiences of identity – the experience of belonging to a tribe, group, collectivity, or nation – is intertwined with social, political or ethical programmes. The phrase “ideology” is a handy one for thinking about this intertwining, where the concept of belonging to a community is tied to a concept of how one should comport oneself within that community. To the extent that belonging to a national community is a matter of adherence to culture, it is usually a matter of adhering to a normative culture. When identity is ritualized, those rituals will not only serve to remind participants of the groups in which they hold membership, but of the duties that membership obliges them to carry out. In the cast of the modern nation, narratives of identity are usually stories that groups tell themselves.

The Charlotte Salomon exhibition at Amsterdam’s Joods Historisch Museum represented a disruption of the narratives of identity which we entered into through the rest of the museum. Salomon, a German Jewish artist, did not explore the Dutch experience in her work, yet that work expresses more, to us, about the “Dutch Jewish Experience” than anything else in the JHM. The set of Salomon’s gouaches, entitled “Leben? Oder Theatre?”

("Life? Or Theatre?") which hangs in the museum is not accompanied by any text which relates it to the experience of Dutch Jews. The curator who chose to display them may not have foreseen the resonance between Salomon's German-Jewish aesthetic and the experience of her Netherlands counterparts, but nevertheless that resonance remains.

The paintings, thick with references to German artistic and intellectual traditions – cabaret as developed by Weill and Brecht, aesthetic philosophy as Nietzsche wrote it – place Salomon within a progressive bracket of German intellectual life, but part of Life? Or Theatre? is the narrative account of Salomon's loss of family and friends under the Third Reich. Salomon herself disappears after the end of the 760-or-so plates which comprise the full work (only a fraction is exhibited), her autobiography unfinished.

To be torn out of a tradition which feels like home – that is, non-Jewish German culture - finding oneself marked as different in what was once a field of shared traditions and commonalities is the same story that can be heard among Italian Jews (see *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*) and in many Dutch Jews' experiences of the German occupation. This is not to claim that no Jews felt that a gulf of Jewishness separated them from their non-Jewish neighbors (in 1920 Amsterdam was the site of a large Political Zionist conference). The lesson here is that sometimes, the "difference" between a Jew and a non-Jew is imposed upon the former from the outside.

Charlotte Salomon symbolizes that imposition. The tension between German intellectual and aesthetic tradition and Jewish identification tells a story which renders more poignant the tensions in the surrounding Dutch exhibits. A glass case next to Salomon's contains ID cards and badges from Westerbork transit camp, and other signs of the Jewish difference – "Jood" formed, horribly, out of faux-Hebrew letters, defacing the alphabet associated with, among other things, the creation of the world.

Salomon is also the symbol of a community whose national identification is, to say the least, under considerable strain. A certain sector of German, Dutch and Italian Jews had been speaking a language of nationalist discourse which identified them with their state of residence – for example, Dutch Jews were Dutch first, Jewish later. In Germany this was common among communities of educated Jews. When the Germans imposed their standards of who to identify as a Jew, individuals were forced to confront their own "Dutchness" as nothing more than something spoken by a language which was fast disintegrating, revealing as if in a splash of cold water this point expressed by Mladon Dolar: modern identity is "The constant reconstruction and the reinvention of the self.' The [human] subject and the present it belongs to [he means the individual and its environment] have no objective status, they have to be perpetually (re)constructed.." (cited in Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* p. 240) This realization can be easily reinterpreting plainly as an identity crisis: within this analysis, Salomon and other Jews become the ones who truly understand identity because they are the ones forced to leave it and, turning, look at it from the outside.

One question is whether or not there is the same sort of identity crisis preserved at the Tropenmuseum as at the JHM. It is the conundrum over who we really are, that renders Salomon's work so compelling, and makes it an ideal companion piece to the Dutch

collection at the JHM. This is not a conundrum/question answered – to replace either the myth of the German intellectual whose Jewishness is incidental with a new myth of the trans-state Jewish nation – Salomon actually remains within the undefined space of identity crisis, between the old smashed identity and the new one imposed by anti-Semites. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad writes “The Horror, the Horror,” which Homi Bhabha calls both “emblematic words” and “unreadable runes” – and then Bhabha settles for describing this phrase via other means: “Marlow returns to his initiating insight, the experience of colonialism is the problem of living ‘in the midst of the incomprehensible.’” (Bhabha 1996:213).

The Incomprehensible, Charlotte Salomon’s identity crisis, is after all, both emblematic and unreadable. Charlotte Salomon can’t bear her experience of identity crisis, yet that crisis has come to dominate her life – it comes to stand for the state that she is in. Returning to Bhabha’s words, Salomon has had her own identity colonized, and lives in the incomprehension of that experience. This provides a useful link to the colonial history which the Tropenmuseum explores of course – there is much of the incomprehensible about the Dutch trying to deal with their colonial histories, the word “Incomprehensible” taken as a way to sum up their struggle to face up their national (that term taken to mean both the state-political and the imagined national community) past. This is the metaphorical connection between the case of Salomon and the case of the Colonial exhibitions at the Tropenmuseum.

The question is whether or not the Dutch Tropenmuseum can perform Charlotte’s trick: remaining within the open question of national identity. Their new version narratives presumably establish links and reconcile past-present conflicts. Unfortunately it might be possible that the presented information – at least in some aspects - come down to almost impossible myths. Our contention is that there is more potential productivity in this hesitation, this dwelling within the question itself (Rilke) than there would be in a routine encounter with facts, easily used as an excuse to then scurry behind myths of national liberal-progressive destiny. The moment of hesitation can generate conversation.

Salomon is more than the inability or refusal to resolve an identity crisis by joining a national group, of course. She is a woman, an individual, and there is more about her that is significant beyond her identity crisis. While exploring this into its feminist and artistic dimensions is a compelling project, it is also beyond our present scope. For the time being, Salomon is significant because she preserves the possibility of human particularity – of individuality in an age when people are defined according to categories, groups, nations – the possibility of existing outside of the half-unspoken, garbled but epistemologically free. Perhaps this preserved individuality is also part of the key to Salomon’s feminist significance, as well – the preserving of her experience as an individual and as a woman, over and against her membership in any group.

Post-Colonial Rituals at the Tropenmuseum

Departing from identity's disruption we return to its creation at the Tropenmuseum. As a social, political, and ideological instrument, it becomes a dynamically creative field. Staging an exhibition focusing on Surinamese and Antillean culture has the potential to promote understanding amongst different groups in Dutch society. The aim of this exhibition is to establish a link between the Surinamese and Antillean past and present, and the Dutch relation to those pasts and presents.

The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam serves as an example of a museum which adapted – or rather, was changed by authorities and had to change - according to prevalent political, social and moral ideological ideas. Possibly in an attempt to rewrite or correct history, the current Tropenmuseum was changed from being a colonial museum, after 1945, and has been given a whole new aim. They present “non-western” cultures in context – to whatever extent that might be and whatever that may imply in different cases. More importantly however, is the ways in which they attempt to establish a link between the past and present actuality. Issues about identity seem to be addressed in the Tropenmuseum, considering its mission statement about the museum as a meeting place for Western and non-Western cultures (Netherlands Museum Association 1997: 59). The Museum therefore aims to establish greater understanding about other cultures. Exhibiting older, as well as contemporary cultures, what they always emphasize is presumably the role of the Dutch, their relation to those other – presently, also Dutch - cultures. It is thus the link between what “we have to do with that” (Poppinga), the Dutch past(s) and the present.

It is crucial to remember that, to at least as great an extent as in other countries, the Dutch colonial past has followed the Dutch back home. The present Surinamese and Indonesian citizens of The Netherlands have proved themselves to be more than the images of slavery and torture – they have their own versions of the colonial story which they tell, even if by their mere physical presence, (for example, by means of temporary participation in exhibitions). Dutch stories about the colonial past can therefore never remain the only voices heard – they will be challenged by other discourses on the past. The Tropenmuseum could be said to exploit and explore this tension to political effect.

The museum's focus is on the present-day situation of cultures exhibited in the museum and their relation to the Dutch. An interesting initiative on the museum's part was therefore to get “culture carriers” (Dutch: “cultuur dragers”) involved in the exhibition “Latin America,” especially Dutch people of Surinamese and Antillean origin. These members of the Dutch public were invited to participate in creating exhibitions, which then should have expressed a range of present-day perspectives on historical issues. These “representatives” had different backgrounds and interests. It was however, very difficult for a group of them and the museum authorities to come to an agreement on sensitive or controversial topics: for example, the portrayal of slave history and the role of the Dutch was difficult to address in a critical manner. The Surinamese and Antillean representatives proposed the exhibition of an slave ship replica in order to make as much as possible known about that repressed history.

The museum authorities, however, thought that this information would have a very bad effect on children - including Surinamese children.

As we suggested in our introduction, the Tropenmuseum's curators take the museum's political responsibility seriously: for evidence we direct attention towards the museum's mission statement, which describes the Tropenmuseum as that aforementioned meeting place between Western Cultures and non-Western cultures (Netherlands Museum Association 1997: 59). The Museum therefore aims to act as a translator that brings different cultural "languages" together, building greater understanding. Exhibiting older, as well as contemporary cultures, the curators always emphasize the link between what "we have to do with that." (Poppinga).

Tell a Story About Yourself

Further issues on identity can also be explored in the Tropenmuseum's exhibits on present-day life in the Netherlands. Surinamese and Antillean young people are invited to "represent their own lives" as part of the Latin American exhibition. Every sixth months, another individual is given the chance to make a video with the "assignment" to "tell a story about yourself". The exhibited end product has the title "video letters and valuable things". It exists in the form of a video monitor at the museum, as well as photographs of family and friends - of Björn Lodik, whose video is currently exhibited. Although Björn Lodik had a video training session before he had to do the project, his end product was nevertheless edited by professional supervision.

Some printed statements on the Tropenmuseum's exhibition walls raise questions on identity issues, in keeping with the museum's apparent boldness. Statements include, "some ethnographical collections reveal more about the collectors than about the cultures they represent. This is certainly true of our Antillean collections". Also the stated question, "do the Tropenmuseum collections reveal more about interest in the Netherlands for the Antilles than about the islands themselves?" Statements like these could be seen in the context of the Tropenmuseum's anxious attempts to emphasize present conditions, creating links to the past, called "actuality" (Hester Poppinga.) The present relations between Dutch, Antillean and Surinamese are summarised, seemingly, by a question mark.

Becoming (W)hole

At this stage we should again consider the powerful potential of the museum to have a positive influence on society's progress towards wholeness. One should wonder about the effectiveness with which the Tropenmuseum focuses on its goals. Without demanding that they should play an active role, for example, in reconciling different groups in society, their potential should also not be wasted. Exhibiting today's Surinamese and Antillean "actualities," would definitely then have to contain references to multiculturalism within Dutch society. Focusing on this, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science demanded

that all cultural institutions should deliberately focus more on drawing visitors with “another background” (Van Bunte).

“A process of constructing Nationalist illusions,” seems, however to be a more accurate view of the museum’s narratives. At a certain stage however, the dispelling of these nationalist illusions and (various) myths was what drew our attention to the Tropenmuseum. Apparent deliberate attempts are made in museums to lure visitors into participating in the rituals, which should secure the museum’s narratives in the visitor’s mind. The Tropenmuseum seemed to be fighting against views of the Dutch as a people who were progressive, orderly, peace-loving; they had their own bloody history, it seemed to say. At this point we are reminded of what Carol Duncan has written about museums as sites for the construction of obscuring narratives , by way of ritualizing – proposed, and presumably – civilized ideas and truths. The museum easily incites visitor enactment of the rituals. In this regard, it is possible to state that the Tropenmuseum presumably takes the very different tack of exposing “true” history for what it was, rather than reminding a community that even its darkest hour cannot be used as a foci around which a group might gather – the Dutch Colonial past is common knowledge, but the offenses which were a part of that history may not be.

Initial optimism about the exciting role the Tropenmuseum could have played was crushed. The museum limits its potential. Apart from the fact that it is still the colonizer’s representation of other cultures, the museum seems to draw more tourists than it does members of the represented groups. The museum is not very accessible to them. This “cultural temple” (Poppinga) is much more expensive to visit than other museums. The museum is almost not at all visited by cultural minorities – which also has to do with the entrance fees (Poppinga). Even the library or shop cannot be visited without paying the entrance fee. A lack of museum marketing, also contributes to the general exclusion of Dutch “allochtone” (non-White) citizens. Furthermore it seems that very few of those people know about the existence of the museum, and all its (supposedly) praise-worthy attempts. This is also the outspoken opinion of Mr Rudi Spier, influential government representative for ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. Although the museum also prides itself on its outreach to schools, only thirty percent of its visitors are children.

Reconciliation and Future Histories

Through the exhibition of, for example, the slave ship history, the museum creates the idea of reconciliation – but naturally, it is from a white Dutch perspective. In this respect then, the white Dutch constitute only one part of the museum’s audience. Therefore – or logically following from this perspective, it would be that - the people to whom this particular museum(-narrative) or message should then be addressed, would include former Dutch slaves, or rather, the present-day cultural minorities in the Netherlands. Exhibitions like these could be described as nothing less than part of a general national effort to take responsibility for a kind of confession for the unspeakable past horrors of slavery. This admission of difficult past relations, with a view on a renewed present, should obviously happen between two parties. Confession of guilt always has to be addressed to the wronged party. In this view, the

Tropenmuseum must surely be, or at least to a great extent should be, directing its efforts towards Surinamese and Antillean people. Ironic, that those people do not even know of the museum's existence (Spier). Therefore they completely miss this (misplaced) gesture of reconciliation, of trying to heal the past that had become the communal Dutch present. This results in ever-growing challenges and practical problems for the Museum's projects of diversity and multiculturalism.

Rudi Spier's assumption that the cultural minorities do not even know about the museum's existence, and hardly share in its culture of confession (and suggestions of "multiculturalism") can be confirmed. Hester Poppinga stated that outreach work, however necessary it might be "to attract this part of the public, till now, nobody does anything with it. Maybe in the future.... But it would still be a long time. I think, its also a way of Thinking and a way of.... How you want to spend your money, and it has everything to do with it." It seems, thus, that not much is done to attract the "allochtone." The only effort that the museum or its educational officer herself feels obliged to make, is to try to reach them by means of educational outreach. The following is her motivation: "All the children have to go to school. So if I make good programs for the schools, then I will reach those children too, and the parents, maybe." To comment on her assumption, one should bear in mind that the children who come into contact with the museum only make up thirty percent of the total. Poppinga made another comment – which can unfortunately, but sadly and ironically enough be interpreted as having (in)tolerant connotations (and references): "I think it is much more that it has to do with your conviction. If culture is a thing that is mostly consumed by higher educated people.... Or is it possible to put it 'down' for other people too..."

It seemed to us at one point that the Tropenmuseum for the most part only draws (white) Dutch - probably liberal – visitors. This possibility was confirmed by Prof. Rob van Ginkel. This supports our other earlier impression that the exhibition on slave history focuses on those (white) Dutch citizens who participate in this national confession of guilt. The most negative take on the Tropenmuseum finds it to be nothing but show.

One can, however, still mention work which the Tropenmuseum should deserve credit for. Anything that recalls challenges to asserted "peace-loving" national identity and myths deserves praise. The exhibition on Antillean and Surinamese history contains dehumanizing images of slave torture. Also, a few meters of the exhibition which is supposed to resemble a slave ship. It looks like a wooden wall of approximately one meter, containing data on those slaves who were transported and died during the voyage, as well as the prices of slaves. It also shows some objects used on the ships. There are, however, still problems with this exhibit: When one observes the one small picture of slave torture, near the image of "slave [18 years] hung [naked] by the hands as punishment," it is stated that life was not "charming and sweet", which contributes to the establishment of romantic views on everyday life. This is intensified by omitting negative words to describe the situation, while euphemistically only stating that it was not a happy experience. Strange circumstances accompany this ritualized imaging of the torture of a slave. To add to the strangely optimistic or content/satisfied atmosphere is the very cheerful loud music from a speaker almost next to the image; continually played in the room of the exhibition – supposedly contemporary Suriname or Antillean music. Of the many

other images available on the torture of slaves, none is displayed. What kind of intention would lay behind this? Was it considerate, sensitive, diplomatic, or was it comfortable, safe, and convenient?

Regarding public involvement, the Tropenmuseum's graceful act of sharing their cultural monopoly with their fellow Dutch citizens (of ethnic minority origin) is in itself a noble multicultural - and (being typically a Dutch) tolerant - act. To get those people to participate in exhibitions, is an attempt to express the Tropenmuseum's emphases on today's new perception of historical issues. Giving members of various community groups a say in museums, is a praiseworthy gesture, at least to some degree. The reason for this is that there is however, not much agreement on the actual success of the outcome of such participation. This kind of noble multicultural participation, for example through the "Video Letters and Valuable Things"-project, might raise even more questions about the initial motivation for inviting involvement, by offering such opportunities to the Dutch Antilleans and Surinamese.

Influential government spokespersons for the ethnic minority groups, like Rudi Spier, are not at all convinced about the effectiveness and the success of these methods of involving minorities, disregarding the museum's good intentions. He believes that the cultural and ethnic minority groups should take initiative themselves, instead of staying dependent on the cultural modes and mercies of the majority. Only then, could they be fully in control of whatever narratives and ways of representation they want to explore - also whatever mode of expression would serve their experience and interpretation of a reconciling and practical multiculturalism in the best way. One of his other arguments against it, is that these individuals and groups would most probably not be sufficiently representative at all of the broad Antillean and Surinamese community. Both his concerns seem to be extremely valid, in the light of some interpretations of the effectiveness and outcomes of the opportunities given to specific individuals. The "Video Letters and Valuable Things" project is of suspicious quality and contains some ridiculous aspects. It results in a product which is supposed to be admired for the intentions behind it. In truth however, it embodies the fine line between having the opportunity to speak out and degrading oneself - especially measured against the standards of those who granted the opportunity. Giving somebody an opportunity to prove themselves, could thus easily turn out into a ridiculing experience (in extreme cases even making fools of those who exposed themselves in a brave way as supposed representatives of their groups).

Furthermore, it should be mentioned how significant different aspects of the exhibition contributes to the strangely contradicting impressions that are - ritually - established. For example, near the image of slavery and a displayed whip can also be found artworks of Gerrit Schouten, made c.1820 in Suriname. His dioramas are pretty little architectural models of the plantation farms, of which the Dutch were so proud. The description says "however charming and sweet the dioramas seem now, life and work on the plantation was hard and dangerous." Exactly this vague description of "hard and dangerous" omitting all the unsafe information, is significant. Given the lack of any other slave images, it gives the impression that this kind of information would be reserved for the select few - whoever that might be, or never be! Are they protecting the broad public, or the public image? Are they sensitive toward the

Surinamese and Antillean feelings about this history, or are they more sensitive about the feelings of the Dutch public [white majority]. Do they censor information to protect children, is it an adults-only exhibition?

Furthermore it is exactly the totality and fullness of that statement next to the dioramas that can be used to describe the present-day situation in the Netherlands. On the one hand it states, in a very abstract mode, that however charming and sweet presentations of past (and current) situations seem at present, “life and work was (and is) still hard”. This is exactly the convenient and safely abstract viewpoint which is generally taken about humanitarian issues today. Everything is not always what it appears to be, a lot might be wrong or displaced underneath the surface.

Now, and to us, everything seems in order and in place in Dutch society, but do we really take the trouble to search for underlying issues? Even when we are told that tolerance and multicultural life in Holland is symbolically “hard and dangerous”, it stays ever difficult to get past “sweet, charming,” re-assuring images, reassuring us that everything is well. As if everybody is embracing multiculturalism and accepting diversity. Or so it seems.... At least judging from the Tropenmuseum’s exhibitions and good intentions. However much we want to believe in the positive possibilities of museums, too many questions arise. The more than explicit good intentions of the Tropenmuseum seems obvious in an almost life-size image of two standing men at the entrance of the Southeast Asian exhibition in an unantagonistic pose. It shows a black man (in official dress) standing with a white colonialist, shaking hands. Placing this image here seems like too much of an obvious attempt to show good relations. The supposed past good relations it portrays is part of a myth. We know the image is a lie, we know there was “violence” in this relationship. Under contemporary political circumstances, such a gesture could be interpreted as the proposed good relations between different cultural groups in Dutch society. Ironic, however, are the ways in which this obvious, almost forced gesture of reconciliation, is contradicted.

The observations of anthropologist Edmond Leach sheds more light on the Tropenmuseum’s ritual system. He noticed that every culture mounts some symbolic effort to contradict the irreversibility of time and its end result, death. He argued that themes of rebirth, rejuvenation, and the spiritual recycling or perpetuation of the past deny the fact of death by substituting for it symbolic structures in which past time returns (Duncan 1995: 17). As ritual sites in which visitors seek to re-live spiritually significant moments of the past, museums make splendid examples of this kind of symbolic strategy (Duncan 1995:17). We have observed the political potential of this strategy, its pitfalls, and one example of this strategy’s disruption. Charlotte Salomon breaks any narrative of identity which the Joods Historisch Museum might construct, resulting in a creative space of identity crisis. We valorize that identity crisis, hoping that we do not also valorize the position of the victims of the Holocaust - what we value is the creative freedom from museum narratives. It is the ability to speak from individual perspectives, after all, which Dutch citizens of all backgrounds must seek if they are to enjoy the fruits of a multicultural society, and while the idea of “each one pursuing her own dream” has an American ring to it, it is a phrase that resonates well with Dutch questions of multiculturalism.

It is often said that without a sense of the past, we cannot envisage a future. The reverse is also true: without a vision of the future, we cannot construct and access a usable past. Museums are at the centre of this process in which past and future intersect.

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