

Eindhoven, May 2008

## ***Be(com)ing Dutch* is a highly unusual exhibition**

For two reasons.

Firstly, the exhibition is part of a large-scale project that has evolved over two years already focussing on sensitive issues for the Netherlands such as identity, diversity and nationality. In those two years, Charles Esche (director of the Van Abbemuseum) and Annie Fletcher (curator) have been talking with artists, intellectuals, politicians and the people of Eindhoven to find possible answers to awkward questions. What does the notion of 'Being Dutch' or 'Becoming Dutch' mean or encapsulate in the 21st century? Who are "the Dutch" anyway and how do we want to be seen by ourselves and others?

Secondly, the project is unusual because it takes on an outright political and social subject and translates it into artistic terms. It is an issue that comes hot off the presses and the blogs, so it is an area with which museums in the Netherlands have not readily become involved and is therefore groundbreaking for this country.

Starting 24 May 2008, the outcome of this whole process is being shown in an exhibition of artists works in the museum and throughout the city of Eindhoven.

Since 2006, when the Van Abbemuseum was awarded the Development Prize for Cultural Diversity that made it possible to turn our idea into reality, the discussion in the Netherlands about who we are, where we come from, where we are heading and our norms and values in a globalizing world has become even more topical and urgent. Thanks to that additional support from the Mondriaan Foundation, Fletcher and Esche could be more exploratory than usual, having more time and space. The museum could at last tackle something with true thoroughness and with extended reflection. They could talk with people at length, spend time considering the choice of artists and works in collective meetings, really get something going. This means that *Be(com)ing Dutch* has become an experiment with great substance, including commissioning 21 of the more than 35 participating artists to conceive completely new works.

'You sometimes have to accept that certain things are complex and take time to grasp. Oversimplification is too easy,' says Charles Esche concerning the necessity of that extended timespan. 'If you rush to conclusions you end up with easy answers: "OK, religion is the problem" or "Immigration or globalization, or politicians, whatever. All very simple and with one stroke the problem could be solved." But you need time to understand something in a way that deals with both sides of an argument, and time is something that we no longer have today. It is here that the museum can do something: give time to tackle the more difficult things, time to reflect, to think about art and art's influence on our ways of thinking. In this way, *Be(com)ing Dutch* is about all of us, about all Dutch people, new and old.'

Esche underscores how the Van Abbemuseum has always been a place where there is room for experiment. This extends back to its early years, in the time of former directors like Jean Leering and Rudi Fuchs, as well as applying today. 'We are trying to keep this tradition going.'

*Be(com)ing Dutch* reveals how the Netherlands is in a state of flux and transformation. It also demonstrates how the museum is changing. Curator Annie Fletcher thinks that this might well involve fundamental shifts:

'Art is often seen merely as something "you can look at" or something "spectacular". We are proposing that a museum might sometimes serve as an extremely important catalyst for such discussions. Perhaps it is time for museums to reinvent themselves...'

**Note to editors:**

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