

EXCITEMENT

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

In the late 1960s, I was a curious young art writer. I learned about all kinds of things: new art that we were convinced, would radically change the status quo. Because it needed to change, that much was clear. When I began my museum career in 1975, my intervention took a far more concrete form. I was able to hang the works myself and see what they looked like from close up.

That generated enormous excitement and, at times, considerable confusion. In the meantime, I was beginning to realise how I looked at works of art. I learned the most from arranging art works next to each other in a gallery. When pieces are hung close together, it's far easier to see their individualism. This *individualism* is what museums ought to show their visitors. Art works may look alike (because they were painted in New York in the 1960s or, a little different, in Amsterdam) but if you examine them closely, you see that each and every one is quite distinct. All the while, I continued to write about these new departures, too.

You learn to see more clearly when you write. Dealing with individual works (in a *mise-en-scène*) became my way of getting to know art well, also while writing. The things themselves: in a museum, you always encounter a certain piece by Carl Andre, for instance: a row of 13 blocks of cedar wood, 30 x 30 x 90, placed side by side in a straight line. That's what you see and that's what it's about. In a gallery, your job is to find an eloquent place for this rugged piece – it's not about anything as vague as Minimal Art it's simply about that thing. And the title, *Palisade*, has no relevance either. When he produced the work, Andre wasn't thinking about making a piece of Minimal Art. He was thinking about placing blocks of wood next to each other and how that would look. That is the work in Eindhoven. You look at it from different distances and think about what to hang near it on the wall. Perhaps a baroque work by Dibbets entitled Rubens – because of the matt hue and narrow, vertical shape - would fit well with the sturdy contours of the Andre and the sandy-coloured wood. It's about those kinds of practicalities, and it's about what you've got in the collection.

That – the excitement of discovering things and getting to know them better – is what this exhibition is about. With a handful of exceptions, I use contemporary works that I purchased for the collection while director of museums in Eindhoven, The Hague and Amsterdam. I bought them because I believed it would be good for them to remain at the museum. And those are some of the works I know best, and from close quarters. They were always within arm's length.

I am also an art historian. That type of approach (wanting to see things in a broader context and from a greater distance) meant never wholly believing in your excitement. The excitement of seeing something you've never seen before was inevitably followed by another, placing the previous excitement in a different light. That's when you discovered you had particular preferences. In the work by Ad Dekkers I discovered a square abstraction. That was excitement – I merged with the clarity of his formulation. My first acquisitions in Eindhoven at the time were streamlined, abstract works of a similar ilk by artists such as Sol Lewitt and Robert Mangold. You had to have them. But not

as a trophy, that never interested me. With every purchase, I focused primarily on the collection as a whole. You weigh things up, try to imagine how something new would affect the entire ensemble. To phrase it differently, a collection is a story, too. There was a story even when you began. So as not to overcomplicate matters, it was the story of your predecessors in their time. After the Second World War, when De Wilde became director in Eindhoven, American art had little impact here until 1963. You started seeing it in Europe in the 1960s. And that's reflected in a collection. In 1963, when he became director of the Stedelijk, De Wilde himself shifted his emphasis primarily to New York. The best art - and the best excitement - came from that new Mecca. De Kooning and Barnett Newman were his heroes, soon joined by Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein and other Pop Art luminaries. Such acquisitions changed and broadened the story of the Stedelijk. Jean Leering, De Wilde's successor in Eindhoven, was a structural engineer with a passion for the celebrated Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky. His idiom was abstract but as a Soviet artist he also sought a broader scope, engaging with social issues in his use of images. In the sixties in Eindhoven, Leering brought together an important group of work by El Lissitzky (and art in a similar vein). That changed the story there. In the course of the 1960s, the constructivism of Lissitzky brought Leering into contact with the stirrings of Minimal Art (Stella, Judd, Morris, Flavin) as well as Bruce Nauman and Joseph Beuys. These recollections are patchy, but nonetheless show that, bit by bit, collections also change their story and their tone. After all, art evolves and so does the way museums respond to it, and their preferences. In about 1967 or 68, The Hague developed an early, serious, interest in a different type of Minimal Art than that favoured in Eindhoven: Carl Andre and Sol Lewitt, together with Jan Schoonhoven and Ad Dekkers. This impetus in The Hague was driven by an impassioned curator, Enno Develing.

In the meantime, I started at Eindhoven in February 1975. My preference for radical abstraction led me to Sol Lewitt and Robert Mangold - and also to what, at the time, was emerging as a new offshoot of that abstraction which was largely referred to as conceptual art. Interest was starting to shift to artists like Daniel Buren, Lawrence Weiner, Jan Dibbets, Stanley Brouwn, Ulrich Ruckriem, and Robert Barry.

Because I am an art historian I know that everything always happens concurrently. But every avant-garde believes, even if only unconsciously, that they are the most important thing happening at that moment. The poet Ezra Pound said 'make it new'. Which is difficult enough. To do so, artists need unwavering self-belief. In a museum, however, it's not about one artist but, in principle, all the artists that comprise the collection. There, it's about the scope and breadth of a collection. You look at a painting in a gallery; but as you continue to look, you see another painting. A collection strives to bring together such diversity because presenting disparities is the purpose of a museum and the bedrock of the stories it tells. Modern and contemporary art is often contentious - so there's all the more reason to treat it with caution.

In Eindhoven, I was able to pursue my own preference for abstraction thanks to Lissitzky. Although many museums were reluctant to fully embrace Minimal Art, by then it had begun to achieve inviolable status, soon followed by Conceptual Art. This was due to it being tightly formulated, radical art - and also because it was considered highly American. In America, they tend to believe that whatever's created on US soil is the best of the best. So they regarded work produced elsewhere with a degree of pity. Then something upset the applecart.

Not long after I began in Eindhoven, we mounted a major exhibition of paintings by A.R. Penck, which had toured from Kunsthalle Bern. That was something totally different. Once those audacious works were hanging in the museum, their reckless energy gradually won me over. We also bought several of the works in the exhibition. I thought that Penck, together with all the others that came to my attention (Baselitz, Rupprecht, Richter, Sieverding, Kiefer, Immendorff too, and Rainer, Kounellis and Merz), as contemporaries of Sol Lewitt or Mangold revealed another, new and raw imagination from Europe, that was of fundamental importance. There were others who stayed closer to the abstract idiom of Minimal Art and were less controversial. Figures such as Daniel Buren, Jan Dibbets, Stanley Brouwn, Imi Knoebel, Richard Long, Gilbert & George. The fact that these artists (from Baselitz to Long and from Dibbets to Rainer) were (and are) all excitingly good and no less exceptional than their American counterparts, called for the balance to be redressed. You couldn't dismiss a Rainer painting as bad and poorly-executed because it wasn't beautiful and geometric. That wasn't fair; that was bias. In Eindhoven and at other venues, I staged exhibitions juxtaposing works by all these different artists, and bought them. In the summer of 1978, I presented an arrangement from the collection with a work by Buren in the corner, a rectangular wood structure by Judd at an angle in front of it, and a vigorous gestural painting by Baselitz on the wall alongside. Was that a provocation?

In 1982, when my Documenta presented very different works in a dialogue setting, the critic of the New York Times called me a 'romantic fascist'. But to me, the combination was powerful and exciting – that's why I did it – so that I, and the public, could see things from a fresh perspective. For sentimental reasons, I've reiterated the Judd, Buren, Baselitz ensemble in this exhibit. I continued to work like this. All kinds of younger artists added themselves to those configurations, as you can see.

Everything's very different, which is why it works.

Rudi Fuchs

April 2016