

From Art History to *World Art Studies*:

The World Upside Down

Valedictory lecture by

Kitty Zijlmans

Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory/World Art Studies

at Leiden University

delivered on

Monday, 25 October 2021

Dear audience, all those present in the room and online,

Last August, I unsuspectingly walked into a rather dark room in the huge art- and nature complex of the Verbeke Foundation, a site and museum for contemporary art close to Kemzeke in Belgium. On shelves and on tables sat jars of formaldehyde containing embryos and animal parts; there was a pentagonal space, overflowing with taxidermized animals: rodents, birds, turtles and snakes; further on, there was a whole but somewhat moth-eaten panther; and countless display cases with pinned insects; old cabinets; crammed drawers; stacks of sorting boxes; binders and vascula; instruments; books; a wall full of skulls and antlers; a taxidermist's entire workshop, and much more; all slightly dusty and poorly lit. It was the work *The Accused*, from 2020, by the American artist Mark Dion, specially developed for the Verbeke Foundation.¹

When I first studied art history at Leiden, in 1974, I wouldn't even have recognized this an artwork, just as I once walked by an installation by Thomas Hirschhorn, because I thought that they were still unpacking the work. Now, many decades later, I realized that I was walking through an episteme, a way of knowing. The arrangement at Verbeke fascinated me, primarily mainly due to questions about which knowledge systems the displayed taxonomy represents? Where we stand as humans in the midst of and inextricably linked to all these – now rapidly disappearing – species, and what that says about our worldview? And directly aligned with this are the questions: who do I mean by 'us' and what do I mean by 'worldview'?

Taxonomies anchor the world, at least temporally. I would like to turn that world upside down and question it: where do ideas, imaginations, classifications, and categories come from and what do they *stand* for? Even a simple world like 'us' implies a 'not-us', so who are 'they'? What is the organizing principle behind 'us': Us art historians? Us women? *White* women? Us the Western academy? And who do we mean *exactly*: "those that belong to the Emperor, embalmed ones, those that are trained, stray dogs"? Or my favourite: "those included in the present classification"? With this quotation from *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, which originates from a "certain Chinese encyclopaedia", Jorge Luis Borges shows us the arbitrariness of classification principles; and Mark Dion is doing that, too, albeit visually.² Dion's work explores the ways in which dominant ideologies and public institutions influence our understanding of history, knowledge, and the natural world. The job of the artist, he says, is to push against the dominant culture, to challenge notions and customs.³ So, to shake up the world and question the knowledge systems. Classification principles are based on knowledge about the world and scientific models, as well as beliefs, norms, and values, and this is all culturally determined. They are models for structuring the complex reality; they are time-bound and thus require constant adjustment and revision.

From art history to World Art Studies

The title of this valedictory lecture, 'From Art History to World Art Studies', summarizes my development in a nutshell. I began studying art history at Leiden in 1974 and now I am leaving it with a World Art Studies. Fellow art scholar John Onians coined the concept in 1996 and it took root in Leiden when I took up my position as professor of art history in 2000, with the key objective of thinking beyond Eurocentric models and arriving at an understanding of the interconnections and transcultural exchanges that drive the dynamics in art worldwide, past and present. The need for such a revision was already urgent then, but has become acute in the last twenty years. Much has happened in the recent period, in the world, in society, in academia, to me. It is these changes that I want to talk about.

My inaugural lecture, which I delivered on 6 April 2001, was titled 'A World of Difference: Art History on the Threshold of the 21st Century'. Much of what I wrote then still applies. I wrote then (if you will allow me to quote myself):

The process of thinking about possible approaches, interpretations, and placements of art, the designing of strategies and models, the development of viewpoints, the supplementing, adjusting, and changing of existing knowledge by looking at the known – and, from my part, the unknown – is a form of creative cerebral gymnastics that is comparable with the creative process of the artist or with the experiment in the laboratory. That studio or laboratory is, for us, art scholarship, the building materials of the art-historical.⁴

At the time, I was challenging three boundaries: those of the discipline, the region, and the object of research, all three of which were broken with the launch of a World Art Studies (to which I will return later). The art-historical paradigm has been firmly tackled over the past twenty years, with World Art Studies as the starting point (my partner-in-crime Wilfried van Damme likes to summarize this paradigm succinctly as 'global and multidisciplinary'). There were numerous incentives and reasons for this.

In April 2001 (the moment of my inaugural lecture), 9/11 had not yet happened. There was no talk of 'the war on terror' and 'the axis of evil', which were to create a new division in the world only twelve years after the fall of the wall, when the dichotomies of the Cold War appeared to have ended. But today, it seems they may have returned, with the world powers China and Russia on one side and, on the other, the new AUKUS alliance, launched on 15 September, euphemistically called a 'trilateral security pact' between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Europe is a mere spectator in this arrangement and Africa, as so often is the case, is passed over. We do not yet know what exactly this will mean for the (already fragile) balance in the world. The Middle East remains doggedly stuck in the aforementioned 'axis of evil' dichotomy, of fundamentalist Islam versus . . . what exactly? The Christian, 'free' West? AUKUS + Europe? And what about

Africa? Or Latin and Caribbean America? This geopolitical constellation is just one of our problems.

Back in 2000, the climate crisis was already firmly underway, but was still ‘parked’; that is no longer possible. Sadly, the refugee problem has always existed, but in confrontation with the bastion of Europe, it has become particularly poignant. Migration is now seen as a ‘security problem’. Neoliberal forces affect the capillaries of our society, and the university is no exception.

Is all this far removed from the practice of art history? No, not least because contemporary art confronts us with it and demands we take a stance, and the critical discourse keeps us sharp. I want to talk about how art does that in a moment, but first I want to dwell on the paradigm shift towards a World Art Studies. It emerged under the influence of external impulses, often on a global scale (politics, climate, refugees), developments in scholarly thinking and in art, as well as locally, at Leiden University itself.

Back in 2000, I was appointed to the Faculty of Letters and became involved in the long-cherished wish for a structural link between the arts and academia. This resulted in a covenant between the University of the Arts, The Hague and the University of Leiden and the establishment of the Faculty of Arts in 2001. One of the great things that this intensive collaboration made possible was artists getting a PhD, but the discourse also received a strong impulse with the consolidation of *Artistic Research* or *Arts-Based Research* as an independent research field, i.e. research by and from the arts, research as an artistic approach. The arts have also returned to the fold of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) with the founding of the Society of Arts in 2014. The recognition for and appreciation of arts research, getting to know, understand, and feel the world through the senses, emotion, intuition, imagination, and artistic thinking is one of the most important milestones in our knowledge landscape: Double A – Art and Academia.

A second and, for me, equally important (and art-related) development is that of ‘the global’: thinking of the world beyond Europe, beyond ‘The West’, beyond Eurocentrism and the alleged white supremacy and hierarchy.

This was already evolving in a somewhat longer-running partnership with a number of what were then still called ‘non-Western’ language studies, and cultural anthropology, in a programme that allowed students to study the art and material culture of various continents. In 2008, the Faculty of Letters, together with a number of smaller faculties, merged into that of the Humanities (a denomination that I feel much more closely related to) and all Western and non-Western languages and culture studies, as well as the arts – under a new name, the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts (ACPA) – joined too. We all became sister institutes, six in total. We renamed our institute LUCAS, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society – art *in* society – it became my home base, with ACPA as a second home.

Approaching art from a global perspective also resulted from the changes within language studies themselves. Whereas previously, e.g. Spanish, Chinese, or Arabic were studied with a strong philological emphasis, this gradually became the study of the

languages and cultures of Latin America, Asia, or the Middle East, and material culture and art received attention and space – and this is where we were able to make a connection. In collaboration with language and culture studies, in 2000 we started to offer cross-disciplinary lectures (so-called VOCs [*vakoverschrijdende colleges*]; I would think twice about using that acronym now!) and we looked for a designation other than ‘Non-Western Art and Material Culture’ studies (NWKMC). This was not only an awkward term, but it was completely wrong: ‘non-Western’ implies the West as the norm and ‘the rest’ as derivative. To this day, I oppose the use of the label ‘non-Western’. But what then? Other cultures? Other than . . . us, and so the ancient, hierarchical dichotomy of the ‘West and the Rest’ remains. World Art Studies, on the other hand, is a horizontal notion.

Sometimes, you need a bit of a wake-up call, too. I have told this anecdote many times before, but I want to recall it here, one more time, because it had such a huge impact on me. In 1996, I was invited by Het Apollohuis, an artist-run space in Eindhoven, to travel with them to Tokyo for the second part of their exchange project with contemporary experimental Japanese artists, in celebration of their fifteenth anniversary. My job was to provide texts for the catalogue. One evening, the Japanese curator Shin-ichi Sakai asked me what I did in Leiden, and when I told him that I taught international modern art, Europe and America, he responded somewhat scornfully: do you call that international? This simple remark caused a landslide for me. I needed Shin-ichi’s gaze to see my Western bias, because only then did the penny drop that we were not including the largest part of the world in art history, and that, for him, Europe/the United States was one and the same.⁵ I returned to Leiden with the insight that something had to change and that *we* had to do it, that *we* – and here I do mean ‘The West’ – had to critically examine our place in the world, make it more nuanced and no longer talk *about* ‘The Other’ – if we ever did – but rather talk *with* them. How else were we to arrive at a more inclusive art history?

This *Umdenken* did not come out of the blue in terms of theory, either. Poststructuralism and feminist theorizing have been fundamental. It was feminist art historians who, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were the first to question who actually writes art history. A question that is and always will remain relevant; because art history is not an ontology – it is a construction, a model, long-dominated by a white, male, Western gaze with ‘him’ as the norm. Not being androcentric invoked a whole process of awareness and positioning for me: where do I stand in the debate? What are my assumptions and what are they based on? As said, you need the gaze of ‘the Other’ for that, and the other is a multi-voiced plurality.

Fuelled by all of these insights and, of course, by global contemporary art per se, World Art Studies has been set in motion. We may just be at the beginning, but the snowball continues to roll, getting bigger and bigger. My appointment to the position of professor has certainly helped in this regard, because the chair holder is responsible for progressing the field, and that field had to be thoroughly addressed first.

Initially, the teaching assignment was ‘research and education in the field of modern visual art’. Without waiting to seek permission, I immediately changed this to the ‘History

and theory of visual art of the modern period', and a little later to 'Art History of the Modern Period' or 'Contemporary Art History'. After all, we are practising the discipline of art history, and I wanted to get rid of the 'modern art' emphasis, which I increasingly came to see as a specific expression of the art of a certain period, with far too much Euro-American content. Indeed, it had dominated art history too long for my taste. The focus had to be on the dynamics of the art history profession (or rather, Art Studies); I wanted to pave the way for a study of art as a pan-human phenomenon. I have been adding 'World Art Studies' to the designation of my chair for about ten years. It is quite a mouthful, now: Contemporary Art History and Theory/World Art Studies, but one I feel happy with. We also received a compliment for it, by the way. When I was invited for a lecture on the occasion of a book launch at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Vienna, in 2019, the person introducing me called Leiden University 'visionary', simply for the addition of the word 'theory' to the chair, but a fortiori that of World Art Studies. I set him straight: sometimes you have to take matters into your own hands.

For me, World Art Studies is an attitude, a consciousness, and a pursuit of the study of the art of the world, of all periods and cultures. An impossible ambition perhaps, but nonetheless an ambition that, for me, also entails a political stance.

Words matter

Labels such as 'art history' or World Art Studies – among others – are never neutral terms; words matter and so does what they mean, signify, but also who uses them and how they are used.⁶

For example, take an apparently neutral label such as 'migrant'. The following was recorded in the Gutmensch Calender (yes, it's important to be widely informed) from 5 May 2021: "foster son Afief does not like the word migrant, after all, he has only migrated once and is not busy migrating all the time. He wants to be called a 'stayer', 'rooted', because he is here and he is staying."⁷

The problem of the language we use (e.g. the obviousness of English) was a leitmotif in my seminars for the MA track 'Contemporary Art in a Global Perspective', and we discussed with each other how we can revise or nuance our language use. A number of students even founded the 'Think Twice Collective', an interdisciplinary group of young researchers calling on us to engage the imaginative power of creative thinking to rethink and reimagine the future. How have we shaped the world we live in? Who decides who 'belongs' and who doesn't? How can we limit our impact on the earth? Even though the Think Twice Collective is currently dormant, the intention remains strong. Also among PhD students, the importance of using correct, relevant, and thus clear language was and is a recurring theme: awareness of how you speak about something, but also about whom and for whom you are speaking. What does reviewing our language use actually involve and how should we take action?

It has almost become a cliché but the word ‘slave’, which has been replaced in favour of ‘enslaved’ is a good example, because being a slave was not a characteristic of a person but rather a condition that was imposed on them. There is a growing awareness of being critical of language use: the call is growing to decolonize the curricula in schools and universities, museums, archives, and public institutions.

Paradigm shift

Let us return to the context of this university. I have had what is known as ‘a Leiden career’. I studied here and, after a few hiccups, was given a permanent position, then, in 2000, a chair. In retrospect, that sounds like a dream career but at the time, the future was still uncertain and the outcome far from obvious. But, the opportunity came my way, and what a challenge and what a wonderful place to get the most out of it!

The reason Leiden has remained so attractive to me is the presence of global languages and cultures studies, history, archaeology, religious studies, anthropology, and international studies. In addition, the knowledge and experiential environment of the museums in Leiden and its surroundings, all the possible cross-links that can be made and exploited, for example in exhibition projects in which I participated, such as: *Voices from Japan* in 2000 – contemporary art from Japan, in the context of 400 years of relations between the Netherlands and Japan, which was installed at the Lakenhal and elsewhere in Leiden; the ‘COOPs’ presentations and exhibitions in the Lakenhal and Scheltema in 2007, the result of the art and science collaborations within the large, NWO-funded Transformations in Art and Culture programme; *The Unwanted Land* with the Beelden aan Zee Museum in Scheveningen in 2010/11; and *Global Imaginations* in 2015 in De Meelfabriek in Leiden with twenty leading artists from all continents, who presented their vision of the current globalizing world, again with the Lakenhal, but also in cooperation with the National Museum of Ethnology (Museum Volkenkunde), Naturalis Biodiversity Centre, Rijksmuseum Boerhaave, Hortus Botanicus Leiden, the Special Collections of Leiden University, and Galerie LUMC. I have thoroughly enjoyed the learning experience of these collaborations and exchanges. Indeed, all that knowledge fused into an artistic-critical paradigm consistently confronts us with the question: what are my assumptions and on what basis are they formed?

Hence I see the transition from Art History to World Art Studies as a paradigm shift, because it challenges our knowledge systems, models, and assumptions. If the term ‘art history’ denoted a global scope, then we might be able to keep it, but that is not the case. Too much about that appellation connotes a Eurocentric/Euro-American focus, hierarchy and exclusion, one-sided developments instead of dynamic transcultural exchanges that locate what is happening in the world in a broader context.

Does this mean that no more art histories can be written? Of course not. I like to use Estonia as an example. In 1991, after centuries of foreign rule, it became its own, free

republic and was determined not to disappear from view again by being referred to as ‘one of the Baltic States’ – even if that is one of its immediate contexts. Quite soon after the liberation, people began writing Estonian art history – now seven hefty volumes – in Estonian, because, as I was told when I asked about it, it was intended for the Estonian people. Here, Estonia is considered the centre, Europe as the periphery, but mindful of the fact that Estonia is part of Europe, and of the world, and is inextricably linked to both. In my view, this is a World Art Studies perspective – art history as a self-description and position, based on the insight of the greater coherence of things, without becoming mired in hierarchies or an inferiority complex.

I see World Art Studies as a dynamic whole of theoretical, philosophical, and scholarly models and assumptions, as a conceptual framework for analysing, understanding, and interpreting reality. The valedictory volume *Mix & Stir* (Fig. 1), which launches today, also bears witness to this, with a plurality of voices, ideas, perspectives, idiosyncrasies, tastes, and visions, crisscrossing every possible frame of thought, regions, cultures, and methods, a veritable candy store for the creative spirit. Paradigms are not separate from the norms and values that determine our worldview, and we must acknowledge them: it is primarily about being aware of our own theses and assumptions and their shortcomings. And art is essential is this regard.

Kader Attia

I now want you to join me in considering an artwork, the multimedia installation ‘The Object’s Interlacing’ from 2020, by Kader Attia, a French artist born in 1970 to Algerian parents. The presentation was on display between April and September 2020 at BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, in Utrecht. The work is part of a multi-part project entitled *Fragments of Repair*, organized by BAK together with Attia and the decolonial forum ~~La Colonie~~ in Paris. ~~La Colonie~~ is deliberately crossed out; Attia is responsible for the strikethrough, and it signifies more than the fact that the forum has since closed and has taken on a nomadic existence with BAK as one of its stops. The project and the installations encompass everything that is important to me about contemporary art as a critical practice and the way the work communicates. *Fragments of Repair/Kader Attia*, conceived as a “polyphonic reservoir of knowledge and practices of decolonial recovery”, filled the entire space of BAK.⁸ In nine works, the exhibition addressed questions about the legacy of colonialism and confronted issues raised regarding the restitution of colonial objects, capitalism, related (racial) violence, the government-funded control and surveillance that often disproportionately affects the underprivileged and, finally, the role that public space and architecture play in all of this. There was plenty of critical analysis, but also alternative imaginations and possible paths to follow. It is unfeasible to discuss every facet of the exhibition, so I will focus on the installation ‘The Object’s Interlacing’, arranged in BAK’s studio space, because that work made such a deep impression on me (see Figs. 2- 10).

The space was darkened, the light coming from the doorway and the film itself. Three chairs were arranged in the middle of about seventeen small, white plinths; I sat on all three of them, and each one offered a different field of view. Why this is important has never been clearer to me than through the work of another artist, the choreographic performances of k.g. (the artist name of Karen Ginger Guttman), who received her PhD from ACPA, Leiden University, last year. k.g. tests the specific capacity of people to respond to the circumstance of a location within a choreography between guest, hostess, and place. When moving through a space, you are constantly entering into different relationships with the objects in that space, with the non-human presence. These objects, which can be furniture, but also art objects, offer me the possibility of response-ability; literally how you stand in a space and see it from that point of view, and metaphorically: what it means that I am standing here, moving between the objects, relating to them. Within these, what Karen Barad has called 'intra-actions', the distinction between me and the others present – human and non-human – only emerges at that moment, and meaning is formed within this given situation, which is not predetermined.⁹ It is about relationships, constantly making connections.

Standing on the plinths in the space were replicas of African masks, headrests, and a single sculpture, some were 'traditional' wood carvings and others were high-tech 3D-printed sculptures. They were roughly at shoulder height; the masks were observing along with you. Their eye holes were piercing lights, sometimes hollow holes through which you could view the video. The video projection cast silhouettes of the objects on the screen and so they became part of the argument, with their own voices. Masks only come to life in a ritual; here, it was through projecting, witnessing, and perhaps also testifying to my response to the work.

That resonance plays out on three levels: material, emotional, and intellectual.¹⁰ Material because, like everything else around me, I am made of matter and, for that reason alone, I am connected to the world. For that reason, too, the bond is affective, it is a relational bond. Affect is born in the interspace between humans and matter, in their intra-action, both capable of exerting agency. Humans and non-humans play an equal role in the ability to (emotionally) touch and be touched. That also means looking at and dealing with matter, nature, objects, and art in a non-instrumental way. Rather, we should ask ourselves what materials and things enable us to do. Human/human and human/non-human are mutually dependent and that forms the foundation of an (emotional) bond.

The biggest actor in the space, however, was the film, which, based on interviews with a dozen people, raised a constellation of voices on the issue of restitution of stolen African objects from philosophical, juridical, anthropological, psychoanalytical, economic, and museological viewpoints. I was addressed and touched both emotionally and intellectually. The video dealt with topics such as the recycling of stereotypes and presumptions about 'the Other', being trapped in a frame of reference or in institutions imposed by third parties, but also that restitution always involves the initial aggressive act of removing an object from its own cosmology, one in which the object is not seen as inert. How can one come together again, one speaker wondered, in the rhythm of an object that

has long been inscribed in another culture and other classifications, and from which it cannot return unscathed? There are no simple answers or solutions, but instead reflections that encourage further thinking and action.

The project is titled 'Fragments of Repair' and refers to the decolonial healing of injuries and wounds, key concepts of Attia's practice. He sees art as a guide for dialogue and reflection: "The population of every Western country, but especially in Europe", argues Attia, "originates in the ex-colonies. It must be able to co-write their own histories in the story", so that a new epistemology emerges with a "permanent and active dialogue between all those cultures and communities in the West."¹¹ Entirely a World Art Studies idea. According to Attia, we can "repair the flaws and wounds of colonialism and arrive at a balanced and diverse thinking" in this conversation.¹²

This work, and the entire curriculum of lectures, discussions, and podcasts surrounding it, is visually-, materially-, intellectually-, and emotionally layered. It is an in-depth exploration of what caused colonialism and Western cultural hegemony, a legacy that affects us all, with, at the forefront, knowledge institutions such as the university and the museum, which have provided frameworks for and substantiation of even dubious points of view. But that is exactly what is currently under scrutiny. Everything is in flux now. Just look at the #MeToo movement, *Black Lives Matter*, the founding of the *Black Archives* in 2016, the climate marches and one Greta Thunberg telling us, "No one is too small to make a difference";¹³ the call for the decolonization of educational curricula, museum collections, and archives, with a first, positive step being the collaborative *Musea Bekennen Kleur*,¹⁴ in which diversity and inclusion in the museum are questioned introspectively and retrospectively; the call for a new administrative culture – even in our Cabinet, which could set a good example by clearing the field and paving the way for real innovation. We must hold onto this dynamic of movement and change. Triangulation Triple A: Art, Academia, 'An-Other'.¹⁵

Now the infrastructure – and that is a cause for concern.

What now for universities?

"For more than a decade, Dutch universities have been under ever-increasing financial pressure, with gradually unacceptable consequences for education." So wrote Chris Lorenz in 1993 in *Van het universitaire front geen nieuws* [All Quiet on the Academic Front].¹⁶ Meanwhile, we have moved even further away from home.

I am an academic at heart. For me, the university – still – stands for *universitas*, a community of values of academic training, autonomy, and the ability to self-direct. Only the free spirit has access to its greatest asset, our imaginative potential. Artist Joseph Beuys said it all, creativity is our human capital. It is therefore with a heavy heart that I see how Dutch universities have now been bureaucratized into a business in a market economy, in which the increasing focus on numbers and reporting compulsion reveals grotesque features. Eelco

Runia calls us – staff and students – “Management material” in his 2019 book *Genadezesjes* [Sympathy Sixes]. In it, he gives short shrift to the current state (read: loss) of the Dutch university.¹⁷ He has received no thanks for this, but we cannot ignore his analysis. Quality *management*, so Runia states, takes precedence over quality *promotion*, regulation over self-management.¹⁸ We have become policy implementers instead of thinkers & writers. Just look at the jargon: feasibility programmes, quality assurance, control procedures, reporting systems, workplace standards, and monitoring of student progress, publications, income, grants, and so it goes on. These are the wrong categories.

But Runia also offers an outlook: the university as testing ground, experiment, school of life, a place for imagination and the stimulation of self-transformation, a culture of crossing boundaries. Last year saw the publication of Floris Cohen’s book *De ideale universiteit. Ontwerp van een uitvoerbaar alternatief* [The Ideal University: Designing a Viable Alternative].¹⁹ And they do exist. Whether you agree with his vision or not is not a matter for now, the point is that he indicates that it can be done differently, and how. To this end, WO-in-Actie [Higher Education-in-Action] has also been set up, a national movement of university staff and students that makes a strong case for the university and its future. Read their *40 stellingen over de wetenschap!* [40 Theses about Academia!].²⁰ For a few years now, alternative (‘real’) openings of the Academic Year have been held to demonstrate against the further impoverishment of higher education. Weekly, if not daily, we’re reading critical articles and columns in the press.

I am calling for a decolonization of neoliberal market thinking within the Dutch university system and higher vocational education and I am calling politicians to account. If we want to continue to cherish our expertise and let it thrive, to deepen our knowledge and to remain a leading knowledge country, then we need more money, because with increasing student numbers and budgets failing to keep pace, it is going badly wrong. I hear colleagues in their early forties saying, desperately, that they will not last until retirement. The workload is irresponsibly high. We must rid ourselves of this growth madness.

But money alone will not help us; just as important is a reconsideration of the role and function of academia. We have been colonized by management thinking, by calculation models and business cases, output funding, performance agreements, and targets. This institutionalized, top-down bureaucracy is killing every talent.

I do not want to leave the university where I have worked with heart and soul, and in which I believe with equal passion, with negative feelings. Rather, I am calling for the dismantling of this out-of-control system and for putting the *universitas* at the centre again. And to recognize, each of us, students, PhD candidates, lecturers, support staff, the urgency, but also the beauty of understanding the world and developing perspectives for a more liveable world for all, human and non-human.

This is important not only for higher education but for society as whole, for our democratic system. We cannot cope with complex global problems with this profit mindset. On the contrary, says Martha Nussbaum, in *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, it is endangering democracy.²¹ Floris Cohen sees the Humanities as the beating

heart of academia, the inspirational powerhouse of social debate that is based on facts and business arguments.²² Because science is “not just an opinion”; it is based on research and debate by a community of critical, creative thinkers in a place where research and questioning relentlessly feed education, and vice versa.

The fundamental research of the Humanities is particularly important because it raises questions about the nature of humanity in changing circumstances – not the quantitative but the qualitative interpretation of data. As Bas Heijne in one of his wonderful opinion pieces writes:

objects, artworks, or buildings mean nothing – not if you don’t know anything about it, not if you don’t delve into it, not if you don’t know the history and context. It is *us* who tells the story of these objects, *we* give them meaning, *we* hold them up to the light, examine them, cherish them, and relate them to other stories. The disciplines that deal with that story have a name: the Humanities.²³

The Humanities shape meta-perspectives for understanding the world, and the arts reveal to us infinitely more possibilities for thinking about and shaping it. A World Art Studies is fully committed to this.

And here lies our current social challenge: the Humanities are seasoned in grasping and perceiving other worlds, habits, and meanings. And that is why we, artists included, must sit around the table, everywhere, and meddle in everything – ‘infiltrate’ everywhere. And that is why we will always need people everywhere who can safeguard the Humanities and artistic thinking and design, however recalcitrant.

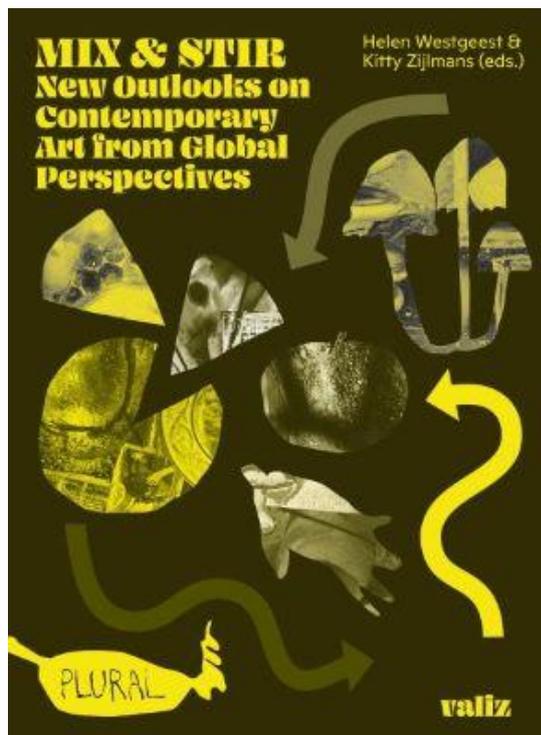
Finally

I am indebted to art – in all its guises – for keeping me alert, moving me, bringing me to new insights, showing me that the world can also be lived, interpreted, and experienced differently. I have been everywhere through art and have been confronted with the most diverse situations, because art takes me everywhere, to places I never knew existed, where I was confronted with the unthinkable, where I might not want to be at all, but that you simply must get to know. Of course, there were also physical journeys and that was done at the invitation of conferences, but mainly also as a result of the many excursions organized by the LKV, the Leiden Art History Association: from Cologne to Shanghai, from Tallinn to Morocco – thank you for that! And thank you to *universitas* Leiden, and to scholarship and theory for the inexhaustible, critical diet.

Dear listeners, dear people, I have given much but have received back many times over. Thank you all: family, friends, students, PhD candidates, colleagues and artists, and – life is inconceivable without you – Rudi.

I have spoken – although, I believe, I am far from finished.

Images



1. Cover Helen Westgeest & Kitty Zijlmans (eds.), *Mix & Stir. New Outlooks on Contemporary Art from Global Perspectives*. Amsterdam, Valiz 2021

Figs. 2-10: *Fragments of Repair/Kader Attia* BAK, Basis voor actuele kunst Utrecht 2020
The Object's Interlacing (Photographs Kitty Zijlmans 21.09.21):



2.



3.



“and next breaks it down

“and embraces the object in a way” “and is in sympathy with it, coincides with it” “And in his view that is the profound signification of art...”

“Senghor uses the expression” “I here am the subject”

4. Stills from video ‘Les Entrelacs de l’objet/The Object’s Interlacing’ (photograph from *Metropolis M*, No. 2, 2021, p. 67)



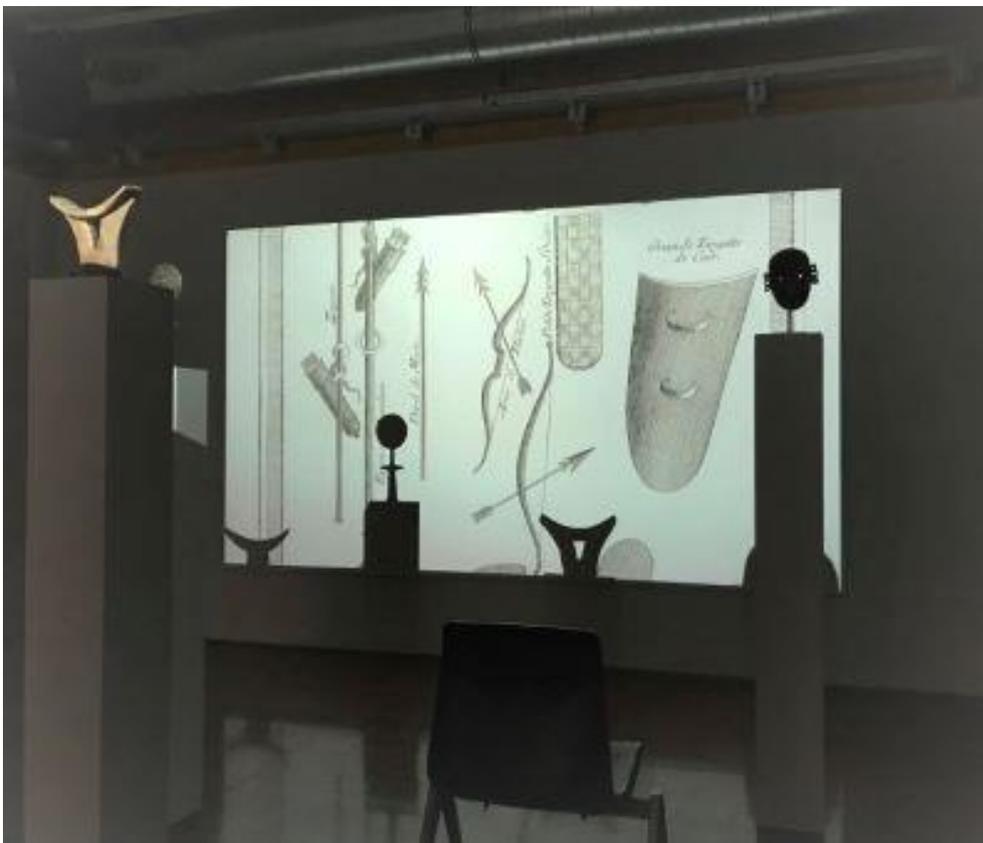
5. "I won't become the person I was"



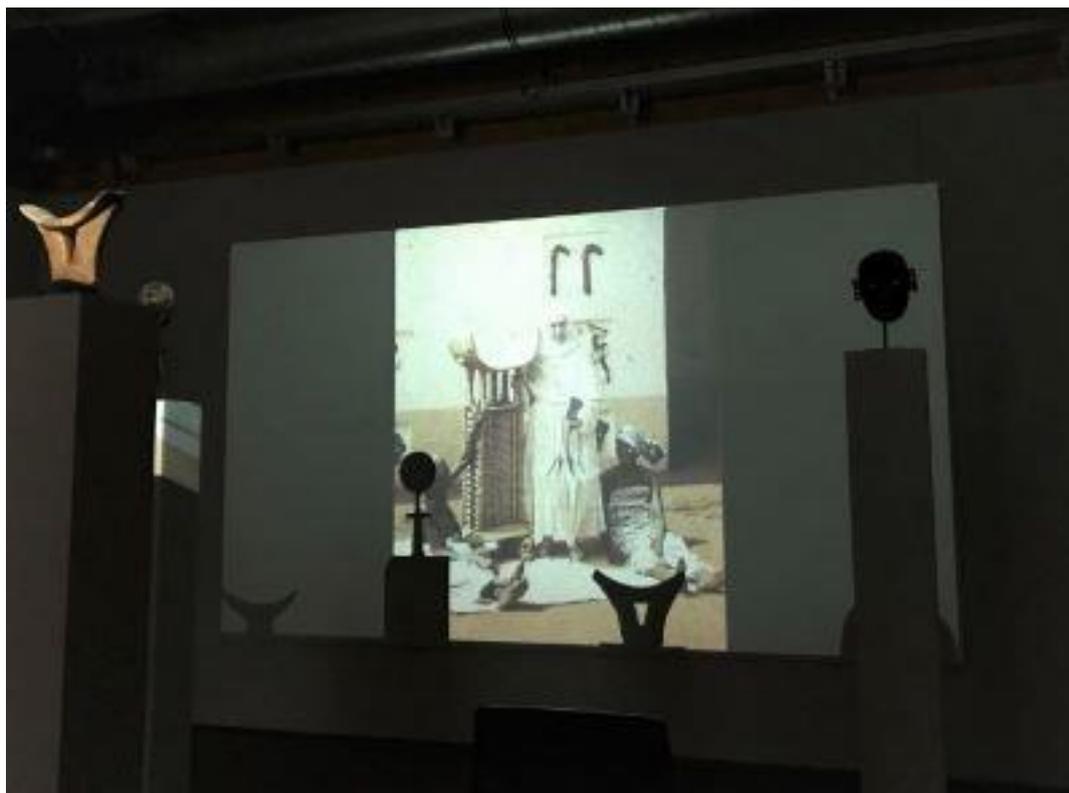
6. "Is that the signature?"



7. "Before plundering the heritage of the cultures it colonized, the West first represented its objects"



8.



9.



10. "So reclaiming this immaterial good"

Notes

- ¹ Mark Dion, *The Accused*, 2020. Verbeke Foundation Belgium. Origin of the objects: Antwerp Zoo, private taxidermist, auctions, Bird Museum Booischoot. See: <https://verbekefoundation.com/en/>. See also: *The Incomplete Writing of Mark Dion. Selected Interviews, Fragments, and Miscellany*, ed. Roel Arkesteijn, Fieldwork Museum 2017.
- ² Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins', in Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins', *ALAMUT, Bastion of Peace and Information* (PDF).
- ³ Text accompanying the work *The Accused* by Mark Dion, Verbeke Foundation.
- ⁴ *Een wereld van verschil. Kunstgeschiedenis op de drempel van de 21^{ste} eeuw* [A World of Difference: Art History on the Threshold of the 21st Century]. Inaugural lecture delivered by Kitty Zijlmans on accepting the position of full professor in the history and theory of modern visual art at the Faculty of Letters, Leiden University, held on Friday, 6 April 2001, p. 3.
- ⁵ Chin-ichi Sakai of Surge Gallery Tokyo died on 5 September 2021 at the age of 67. Japanese-English catalogue *NowHere/Twelve Environments. Exchange Exhibition of Contemporary Art in the Netherlands and Japan*, Eindhoven 21 Oct.-17 Dec. 1995; Tokyo 9-23 June 1996; Ed. Paul Panhuysen; Texts Kitty Zijlmans and Kazuo Amano, Eindhoven: Het Apollohuis/Tokyo: Surge Gallery 1997.
- ⁶ See: Wayne Modest, Robin Lelijveld (eds.), *Woorden doen ertoe. Een Incomplete Gids voor woordkeuze binnen de culturele sector/Words Matter. An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*. Published by Tropenmuseum et al. 2018.
- ⁷ See Gutmensch Calendar 2021, 5 May and 13 May 2021 with a reference to Mariska Reijmering, *Niet je moerstaal. Anderstaligen in Nederland* [Not Your Mother Tongue: Non-Native Speakers in the Netherlands]. Utrecht, De Graaff 2020.
- ⁸ See the guide accompanying the *Fragments of Repair* exhibition, a multi-part project by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, with the artist Kader Attia and the decolonial forum *La Colonie*, Paris, 17 April-26 September 2021; bakonline.org. See also: Ive Stevensheydens, "'Ik wil een horizon voor links scheppen'" [I Want to Create a Horizon for the Left], *Metropolis M*, no. 2, 2021, pp. 66-71.
- ⁹ Karen Barad, 'Posthuman Performativity: Towards an Understanding of How, Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2013), pp. 801-831. The concept 'response-ability' comes from Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.
- ¹⁰ This triple response to art (material-emotion-intellect) was highlighted by Jet Overeem, head of education and curator at the Kunstmuseum, The Hague, during a presentation on art education, 12 September 2021.
- ¹¹ Attia in an interview with Ive Stevensheydens in *Metropolis M* (see note 8), pp. 68-69.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Greta Thunberg, *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference*, Penguin Books 2019.
- ¹⁴ *Musea Bekennen Kleur* (Acknowledging Colour, Show Their colours), see <https://museabekennenkleur.nl/> and from that perspective the impressive exhibition *Say It Loud*, an international group exhibition with contemporary artists who relate their work to subjects that are related to diversity, the colonial past, and the image formation or interpretation of this, in the Bonnefanten Museum Maastricht, 27 Sept. 2020-18 April 2021. <https://www.bonnefanten.nl/en/exhibitions/say-it-loud>.
- ¹⁵ 'De Ander' translates as 'the Other' in English. In order to maintain the integrity of the aforementioned triple A construction, I have chosen to translate this as AnOther.
- ¹⁶ Chris Lorenz, *Van het universitaire front geen nieuws* [All Quiet on the Academic Front]. Baarn, Ambo 1993.
- ¹⁷ Eelco Runia, *Genadezesjes. Over de moderne universiteit* [Sympathy Sixes: On the Modern University]. Amsterdam, Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep 2019, p. 103.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁹ Floris Cohen, *De ideale universiteit. Ontwerp van een uitvoerbaar alternatief* [The Ideal University: Designing a Viable Alternative]. Amsterdam, Prometheus 2020.

²⁰ Rens Bod, Remco Breuker, Ingrid Robeyns, *40 stellingen over de wetenschap* [40 Theses about Academia]. Amsterdam, Boom 2020.

²¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs The Humanities*. Princeton University Press 2010.

²² Cohen p. 22.

²³ Bas Heijne, "Mens blijven in een bètawereld" [Staying Human in a Beta World], *NRC-Handelsblad*, 21/22 September 2019. In this opinion piece, Heijne refers to Christian Madsbjerg, *Filosofie in een tijd van big data* [Philosophy in an Age of Big Data] (Utrecht, Ten Have 2017), in which he emphasizes the 'usefulness' of the Humanities in economic-financial terms, because the big multinationals need the Humanities in order to understand the world, not quantitatively but qualitatively, at the level of the individual.

English translation Anna Yeadell-Moore