

NOT LISTED, NEVERTHELESS ACKNOWLEDGED

How is quality assessed in the international art world? Of course, artists whose work is sold well receive a lot of attention, but this is hardly a criterion for quality. It means that speculators think they can earn a lot of money with your work. In November 2009 this was apparent again when international art critics put the paintings of Damien Hirst aside and said they were second-rate.

ALEX DE VRIES

There are numerous lists and because of the popularity of the canon, new top tens, top hundreds and top thousands are being made continuously. A good example is The Times Top 200 Artists of the 20th Century to Now. In the Netherlands we have the annual 'Elsevier Top-100 Dutch Artists'. The credibility of these lists greatly depends on arbitrary criteria. It is tempting to consider money as the deciding factor, because 'figures don't lie'. The international position of visual artists is determined by many different factors, and price is only one of them. Other criteria are the artist's level of education, the reputation of the institutes where his work is shown, awards, participation in prestigious exhibitions, publications and working periods in 'residencies'. A Dutch artist with a low ranking on the international price lists could, however, actually count on important appreciation in the art field. Dutch artists are certainly able to build an excellent reputation abroad on their own terms, without that necessarily leading to great fame and increase of prices. Moreover, the Netherlands, small as it is, has quite a good international reputation.

CONTEMPORARY IN A TRADITION

An example of a Dutch designer with an international practice is Mirjam Kuitenbrouwer (Nijmegen, 1967). She was educated at the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Arnhem in 3D Design. After that she attended the post academic Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht for two years, not a teaching establishment, but an institute where professional visual artists perform specific research into the arts, in order to broaden the content of their work.

The research of Kuitenbrouwer was related to the way in which we can direct spatial observation in art and reality and how we experience this. She creates different types of work in all kinds of media, in which photography plays an important role. Typical for her is the way she connects extreme tradition to modern technologies and always stays in charge. She became very successful some 10 years ago with her small wooden panels, on which she combined different photographs of interiors and connected the extremes by means of techniques used in the art of painting. A solo exhibition in the Arnhem Museum for Modern Art and an independent publication 'Het verblijf: Mirjam Kuitenbrouwer's vertrek' gave a fascinating view of the first eight years of her practice. The way she gives insight into how her work comes into being is clear and certainly catches people's imagination abroad.

Her literary talent contributes to the idea that Dutch art has the quality of connecting a rational, serious working method to a spiritual and light-footed poetic quality. This way Kuitenbrouwer places herself, as a contemporary artist, in a tradition which leads from Jan van Eyck, Pieter Saenredam and Vermeer to Mondriaan and contemporary artists such as J.C.J. Vanderheyden and Pieter Laurens Mol. Galleries from Austria and Germany and later from Italy and Japan were introduced to her work at exhibitions and invited her to come and give presentations. This led to participation in expositions and solo presentations at institutes such as the Kasseler Kunstverein, the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig and the Secession in Vienna, the Kunsthalle Nürnberg and Museo Michetti in Francavilla. This enabled her to enter the international collector's circuit ▶

MUSEUM DIRECTOR SJAREL EX CLOSELY EXAMINES THE SCULPTURE 'EN FILIGRANE' BY HARMEN BRETHOUWER (IN THE BACKGROUND), A PIECE OF WORK FROM 2005, HEIGHT 72 CM, CREATED FOR WORKSHOP ANTÓNIO NARTINS CASTRO IN GONDOMAR, PORTUGAL. COLLECTION MUSEUM BOJMANS VAN BEUNINGEN.

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MIRJAM KUITENBROUWER, KOPSTATION, 2008, OBJECTIVES, SILICONE AND ENAMEL ON ACRYLIC, 70 X 110 X 83 CM, COLLECTION MUSEUM HET VALKHOF, NIJMEGEN
RIGHT PAGE: MIRJAM KUITENBROUWER, FLITSERHUIS II, 70.5 X 54 X 25 CM, COURTESY GALERIE FERDINAND VAN DIETEN D'EENDT, AMSTERDAM

by purchases made by private collectors as well as museums, company collections and so on.

FAME

Positive reviews about her work in Kunstforum, 'Art in America' and 'Frame' confirm the quality of her work at art theoretical level. In the meantime her work has evolved into installations and sculptures. Since 1998 Kuitenbrouwer has been represented by Galerie Wohnmaschine in Berlin and occupies a special place within the international visual arts world, which has, however, nothing to do with the list obsession that the popular media consider to be the deciding factor for fame. Kuitenbrouwer is not famous and the prices for her work are not extravagant, nevertheless, her position in the world of visual arts is remarkable. These last few years this reputation has paid off in the Netherlands as well. Apart from the Wohnmaschine, she also has a Dutch gallery, Ferdinand van Dieten d'Eendt, who is organizing a presentation of Kuitenbrouwer's work in New York soon, and museums are showing an interest in her work again. She presented her new work in the Jan Cunen Museum in Oss this year and Museum Het Valkhof in Nijmegen expanded its Kuitenbrouwer collection with a new sculpture, her archetypal work 'Kopstation'.

AFFORDABLE MADNESS

Kuitenbrouwer is not the odd one out. Interesting is also, for instance, Dick Verdult, founder of the Instituut voor Betaalbare Waanzin (Institute for Affordable Madness), who has become very popular in South America with his folkloristic pastiches. The artist Rob Moonen built a remarkable reputation in Germany with critical political work, for which he later received appreciation in South Africa, Japan and Canada, also because of his collaboration with well-known theatre makers. His colleague, Loek Grootjans, whose work has a philosophical touch, inspired by Spinoza, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Georges Perec, with his Foundation for the benefit of the aspiration and the understanding of context, has museums throughout Europe, and even in Lima, Peru. The photographer Viviane Sassen has a special connection with Africa because she grew up there, and her photos receive international response at many different levels, from large fashion houses and fashion magazines to reputable art institutes.

Harmen Brethouwer (1960) from Aalten, has specialized in projects in which he focuses on Chinoiserie, Art Deco and Minimal Art and collaborates with craftsmen at home and abroad. According to his instructions, they make traditional or technological contributions to his work. At the beginning of 2008, an outline of his work was presented in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. Portuguese silver filigree, Japanese varnish, Makkum porcelain, French stingray leather, Chinese silk, Brabant clock bronze, German Fachwerk and Leerdam glass came together in an incredible oeuvre that has international fame. Brethouwer usually finances and sells his work through channels that are not common in art practice. Brethouwer is also fond of lists but he is not all that interested in his own ranking. ◀

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