Entering the storage vault of a museum is like going into a Wunderkammer. Artifacts of all sizes and value, produced by individuals (some nameless) of diverse historical periods and reputations, hang indiscriminately next to each other and sit together intimately on shelves or on the floor. Close packing is the governing principle. This is the collection.

The context for which these objects were made no longer exists. At some time they were all considered to be wonderful and they are all worth wondering about today. However, only studies drawing on all fields of human inquiry—not just art history—can give us an inkling of the role and significance they had at the time they were made and how their meaning changed over the years (this is true also for works of the recent past).

Both the presence and the absence of works by certain artists, "schools," and art movements in a collection tell a lot about the people who shaped it, about their passions, scholarship, friendships and civic spirit (as well as money and power games). Above all, however, they tell us about the ideological functions these works performed for them: in classical terminology, how and to the benefit of whom they represented the ever changing notions of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Whenever an object is exhibited (or otherwise singled out), it enters into a "conversation" with other artifacts and, according to the context in which it is placed, it champions an array of particular views which, inevitably, differ from a host of other views. Both as metaphor and agent (and not only within the art world), it becomes part of the negotiations—and struggle—over how we understand the world and what our social relations should be.

Hans Haacke, 1996
It all started with Marie, a fragile-looking dancer from Montmartre. She was very young. Usually her smooth, flowing hair was bound by a satin ribbon. For years, experts quarreled about its color and the length of her tutu, whether it was a mini-skirt or a longer skirt, hanging loosely from her waist or flaring and supported by a crinoline. This debate did not damage her career. Today she appears in Paris and is equally at home in London. She has admirers in Copenhagen, in Boston, and in Baltimore. The audience is also at her feet in Washington, in sunny California, and in Rio de Janeiro. Most important for my story, however, is her engagement in New York and her unexpected appearance in the oil port of Rotterdam.

When I wandered around the Metropolitan Museum with Michael Kimmelman, the art critic of The New York Times, in late fall 1994, we happened to come upon the little dancer in one of the more intimate rooms of the Museum (her appearance in New York had been made possible by Louise Havemeyer, the sufragette, art collector, and widow of Harry O. Havemeyer of the notorious Sugar Trust). Seeing her, I said to Kimmelman: "The bronze figure pretends to be a real human while the tutu and ribbon are, in fact, the real stuff. I don't know how to express it perfectly, but the relationship between reality and representation becomes complicated. The world of the real and the fictive world mingle. It's the precursor of the collages of Picasso and the Dadaist ready-made. There is a tendency to sequencer, to ghettoize art, to separate it from the world that we actually inhabit. But Degas, here, is breaking down the barriers."

The article in which Michael Kimmelman summarized our stroll through the Metropolitan Museum in the Weekend Section of The New York Times two months later closed with this sentence. He also reported that, in the same chambre séparée, I had drawn his attention to a pregnant nude by Degas which could easily be overlooked amidst other figurines in a showcase of nude dancers. I considered her noteworthy because in Western art there are almost no images of pregnant women, aside from Mary and Elizabeth. Kimmelman took down my comment: "They're not nudes: presenting themselves to a voyeur. They're working women, dancers. Their physical strength and control, and the use of their bodies as a means of expression, is unbelievable. You see that in Degas."

Aside from my musings about Degas' image of women and the complex relationship between "representation" and "reality", we came to speak about many other things. Our stroll began with a photo by August Sander of an unemployed man in Cologne. We then stopped briefly at a Venus lolling in a light swell by Alexandre Cabanel. This saccharine pin-up girl had been a favorite of the founders of the Metropolitan Museum. Much more boldly, Iris, Rodin's headless nude, provocatively opened her legs toward us. The Virgin Messenger of the Gods made us think of the Northern Senator Jesse Helms, who, in 1990, had written into the law of the land that the National Endowment for the Arts must consider the gesundes Volkempfinden when making grants with public moneys.

In the special exhibition "Origins of impressionism," the real goal of our journey, I began by paying tribute to Cézanne's wildly painted Magdalena. Next door, in a room reserved for paintings of nudes, I thought I was getting homoerotic signals from the rear of an adolescent boy by Renoir. In the same room, Courbet's Woman with a Parrot then prompted me to expand farther and hold forth about the close connections I saw between this painting and Duchamp's voyeurist Etant Donnés (of Philadelphia), as well as the Origin du monde Courbet had painted for the prurient eyes of Khalil Bey, which can be inspected at the Musée d'Orrsay. It came from the estate of Jacques Lacan a few years ago. The woman escorted by a parrot was Courbet's response to the challenge posed by Manet's picnic in the woods and more even by the younger painter's Olympia fixing her eyes on the viewer (and the painter).

Courbet got me going again with his Oak Tree in Flagey. To the eyes of a naive viewer, it is merely a nature portrait skillfully executed with a palette knife. However, experts understand it as a political manifesto. This contradictory reception is similar to that of the work of Caspar David Friedrich, who often articulated...
decidedly political messages in his seemingly sentimental images of nature. Eventually I went into raptures over Edouard Manet’s sophisticated composition *Battle of the "Kearsarge" and the "Alabama,"* a reportage of an episode of the American Civil War that had taken place off the coast of France in 1864. Having become better acquainted with the work of Manet through research for my Manet-PROJEKT ’74, I am an ardent fan of this enlightened bourgeois.1 In the last part of the exhibition, Manet’s moving portrait of Victorine Meurant, a woman deeply marked by a hard life, prepared us for Degas’ Little Dancer with the ribbon in her hair, a girl modeled with equal empathy and respect, still unemb to take on the world.

During the early 1990s, Karel Schampers, the Head Curator of Modern Art at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen,5 conducted research in the history of dance. The result was that the Rotterdam dancer was given a new tutu in 1995. Without exception, all guest curators the Museum had asked since 1988 to organize exhibitions with the holdings of the collection had invited her to play a prominent part. No matter whether in a short or a long outfit, since her arrival at the Museum in Rotterdam, as elsewhere, she had become the darling of the public.6 Harald Szeeman was the first guest to stage the collection. He was followed in 1991 by Peter Greenaway, and in 1993 by Robert Wilson.7

By accident, Kimmelman’s article about our walk through The Metropolitan Museum fell into the hands of Chris Deconinck, then Director of Witte de With in Rotterdam, at a moment when he began thinking about the program of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen he was to take over at the beginning of 1996 as Director. Not yet in office, he phoned me and asked whether I would like to produce the next exhibition of the collection under his aegis. My answer was “yes.”

I made my first reconnaissance trip to Rotterdam in September, 1995. From an earlier visit in the 1970s, at the occasion of my preparing a solo show at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, I remembered only a gloomy, intimidating, long and narrow staircase leading from the depth of the entrance hall of the Museum to the exhibition level, which was bathed in heavenly light upstairs. I felt like a kid in a toy store even more once I got to know the diversity and the richness of the collection that reaches from the 15th century to the present. Marcel Duchamp’s Box, Dutch earthenware, TV-sets of all vintages, Rembrandt, an assortment of helmets, silver, over 10,000 drawings and 90,000 engravings, Robert Gober’s bridal image... the list of objects that lend themselves to be contrasted to create a glib promotional copy could be endlessly continued.

I got to see the surprisingly large space (a central room of 830 square meters and two adjoining smaller rooms of approx. 330 square meters each) on the upper floor of the new wing of the Museum designed by A. Bodon, where traditionally the exhibitions organized by the guest curators are held. The Department of Modern Art, with the Curators Elbrug de Croot, Piet de Jonge, and Karel Schampers, is administratively in charge of the guest performances. They introduced me to their colleagues in the Departments of Old Masters, Applied Arts, Industrial Design and Pre-industrial Objects, the Department of Prints and Drawings, and the Library. They also presented me to the Restorer, the Head of the Technical Department, the Curator of the Collection of the City, the Registrar, the Public Relations operations, the Head of the museum shop, and many other people who, in contemporary management lingo, are referred to as human resources. For the success of my as yet undefined project I was dependent on this apparatus which, as is normal in every mid-size business, has a certain degree of complexity. I was unfamiliar with its institutional history and traditionally accepted procedures, and I did not know its relative efficiency and the potential human trouble spots that could affect the operation. Through personal conversations in the cafeteria over a kopje koffie, particularly, however, at “extraterritorial” dinners, I managed to piece together a sketchy picture of the institutional relationships and culture that had a bearing on my enterprise. In turn, the culinary get-togethers gave the Rotterdamers an opportunity to check me out and map their terms for dealing with me. Fortunately, this mutual sizing up was driven more by intellectual curiosity, sympathies, and convivial hospitality than by cool business calculations.

Obviously, during this excursion I also paid my respects to the little dancer.
I found her in the sculpture depot in the basement, next to the workshops, squeezed mercilessly between a chubby-cheeked Pomona by Renoir and George Segal’s plaster girl (her window with the curtain was leaning against the wall). The bizarre encounter with these three so unequal figures of women primed me for what awaited me in the flood-proof painting vaults next door. There I found, suspended from the ceiling, close to each other, dozens of pull-out steel wire racks totally covered with paintings, photos, and objects of all possible dimensions, periods, themes and art historical reputations: a Wunderkammer par excellence!

Aside from financial arrangements common in the business world, the contract for my engagement also included clauses committing the Museum to my “articles of faith.” I was assured complete freedom for my concept, my choice of works and of their interpretation, a demand that met no resistance in Rotterdam, which is by no means taken for granted in the art business. All publications of the Museum regarding the exhibition had to represent my ideas (also that by no means a matter of course in today’s art world). Any appearance that my exhibition was sponsored by Philip Morris, as was Manifesta, a show which took place in Rotterdam at the same time, had to be avoided all cost.  

During my first excursion, also practical aspects of my project were up for discussion. I had in mind bringing together in evenly lit rooms works of a great variety of media, from all periods and departments of the Museum. Avoiding dramatic stage lighting effects, floods were to light the walls uniformly, as is customary in many museums and galleries. The head of the Technical Department explained to me that, unfortunately, this was not possible for reasons beyond his control. The exhibition halls had been built for daylight. Therefore the Museum had no floods. Moreover, the Curators of the Print and Drawing Department insist that works on paper never be exposed to an illumination of more than 50-60 lux. How gloomy the display of formerly cheap and massively produced prints could be if it were to follow such rules to secure their eternal life, was sadly apparent in the Museum: the prints were hanging lifeless on the wall. In my disappointment I went to consult the restorer. He declared that, as long as the paper treasures are exhibited only for a few months and are not exposed to direct UV light, they are not in danger, according to the expert opinion of chemists (ironically, under glaring lights, he was just trying to save some old ink drawings that were about to fall apart because of the iron in the ink that had been used). But it was obvious that a violation of the rules was possible only in defiance of the deeply held beliefs of the curators in the Department of Drawings and Prints. I therefore had to forget the inclusion of works on paper. This was the first of several conflicts between the regulations governing conservation, security, and fire safety and my ideas for the exhibition.

Seemingly trivial, although without reason for institutional practice, they are symptomatic of the splintering of the management of cultural history into several non-communicating departments and the influence of insurance policies and technical constraints on the reception of the objects over which we fight our religious battles.

9 All art institutions of Rotterdam, among them also the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, made exhibition space available for Manifesta. Manifesta is an international exhibition of contemporary art, held periodically in different European cities.

In 1990, Philip Morris had tried through legal threats unsuccessfully to prevent an exhibition of mine at the John Weber Gallery in New York. My works revealed that the company had paid considerable sums to sponsor a celebration of the arch-conservative Senator Jesse Helms. At the time, Helms was waging an ultimately successful campaign in Congress against art productions that did not conform to his ideas of sexuality and religion.

In 1994, Philip Morris threatened the New York City Council that it would stop sponsoring cultural programs in New York if the City Council passed a law that restricted smoking in public places. The law took into account that passive smoking is harmful. In the United States 456,000 people die every year from smoking related diseases (100,000 in Germany, according to the World Health Organization). Forty American states have filed the tobacco industry for reimbursement of the expenses they incurred for the care of their citizens who became ill because of smoking. In 1998 the industry agreed to pay $206 billion over 25 years. The U.S. Justice Department is preparing a suit to recover damages as well.

10 Even on a concrete floor, the lighting of candles in metal candlesticks made for altar use was not permitted. Furniture had to be displayed on pedestals. Unused movable display partitions had to be stored within the exhibition, consolidated as a block.
Sometimes, with gold it's easier. The Metropolitan Museum had developed a formula for blockbuster shows: "Gold, death, and sex sells." Following this recipe, the Rotterdam Museum had staged the super spectacle Treasures of the Czar half a year earlier in the space that was reserved for my show. Three hundred years ago, Peter the Great had been toiling as a carpenter in the Amsterdam shipyards of the Dutch East India Company. Aside from his crown jewels, the Museum offered a range of opportunities for gala receptions in the style of the Czar's court: Russian canapés, for 75 to 1000 persons, price 62–72 guilders/person; Russian buffet, for 45 to 400 servings, price 85 guilders/person; for more extravagant tastes a five course Russian dinner with music and dance in the Serra space, for 75 to 350, price 167 guilders/person—on the first and second day of Christmas 197 guilders. At all receptions waiters and waitresses served in Russian costume. Emulating product marketing in American museums, the Museum shop was hawking matrioshkas, painted Russian eggs, napkin rings, coasters, balalaikas, icons (price: 960 guilders) and other Russian knickknacks. Since Unilever and the ABN-AMRO Bank were sponsoring the spectacle, the Museum had no problem buying 100 spotlights for the dramatic staging of the Czarist extravaganza. This is how I became a freeloader. My continued griping about the lighting conditions also met with partial success: flood lights were bought for one of the two smaller spaces, as well as for a small light controlled room devoted to engravings and lace.

My first excursion to Rotterdam was followed by three more visits before the actual hanging of the show. I had to familiarize myself with the collection and the history of the Museum, develop an exhibition concept, determine its technical feasibility, and finally, choose the objects. The final selection was completed only a few days before the opening, driving everybody to despair. Even though the principle decisions had been made at the drawing board much earlier, since the exhibition space was not cleared out until two weeks before the opening, I was unable to test sooner which combination of objects was best. The situation was aggravated by the simultaneous reconfiguration of paintings in other areas of the Museum, which had become necessary, in part, due to the holes in my selection had created.

In January 1996, Chris Dercon began to settle in his new position as Director and, with a lot of energy and ambition, he tried to get a grip on the Museum. As in any other institution this is not an easy task, particularly for someone coming from the outside. Prior to my exhibition, he wanted to remind the Rotterdam public of my Dutch past. For that purpose two works that I had devoted in 1978 to the Eindhoven–based Philips Company were exhibited for several months in the Serra Hall where (aside from Czarist feasts, gigs of the Tievras [all-girl band] and opening festivities) occasionally small exhibitions are held.

My visit to the Wunderkammer in the basement i.e. the substructure, turned out to have been a key event. This kind of hodgepodge is the foundation of all museums. Exposure to the indiscriminate accumulation of exhibition materials on gray steel grids, subject only to the rationale of efficient use of space, provides a sensory experience for what sociologists and experts in cultural studies talk about when they refer to the ideological power that transforms painted wood planks and rectangular pieces of textile into works of art. The puzzle serves as organizational model for their seamless interlocking on the steel grids. Different from the puzzle, however, the elements of the arrangement do not join to produce an intelligible image. What is left in the depot to serve as criteria for classification and meaning are only their inventory numbers and their physical dimensions. They are dépayssés, homeless, comparable to displaced persons during war-related upheavals. Torn from their original context—a fate they share with the objects that are presented with full honors on the parlor floor—they are cut off, in the underworld of the depot, even from that context in the museum for which they are actually meant. It is upstairs where the footnotes are exchanged, marketing strategies are developed, and the spiritual is tied down. Upstairs, in well-appointed rooms, a complex construction of beliefs is put together. A lively exchange takes place between the indoor builders and the world "outside." Collective convictions and hunger for prestige, scholarship, power relations, as well as personal predilections and friendships, manifest themselves in this magnum opus. The subterranean storage therefore yields information

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11 Two massive steel walls by Richard Serra dominate the entrance hall of the new Boudewijn wing of the Museum.

12 The designer Wim Crouwel, a former Director of the Museum, had been commissioned to do the exhibition architecture.

13 A triptych of light boxes about the collaboration of Philips with the apartheid regime of South Africa and a wall carpet with a facsimile rendition of an homage to the Shah of Iran by Philips.
about the individuals who, over the years, were in charge of stocking it. In a 1980s annual report of the British advertising agency headed by the art collector and dealer Charles Saatchi and his brother Maurice, Lenin is quoted as follows: “Everything is connected to everything else.”

My encounter with the semi-dead of the nether world made me think of the 1972 exhibition The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present by Marcel Broodthaers at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle. Referring to Duchamp and Magritte’s Tresson de l’Images (Ceci n’est pas une pipe), an essential element of this experiment by Broodthaers was that he attached a plaque with the inscription “This is not a work of art” to each of the objects on display, irrespective of whether, according to general consensus, it is considered a work of art or not. An eagle was the central image of all those objects whose status had thus been thrown into question. Broodthaers postulated that the power of the bird and of all those who invoke it—like that of art—is nothing but a projection. It is fictitious, a matter of faith. When Marcel Duchamp, under the pseudonym R. Mutt, entered his ready-made Fountain in the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, he played a similarly sly sociological trick, scandalously demonstrating that the meaning of an object is dependent on the context in which one encounters it. Through a quasi-alchemical operation, a urinal was transformed into a work of art. A fixture for waste disposal from a plumbing store on Mott Street in New York landed on a genteel parquet floor and, decontextualized, became part of a quite different set of social relations. The new context conferred an aura on the urinal and converted it into a symbolic capital asset. As time went on, it also gained considerable exchange value. Analogous to Duchamp’s operation, taking objects from the museum’s storeroom in the freight elevator upstairs (and any other kind of selective presentation) charges them with new meaning. Thus resurrected they play a part in the social discourse. I thought it worth using the central space of the exhibition to baffle and disturb visitors, and to provoke them to think, thus matching the experience I had in the depot. 14

This process offered an opportunity to render visible how the institution of the museum and of art history (also I as a guest curator) influence social consciousness. In other words: to exhibit the exhibition. Ceci n’est pas une pipe. This is not a work of art. Or is it? If yes, why? Which interests does it serve then?

It is hardly possible not to consider the producers of the discourse materials in these deliberations. Through self-portraits and portraits of their colleagues—not only in the sense of a self-examination similar to a visit with a psychoanalyst—artists articulate their assessment of the role they play and their occupation plays in society. Like all self-assessments, also these are in danger of self-deception, misinterpretation, and the temptation to posture. Nevertheless, the portraits inform us about the scope of ideas about art that were accepted at the time they were painted. The range of the possible, at any one time, is determined not only by the producers but also by the consumers. It is not only the personal habits of the makers and their internal tribal debate, it is also the consumers who influence the market, and thereby the production. Consumers are dealers, collectors, people who give commissions, advisors, sponsors, curators, and various types of mediators, including the apparatus associated with them. In the holdings of the Rotterdam Museum one finds evidence that the battle lines do not run exclusively between artists and their clientele as is demonstrated, for example, by the two gangsters, Jost Herbig and Marcel Broodthaers. Alliances with and against factions of one side or the other are not uncommon. In a central canyon of paintings from the depot that I had turned from bottom to top, I arranged for a face-off between producers and consumers, giving them a chance to look each other in the eye.

Power—sometimes in conjunction with wealth—is one of the factors influencing art production. As a consequence, museums of Western art are filled with portraits of powerful people and images of ostentatious (or discretely encoded) displays of affluence. It is not surprising that in Rotterdam most of them date from Holland’s Golden Era and are commissions. Preparations for my exhibition therefore also required that I take a crash course to deepen my rudimentary knowledge of the history of that period. I learned that Amsterdam was unrivaled in its efficiency as a center of finance, that the shareholders of the Amsterdam stock exchange dominated world trade, and that the Dutch East India Company and later the West...
India Company as well were not only trading companies, but also exercised sovereign powers (brooking no resistance) in the Indonesian Archipelago, Brazil, and other parts of the world. And I learned that, in the 17th century, the Dutch were the leaders of the slave trade. It was this (in many ways) ill-gotten wealth of the Dutch cities which fed artists, supported scientific exploration, and acted as a force of enlightenment in a Europe that was still ruled by divine right.

As in other museums, representations of labor in which work is not sentimentalized are rare in the Rotterdam collection. The same is true of depictions of the "common" folks associated with physical labor who were made fun of in genre scenes. The laborers of workshops, peasants, fishermen, sailors, and footsoldiers had no presence in the art market. The tone was set by big merchants, officers, and captains. This is the reason why the world of labor, if it appears at all, is usually seen from the perspective of the masters for whom these paintings were made. However, I did discover in the Rotterdam collection two small paintings of fishermen that did not follow this pattern. I was unable to find out more about Aren Arentz, the painter, from the department of Old Masters than information on his birth and his death (Amsterdam 1585/86 – Amsterdam 1635). Consulting art historical treatises did not get me any further. It is only as of the 19th century that work is deemed worthy of artistic attention. In this century, sponsorship by governments claiming to represent the proletariat has given the depiction of labor a bad name again, but it did not succeed in making it a forbidden subject. The Canadian artist Ken Lum, for example, is not afraid to tackle it. I was therefore able to arrange a provocative confrontation between Napoleon, in his coronation attire, and Lum’s 1990 portrait of the Chinese immigrant Melly Shum in Ottawa, who tells us with a smile that she hates her job, on the walls of the central space.

During my stints for the preparation of the exhibition, I stayed at the Park Hotel together with roving businessmen, sports fans who came to Rotterdam to cheer their team, and people with name tags attending conferences. The Museum is located around the corner, and two minutes from the hotel. Every morning on my way to work, I was greeted by the doorman in his bright red coat, black top hat, and an impressive walrus mustache. A bit further out, August Rodin’s massive Man Walking was keeping solitary guard on Rotterdam's Westersingel. He belongs to the Collection of the City of Rotterdam. The Man Walking, the relative of John the Baptist, on closer inspection turns out to be a majestic ruin: headless, armless, and without a dick. Giving the broken giant shelter and introducing him to Degas’ little dancer did not pose a technical problem. Their encounter in front of Andy Warhol’s Hollywood kiss served as prelude for one of the smaller rooms of my exhibition. I let myself be guided by the surrealist etiquette of the Comte de Lautréamont. Dracula and his victim have as little to do with an amputated baptist and a ballet rat from Montmartre as a sewing machine and an umbrella do with each other. This cadavre exquis experienced an unexpected resurrection on the operating table of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. As in the other rooms, the selection and pairing of objects for this space was not determined by art historical criteria. The deciding factor was their chance at resurrection. Liberated from the prison of history to prompt "naive" astonishment, these images of women and men, young and old, alone, together and against each other, naked and dressed, of Western and non-Western origin, were to be put to use for reflections on identity and our collective deliberations about social existence in the present.

I not only invited the little dancer to a suggestive appearance upstairs, an equally important part was played in my choreography at the entrance to the other small exhibition space by the somewhat older and less delicate girl behind a curtain George Segal had modeled about 100 years later. The plaster girl from New Jersey has, as counterpart to the silk ribbon and tutu of her bronze Parisian peer, a low brick wall, a window with glass panes and a tulle curtain, and, hanging from the ceiling above her head, a lit electric light bulb. In the 15th century, artists thought of their paintings as views from a window out into the world. In this exhibition, from Segal’s window the eye wandered over a silent wall of cubes by Donald Judd towards an assortment of food and flower still lifes. On the sides, one could see people at work and images of the powerful. If the stacks of the depot had not blocked the view, it would have been possible to see the little dancer and her colorful retinue on the
far side, in between artists and collectors, landscapes with and without cows, merchandise from the Museum shop, and a showcase full of derivatives from the most famous painting in the collection, Brueghel's Tower of Babel. There was also a lively scene in the room behind the curtain: plenty of exposing and covering up, blinding, reflection, make-believe, recording, projecting on, protruding from, and reaching behind the surface (literally and metaphorically). Also here, like in the other rooms, the topography of the exhibition invited the visitors to pursue a network of potential relationships—inevitably all of them ambiguous—and to draw their own meaningful connections between and across the three spaces.

In German the exhibition would have been called AnsichtsSachen: Oben. As an English title ViewingMatters: Upstairs appeared to be fitting. The Rotterdam curators I consulted, because my mastery of Dutch is not up to the level of punning, suggested calling it Boven: ter inzage. In each of the three languages the title alludes to architectural features as well as the unequal status of up and down. It stresses that the focus is on things, that they are to be inspected, and that in looking at them the point of view from which they are seen, i.e. opinions, play a role. In the announcement for the exhibition I tried to express this multiplicity of meaning visually through a collage. I had a photo made of the intimidating flight of stairs that had stayed so vividly in my memory from my first visit in 1978. Into the small rectangle of light at the upper end of the stairs I pasted the extremely shortened zoom-like view of the Hercules Farnese that Jacob Lutma de Jonge had captured in a red chalk drawing during his travels to Rome (it belongs to the Museum). From this point of view the young Lutma had managed to position the family jewels of mighty Hercules exactly in the intersection of the diagonal from the upper left to the lower right corner and from the right eye to the lower left corner of the drawing. Seeing and making oneself a picture have to do with the laws of optics and the understanding of the ideological contingency of views and ways of representation. Both the perception of the eagles of Broodthaers and the camera obscura Vermeer used belong to the field of the visual arts. Optical and ornithological formation belong together.
The bourgeoisie of Rotterdam considered establishing an art museum around 1840, and in 1841 the City acquired the Schielandhuis, a 17th-century building in the center of town. The Museum opened in 1849 with a collection bequeathed to the City by F.J.O. Boijmans, a judge from Utrecht.

In 1852 a Board of Trustees was formed, a majority of which were members of the City Council. It was chaired by the Mayor of Rotterdam. Two art dealers, A.J. and D.A. Lamme (father and son), succeeded each other as appointed directors of the Museum, for a total of 26 years (1852-1878).

In his will, Board Secretary D. Vis Blokhuyzen offered his collection (including Vermeer's Lecemaker) to the Museum for a very reasonable price, but in 1869 the City Council declined. The Vermeer is now in the Louvre.

For the first time, with the arrival of F. Schmidt-Degener, the Museum was headed by a professional art historian (1908-1921). He initiated contacts to local collectors, which his successor Dirk Hannema (1921-1945) cultivated with great skill. Foremost among those collector/donors were W. van der Vorm, a shipping magnate who was involved with the Holland-America Line and ostensibly had a monopoly on the transport of coal to and from England, and D.G. van Beuningen, whose Steenkolen Handels Vereeniging had, although unknown to the public, taken over van der Vorm’s coal shipping interests in 1928. Related through business and family ties to the Fentener van Vlissingen industrial conglomerate, van Beuningen dominated coal shipping from the Ruhr Basin in Germany through the port of Rotterdam. In addition, he had extensive interests in many other powerful Dutch trading companies and industries.

Hannema advised both collectors, who were interested exclusively in old masters. Under Hannema’s guidance, the City of Rotterdam agreed to erect a new museum building designed by the City’s conservative architect, A. van der Steur. It opened in 1939, the same year as the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, which was built by H.P. Berlage, one of the most modern Dutch architects of the time. At the Rotterdam opening, the German banker Franz Koenigs presented his extensive collection of drawings as an extended loan to the Museum.

Hannema soon organized publicly acclaimed exhibitions of Vermeer (1935) and Hieronymus Bosch (1938). In 1938, with the support of his collector friends, he acquired The Disciples of Emmaus, a painting he considered a masterpiece by Vermeer (later revealed to be by Han van Meegeren).

Hannema and his patron, van Beuningen, continued to prosper under the German occupation (1940 to 1945). When a German-Jewish bank in Amsterdam, which held the Koenigs collection as collateral, decided to leave the Netherlands, and Koenigs could not repay his bank loan, van Beuningen purchased the entire collection for himself at a low price. It was kept in the Museum until van Beuningen sold half for a considerable profit to the German Reich for the projected Führer-Museum in Linz. After the war, some of these works were returned to Rotterdam from Dresden. A sizable number, however, is still held by the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. The Pushkin Museum claims rightful ownership, a claim contested by the Netherlands.

In 1938, Hannema wrested control of the museum from the City by establishing a foundation dominated by his collector friends. This foundation was made legal owner of their donations. In 1942, under the German occupation, Hannema was appointed head of cultural affairs in Rotterdam. In 1943 he was placed in charge of all museums in the country. Because of his collaboration with the German occupiers, he was dismissed from all official positions in 1945. However, due to his continued close connections with van Beuningen and van der Vorm, he was able to persuade them to eventually donate their collections to the Museum. He thus remained influential behind the scenes.

Johan C. Ebbinga Wubben (1950-1979) was the first Director who made the Museum receptive to modern art in 1963. While the power of private collectors diminished after the war, the involvement of the municipality and the national government (and thereby also public funding) increased dramatically. In 1972 a new wing was added to the Museum, followed in 1990 by another extension. Under the
Auspices of Chris Dercon who became Director in 1996, the City is now planning yet another addition to the East of the Museum. Under the Directors W. A. L. Beeren (1978-1985) and W. H. Crouwel (1985–1993), perhaps due to the high prices of old masters, almost the entire acquisition budget was allocated to modern and contemporary art.

Since the late 1960s, the mission of a publicly financed art museum has been debated heatedly in Rotterdam, as elsewhere. The socialist-dominated City Council has criticized the institution's traditional "elitist" attitude and views the Museum rather as part of a city-wide program of public education and recreation and, more recently, as a means to improve Rotterdam's image. Wim Beeren argued against a popularization of art as inappropriate for the objects he was charged to administer.

In light of recent cuts in the City's arts budget, the debate has shifted to whether the Museum should be turned into a business-like operation. Under Wim Crouwel, a number of commercial enterprises (a restaurant, a book and gift shop), as well as an expanded exhibition program were introduced, backed by extensive marketing and public relations efforts to increase the number of visitors. In collaboration with corporate sponsors, the Museum now periodically organizes lavishly installed, crowd-pleasing events.

As elsewhere, the strategy of corporations improving their public image and political influence through an association with art, risks transforming the institution (built and supported by taxpayers) into a public relations tool for interests which, in the past, have not been part of a museum's mission.

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