

INSTEAD OF ERASING THE PAST, PUT IT IN THE PICTURE!

Opinion piece by Hans van Houwelingen on the name change of the Rotterdam art institute Witte de With. Published in the NRC weekend edition of September 16/17, 2017.



The Witte de With Square in Amsterdam-West – which I was asked to design in 2013 – owes its name to the former Witte de With Street, whose single row of houses made way for a new building and a square. The architect presented a computer simulation of his new building, including a sun-drenched square with a large green tree and a terrace filled with white people dressed in summer clothes. I photoshopped every lie from this idyllic picture, after which an almost lifeless, leafless tree on a dismal Monday morning remained, and the square was populated only by a few young immigrant loiterers. I got away with it by emphasizing the fact we had to inaugurate this new little square with the truth, not with fabrications. History is suffering enough already, being constantly modelled in the forms that suit best.

Despite my keen interest in social relationships, I associated the name of the art institute in Rotterdam with that of its street, rather than with Witte

de With the historical seafaring hero, and the stories of his crimes. Now the institute Witte de With wishes to change its name in order to be dissociated from the colonial violence for which the 17th-century Admiral Witte de With was in part responsible. While his battles are well documented, as is his role, alongside Piet Hein, in capturing the *silver fleet*, he is also known for his cruelty, involvement in the incineration of clove plantations and in the slave trade.

At its foundation in 1990, Witte de With was named after the street on which it was located, and went on to become a stronghold of contemporary art and social engagement. Neither its first director, Chris Dercon, nor his successors Catherine David or Nicolaus Schafhausen, seem to have been aware of or preoccupied by this blind spot, as it is currently referred to. The fact the institution now expands its historical consciousness and self-reflection is a solid step forward. The research on the base of which it now wishes to change its name deserves appreciation, of course. It also perfectly fits a *Zeitgeist* in which issues of emancipation and identity circulate between cultural agendas and research projects underpinned by post-colonial studies. Art institutes (at least the good ones) closely review their own history and attempt to remove any colonial blind spots from their practice. This is a noble, yet at the same time fraught endeavour, because it inevitably enfolds itself within a white doctrine and re-affirms it. This obsessive self-cleansing does clearly not include the abandonment of one's own position or art collection in favour of those on the other side of the colonial divide. Yet, in theory, that would be both simple and consistent. The decolonization of the art institute is dressed in a white uniform and dons a pith helmet. Moreover, the anxiously formulated rhetoric – while walking on institutional egg shells – also does not contribute to extending the debate any further than the institute itself. In that mismatch, it is often the others that are being measured, an approach whose counter-productivity is proportional with hysterical escalations in tone. The name change envisioned by Witte de With fits squarely in this slowly consolidating mini-iconoclasm. Colonial texts and titles are expurgated, as was recently the case in the Rijksmuseum. The Tropenmuseum, the ethnology museum in Amsterdam,

is in the process of removing its ethnographic collection from sight, in favor of exhibitions that emphasize colonial guilt. Meanwhile, in the USA, statues associated with slavery are being pulled off their pedestals, as was the case with four statues in Baltimore commemorating the Confederate states from the US Civil War. Others were pre-emptively decommissioned, such as the 'pro-slavery era' memorials in New Orleans. After the recent riot in Charlottesville, the statue of General Robert E. Lee is to be removed too. And artists are in trouble too! Jimmy Durham's work became embroiled in a confusing conversation about his own Cherokee ancestry, that he has both claimed and denied, and about the right to speak to and from a Native American perspective. Sam Durant will – head bowed – set fire to his piece of art entitled Scaffold (2012), which although severely critical of a jurisdiction that has expressed its verdicts by public hangings, all the way to Saddam Hussein, infuriates Dakota descendants as it tampers with a history they regard as their own. The latest news: it will be a funeral, not a cremation.

We are fighting one battle after another, armed with amputated bits of history. One chooses the narrative that fits and fires at will. We indeed can play around with history, but what we cannot do is rid ourselves from it – it seems to be both malleable and omnipresent. Colonial history is in the mix, whether one likes it or not. And the 'western art institute' has its colonial history, too. Witte de With wishes to disentangle its history from the biography of Witte de With, but what this boils down to, is that the institute wants to put its own house in order and present itself against the background of an impossible historiographic neutrality. Isn't it more consistent to engage the colonial past, rather than elide it? A grating consequence of the proposed name change is also that residents of the Witte de With Street who do not take a stand implicitly receive the label of complicity with brutal colonial practices; the same old song we intoned collectively in relation to Zwarte Piet/ Black Peter. It does not seem that problematic to me that the art institution changes its name, but it would be unfortunate if it then forgets its past and the reason why its former name was considered unacceptable. It would be regrettable if the reckless maritime hero is both equated with and evacuated as colonial

guilt, sparing the art centre any further self-reflection as it steams forward to the next trend. In a Brussels gallery, I recently saw an installation by the French-Cameroonian artist Dimitri Fagbohoun who described his work as NEGERKUNST, by means of large sculptural letters on the wall. According to the artist, who identifies as a 'transcultural', it is crucial to refer to the 1932 book 'Negerkunst' by Max Bill: it comes with toxic baggage, but it has shaped, overtly or insidiously, the artist's sense of belonging and the perception of Blackness by Western audiences. In my opinion Witte de With would better keep its name for the time being, because it may help to remind us that there is still a way to go in this revisionist genre.

The patriots of Leefbaar Rotterdam however could display a modicum of self-reflection too. In their response, they demanded the immediate termination of the subsidy of Witte de With: the institution showed no respect whatsoever to our national history, and therefore was taking illicit advantage of taxpayers' money. After all, at the opening of the Witte de With year in 2008, Mayor Ivo Opstelten referred to Witte as a 'Rotterdammer to be proud of', who ought to be elevated in the national consciousness for his role in Dutch history – a history that is permanently remodelled to generate new, tourist-attracting stories and anecdotes. For a political party that is so caught in nationalistic fervour, it should be inadmissible to let the old captain float around, adrift in Peter Pan-like adverts for our past. Whenever taking Double White (Dubbelwit, as he was named in his time) seriously, you will easily spot the blots on his escutcheon, a Rorschach test for all sorts of relations to 'identity'.

Now that it looks as though we are attributing more and more value to our national history, we should have the courage to confront it head-on. This is difficult if history is mutilated by fairy tales or erased in mediated controversies. It is a strange paradox that as we are increasingly engaged with history, we are less and less open to look at it. If street names and statues are removed, little in the public space reminds us of the colonial past which we indeed do not want to forget. The problem is of course that the street names and statues are placed in honour. Signs of honour, erected and arranged to stimulate a sense of belonging, are premised on

a manipulative rhetoric. As ideas change and the moral tide turns towards or against people or events, honouring becomes problematic but remembering ever more important. The reintroduction of the pillory could offer a solution here, as a pendant to the statue, a counter-weight to the memorial. Not literally, but as a concept, as a model for thinking, talking and writing. Precisely between honouring and dishonouring lies the space for observing history in an unprejudiced manner. The pillory is in essence the equivalent of the statue that has fallen out of favour: if we believe a monument is no longer a suitable embodiment of changing historical views, reframing it as a pillory allows it to endure, and to sustain our critical inquiry. Old pillories are often as beautiful as monumental statues, and it often turns out that, over time, a statue and pillory become interchangeable, formally and semantically.

I regularly look with embarrassment at the Dutch East Indies-Netherlands monument at the Olympiaplein in Amsterdam. This beautiful monument was built in 1935, and originally dedicated to Governor-General Joannes Benedictus van Heutsz (1851-1924). In 2004 Van Heutsz's name was erased and the monument re-signified to remind us of the relationship between The Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies between 1596 and 1949. But the ghost of the Governor-General always looms in this historical idyll and continues to haunt the place. Although a small plaque at the back of the construction reveals that it previously was dedicated to him, the monument insists to disable any association with a colonial history in the course of which Van Heutsz caused more misery than Witte de With in his own time, and for which he has been honoured for more than half a century.

But I do indeed wish to remember the history of Van Heutsz (the slaughterer of Atjeh) and I believe we have the perfect place to etch in stone his current disrepute and the painful memory of his atrocities. I therefore call for reinstating the name Van Heutsz and his portrait in their original position, re-turning or re-framing the monument to serve as a national pillory and recall an abhorrent episode in colonial history. For emancipatory reasons. If the Van Heutsz pillory nests itself in the national consciousness as a concept of the dual work of commemoration, an

explanatory plaque at the rear might even not be necessary. Needless to say, I hope this project will receive support, especially from the Witte de With art centre.

