

Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven:

'Imagination is the key to change'

An art museum shouldn't be an oracle providing ready-made answers. Instead, it should encourage people to think critically. Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, believes art should take the initiative in paving the way to a more integrated multicultural society.

'Foreigners have a negative connotation in the Netherlands. Even foreigners like me: white, European, highly educated and with a good job. In the Netherlands, the core of the political debate on aliens has a dark side to it. That's why a project on cultural diversity is so important, since it contributes to a better understanding between different groups in a multicultural society,' says Charles Esche, British director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, who has an unusual approach to the role of art and museums in society. 'One of the responsibilities of an art museum is to pick up on the questions troubling society and to translate them into art,' he adds.

Under Esche's leadership, the Van Abbemuseum recently won the first Incentive Award for Cultural Diversity, presented by the Mondriaan Stichting, with a project entitled *Be(com)ing Dutch*. The museum will use the award, which is worth half a million euros, to launch the project. Esche says: 'This project will be about how people can become Dutch, whether it's actually possible to do so, and whether the Dutch themselves will allow it. It's all about what it means to be Dutch. Being Dutch is about more than just satisfying the statutory rules governing nationality. But apart from that, nobody has any idea of what it means. In fact, the definition of being Dutch is constantly changing, and will continue to change, unless it's prevented from doing so by people like Minister Verdonk of Immigration and Integration. The aim of *Be(com)ing Dutch* is to get people thinking about this issue and to stimulate the imagination. I know for certain that the Minister's policy is not supported by the majority of the Dutch population. So I am very hopeful that the forthcoming elections will bring about its reversal.'

Son of refugees

The son of refugees from the former German Democratic Republic, Charles Esche (1962) grew up in the British port and industrial city of Manchester. He is astounded by the attitudes he has encountered in the Netherlands. 'When I came to live here in 2004, I found that the image this country projects to the rest of the world is very different to what we ourselves experience as residents,' he says. 'I was shocked by what Minister Verdonk has said, because I was always convinced that the Netherlands was a tolerant country. But if you argue that this country is full, then you're saying it to everyone. You can't discriminate. If you do so, you make all non-Dutch citizens unhappy, as well as a number of the Dutch themselves. I'm fortunate enough to have colleagues and acquaintances with whom I get on well, but due to government policy, there are many foreigners who feel increasingly uncomfortable in this country. I get the feeling that other people are my enemies and that's very disturbing.'

According to Esche, who has learnt Dutch in the last two years, it would help a lot if politicians were to present cultural diversity as a positive thing. 'Politicians should express the conviction that it's much nicer to live alongside people from different cultures. Everyone has several identities. These identities aren't just determined by your nationality, but also by who you are and the experiences you've had. They're part of each one of us and are unique. Differences are fascinating and make a society more interesting. They make people happier and enrich them. *Be(com)ing Dutch* will explain

that people shouldn't be frightened of cultural differences; they should enjoy them as a society. They can then use these arguments to stand up to people like Minister Verdonk. They can tell her that their own experiences are different and that immigrants can also make a valuable contribution to society.'

In 2008, the *Be(com)ing Dutch* exhibition will be the final part of a four-phase project which begins in September 2006 with an exhibition entitled *Academy: learning from museums*. Esche describes his ambition as follows: 'The whole project is a learning process, not least for the museum itself. That's why we'll be starting with a presentation about what the Van Abbemuseum already has to offer with regard to cultural diversity. All the museum staff, from attendants to volunteers and curators, will be involved. *Academy* will be the first step towards changing creativity within the museum itself. After *Be(com)ing Dutch*, we'll be changing the way we do things in the museum. For instance, we'll be setting different priorities. The projects we realise must be linked to the multicultural reality in Eindhoven and in the region as a whole.'

Next year, residents of Eindhoven and the surrounding district will be invited to exchange views with artists and experts about how a museum can help to influence attitudes to cultural change, immigrants, the indigenous population and multicultural society in general. 'A museum has a duty to bring together artists and the public, to strengthen understanding between them,' Esche says. 'The key question is: how can art help us to see the world differently? The viewing public will therefore be actively encouraged to become involved with the exhibition, which opens in April 2008 and which will be the result of 18 months' discussion on art and the question of a future Dutch identity. The multicultural element of this identity must gradually take root in people's consciousness over the next 18 months.'

Raised eyebrows

The decision to award the EUR 500,000 to one sole museum has caused some raised eyebrows in museum circles. Charles Esche doesn't let that bother him: 'That's the problem with the Netherlands and its polder model,' he says. 'People feel that everything has to be averaged out and that everyone has to do the same thing. Well, I'm not Dutch, and to be honest, I don't want to do the same thing as other museum directors. The Van Abbemuseum has to go its own way. If our project was judged to be the best, then surely we deserve the prize. Don't misunderstand me; I don't necessarily want us to set ourselves apart from the other museums in this country. I don't regard the museums in the Randstad as our rivals. I simply want to do my own thing. And if other museums want to copy that, I've no objection,' he adds with a laugh.

Esche believes that a museum should be a test bed in which you can experiment to your heart's content. 'A museum should strengthen people's imagination. It shouldn't be an oracle providing ready-made answers. Art is not a science. By constantly asking questions, people have to be encouraged to keep thinking. Getting people to think critically is an important responsibility. Art needs to feed the viewer's imagination and make it possible for him to fantasise about something new. But on the other hand, museums must also be open to the critical opinions of others. We can learn from this criticism, without putting aside our own knowledge and ambition. We need to interact with the public.'

Esche fully recognises that he cherishes high ideals for the role of art in the world. 'If you're involved with art, you've got to be an idealist. You've got to be convinced that you can change some aspect of society, improve something in the world. At the moment, everything in society and politics - and in culture - appears to be geared to hanging on to what we already have. You need unlimited imagination to discover new possibilities and new roads. And that's why artists have to take the lead. They've got to try and strengthen society's imagination, so that radical change can help to break through stagnation. In the past, art has repeatedly precipitated change in society; think of the

student uprisings in 1968. Next year we'll be staging a new exhibition, *Vormen van Verzet* (Forms of Resistance), which gives an overview of the historic relationship between art and social or political change from the Paris Commune in 1871 up to the present day.'

Social commitment is something Charles Esche grew up with. 'Even when I was still very young, I knew we'd gone to live in Britain for political reasons. Politics was therefore part of our daily life at home. In the 1980s, I became politically active as a member of the Labour Party, but I pulled out when the imaginative powers of the Left came to an end. The Labour Party went on the defensive and simply tried to maintain the status quo. As a result, they ceased to produce anything new. I found that very unsatisfactory. I'm always trying to bring about change, perhaps because of my Communist background. The penny finally dropped when I was visiting a museum of modern art one day, and I suddenly realised that I wanted to become involved with art because art embodies the power of change within it. And because I'm not talented enough to be an artist, I decided to put on exhibitions instead.'

When he took over from the Belgian Jan Debbaut as Director of the Van Abbemuseum in 2004, Charles Esche found a highly traditional museum in Eindhoven, filled with what he calls 'European male art'. 'Ninety per cent of the collection consisted of Western European and North American art,' he says. 'But the world of modern art is much bigger than that. The Van Abbemuseum needs to present a far more international programme. The collection should be extended to include Eastern Europe and the Middle East. These are regions that were or still are in conflict. That kind of thing inspires artists to produce works of major importance. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, societies in the former East Bloc generated an enormous flow of energy. In the capitalist West, we have long since lost our belief in change. We treat the existing social situation rather like the weather, and say: that's just the way it is! I want to change that attitude because it doesn't get you anywhere.'

Source of inspiration

Jean Leering, who was director of the Van Abbemuseum from 1964 to 1973, is Esche's major source of inspiration. 'I have tremendous respect for Leering. He started the cultural diversity ball rolling, but unfortunately his successors let it drop. Leering added numerous works by the Russian artist El Lissitzky and the Hungarian Moholy-Nagy to the collection, as well as works by people who were then young, experimental American artists. He had the courage to experiment and to go down less well-trodden paths. He was provocative, in that he linked the museum as an art institution to political and social elements. With a more international programme, guest curators from, say, South Korea, South Africa and Turkey, and more risky projects like *Be(com)ing Dutch*, the museum now ought to link up more closely with today's multicultural society and with local residents.'

Last year, Esche's first exhibition, *Eindhoven/Istanbul*, was already setting the new tone for the Van Abbemuseum, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year. The fact that the City of Electric Light was coupled with the city at the crossroads of east and west was entirely due to a coincidence. Esche: 'On the day I was told that I'd been appointed director here, I was also asked to put together the 2005 Istanbul Biennale. As it happened, I already had plans to stage an exhibition in Istanbul with a Turkish curator, Vasif Kortun, who's also a friend of mine. So we combined the two, with Kortun acting as co-curator of *Eindhoven/Istanbul*. In the future, we'll be doing more exhibitions in Eindhoven along those lines, perhaps with Seoul (South Korea) or Yogyakarta (Indonesia).'

Charles Esche was Visual Arts Director at the Tramway arts hall in Glasgow (1993-1997), and Director of the Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art at Malmö in Sweden for a further three years (2002-2004). He is a vehement supporter of the idea of art museums

being public property. 'An art museum is there for the people, for the residents of a town or city. Art collections belong to us all. That's a very important fact. The fact that we are public property gives us the freedom to say what we want, and it also gives us the independence we need to encourage people to think more critically. That doesn't mean I'm against sponsorship on principle. I don't have any fundamental objections to receiving support from sponsors. Provided they're not taking the decisions, since in that case the museum would lose the trust that society has placed in it. As director, I'd like to decide how sponsorship money is used. For me, the underlying principle is that it must be used to enhance rather than hinder the museum as a public meeting place.'

The discussion on financing is a very topical one, since the Van Abbemuseum is expecting 70,000 visitors this year and is struggling with an operating deficit of EUR 250,000. Esche believes the problem can be traced back to the somewhat unrealistic long-range budget drawn up by his predecessor in 2003. 'It assumed that we would close the funding gap when visitor numbers reached more than 100,000. However, that's a wholly unrealistic target, given that there are only about 200,000 people living in Eindhoven. There's no museum of modern art anywhere in Europe that attracts half the inhabitants of the city it's based in. It doesn't even happen in major tourist cities like Amsterdam and Paris. And let's face it, Eindhoven isn't a major tourist hotspot. Even 80,000 visitors a year is a pretty ambitious number. We'll soon be discussing how to resolve this problem with the Eindhoven town council, which is responsible for running the museum. Over the past two years, the Van Abbemuseum has managed to rake in one million euros in external finance from various funds and from sponsorship to support our activities. And we've been awarded the Incentive Award for Cultural Diversity. That's more than enough justification for our continued existence in this region, and it should be reason enough for the town council to find an acceptable solution.'