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Notes on Black Dutch Aesthetics

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It is time to initiate a critical engagement with a Black-Dutch consciousness in the visual arts. An important aspect of this is to do so in Dutch so that we develop our own language usage to discuss our specific social constructions. Up to now the language used to speak about non-white subjects is produced in Anglo-American regions. In order to avoid misinterpretation, I choose the word Black here to denote people of colour. A word such as Black does not have the same connotations in our environment as it does in the Anglo-American context. Using the word Black allows us to give our own interpretation to the concept. From this viewpoint, it ought to be possible in the visual arts to define certain parameters of specific Black Dutch aesthetics without falling into a definition that is derived from the British and American models. Even though we do not yet know precisely what Black means, we can at least make a start.

Giving shape to a Dutch idea of Black starts by a definition that already assumes exclusion. In the case of the debate “Am I Black Enough for You?” it means a gathering of only black cultural innovators and the emphasis of the debate among black people about work created by black people: a black discussion about Black. Consciously rooted in a multiple self, this is not about a struggle for emancipation. The new generation of black Dutch artists and cultural innovators claims without reservation the space to which all Dutch artists believe they are entitled. This involves a Black self-awareness that is Dutch.

Black self-awareness, however, is not the same as a multi-cultural self-awareness. The multi-cultural definition is formulated by the multi-culturally-inclined bourgeoisie which consists largely of white Dutch people. The “multi” in cultural life defines the creative activities of Dutch artists with a black heart and exterior as multi-cultural and never as Black. As long as opinions relating to works created by Black artists are relegated to that position, they will not easily be regarded as Black Dutch works. It is important, when developing a view of the work, that the undermining and warping of western imagery is not always recognised – there is a certain lack of knowledge of non-western symbolism and philosophy. In some cases the artist chooses not to include any visual aspect of Blackness in his or her work. This makes viewing the work as Black even more of a problem because the visual language provides no clues. Embedded in a discourse that takes place from the white, multi-cultural viewpoint, one could ask with whom are these artists communicating through their work? How are they contributing towards a broader Black consciousness or Black Dutch knowledge dissemination?

1. Is the artist involved in Black self-reflection?

What does Black self-reflection signify in Dutch art? *Cry Surinam* by Felix de Rooij from 1992 is one of the most remarkable works in this context. It is a sculpture created from an oil stove with a book about the tropics resting on it and a bone and a black skull on top of that. The image cries out in silence. Critics Rob Perrée and West-Durán say it is a parody of the Surinamer who has abandoned the warmth of his country in exchange for the chill of the Netherlands.¹ For first-generation Surinamers *Cry Surinam* was a medium for self-reflexivity

¹ R. Perrée, *Cry Surinam*, <http://storage.smallaxe.net/wordpress/2009/05/18/rob-perree-the-wakaman-project-2006-09/> (viewed on 22



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and the work poses the question of whether migration was really the best choice. For their children, the work plays on those elements that, since the nineteen seventies, have formed part of the creation of a Black-Dutch subjectivity. In fact, the generation of the seventies was raised to integrate and be absorbed into Dutch society. Their full integration has left the legacy that there are some subjects about which it is forbidden to speak out loud, such as slavery and everyday racism. This is the price that had to be paid. *Cry Surinam* is one of the first attempts in the visual arts to express criticism of today's Black Dutch identity. It is a unique, Dutch work that lays bare the cultural layers that must be penetrated in order to achieve institutional criticism and self-reflection. The fact that, after all these years, it has still not been purchased, speaks for itself.

2. Does the artist present him/herself as being from an immigrant background, as multi-cultural or as Dutch?

With the so-called “failure” of the multi-cultural society, the nation's struggle with identity takes place in a politically-divided, middle-class society. It seems that order must be restored. A middle-class conflict has developed between the “authentic original inhabitant” – the white Dutch person, and the “incomer” – the Dutch person of colour, as two different classes divided by their colour line and religious backgrounds. The question of the political positioning of an artist can play a very significant role when analysing his or her work. Even though it would be a very interesting position, I have been unable to find a single visual artist who would politically position themselves as being of immigrant background. A conscious positioning as multi-cultural, however, is frequently found. An example of this is the multi-media artist Dwight Marica. With the coloured wires around the television in the sculpture *Space Object, series 2099*, he expressed the idea of a streamlined, multi-cultural society. He defends this extreme, politically-correct position by saying that clichés are not merely stylistic figures but make up his daily reality and that he must respond to them. In later versions of the *Space Object, series 2099*, the TV in the earlier series develops into a more abstract and less literal form that demonstrates the transforming reality of multi-cultural society.

Some artists are not satisfied with positioning themselves as Dutch. Dutch without any hyphen or excuse. Sara Blokland is one of these artists. Her dual-blooded legacy and the Dutch identity therein is the central thesis in her work. In the installation *Reproduction of Family part 1&2*, Blokland displays her family in the photographic memory of a historical setting. She reflects on the exoticism in the photography and in the production of history. Her family is captured as a collection of images and objects in an installation consisting of a table with ceramic and historical photographic material. The nature of the work brings anthropological and decorative events to the foreground. The individual becomes a part of a scientific approach that creates a tension between the index of a photographic image and the instability of its meaning.² In her work Blokland illustrates a Dutch identity that is Black and not really very multi-cultural.

3. Does the artist attempt to bridge the internal ideological gulf in the Black Dutch community?

An example of a contrasting strategy can be found in the work of Iris Kensmil. This artist uses history in her life-sized paintings to fill the ideological gaps and to hold a mirror before us all. Instead of confronting the Dutch public directly with our colonial history, she makes this

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²Sara Blokland web site, “About Me”, <http://sites.google.com/site/sarablokland/about-me> (viewed 12 March, 2010).



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visible by showing “other histories”. Kensmil plays with the ideological Négritude³ movement and stories from the African Diaspora. She uses Afro-American heroes from the American Civil Rights Movement, for example, and Surinam heroes such as Anton de Kom and Maroon tribal chiefs. By promoting Black knowledge dissemination, Kensmil makes a statement about Black unification. By calling for unity from a Black consciousness, she tries in her work to build a bridge in the Afro-Dutch community.

4. Does the artist engage with the political functioning of Dutch society?

An artist who also denounces the political functioning of Dutch society in general is Remy Jungerman. His wall installation *Bakru* from 2007 attempts to reflect on knowledge dissemination in the Dutch nation and a new way of suggesting it. Jungerman uses various objects in his *Bakru* piece that refer to Afro-Surinam Winti philosophy. He adorns a garden gnome with an African mask and thus refers to the forgotten god-like functionality of the figure. The joke among people with a Surinam background is that the garden gnome, both in size and functionality, is the same as a Bakru (a Surinamese dwarf entity who, like the gnome, helps in and around the house). In general, western thinking leaves no room for such interpretations of reality and both the garden gnome and the Bakru are banished to the land of fairy tales.

Jungerman places the masked gnome in a structure of wooden laths that initially suggest the modernistic structures of Mondriaan. The artist insists, however, that the play of lines is derived from the chequered *pagne*, a shawl that is worn by Afro-Surinamese people in a social ritualistic or religious setting. If we are to believe the artist, then the work should be viewed in the context of contemporary African and African Diaspora art. Jungerman uses the *pagne* in fact to create a link to the West-African weaving and dying tradition of which the *Kente cloth* is the best example. Contemplating his work would benefit from doing so based on the theory that developed from it, as is done with the work of the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui.⁴

Suffice it, for now, to say that the Afro-Surinamese lens that Jungerman uses in his work focuses unity into plurality. It neutralises neo-racist tendencies and accepts a variety of manifestations of Dutch identity as authentically intrinsic. In doing this, Jungerman, like Edgar Cairo, reminds people of Afro-Surinam origin of the paradigms that have formed their community throughout the centuries. At the same time he criticises the Dutch institutionalised way of knowledge dissemination and offers Afro-Surinamese metaphysics as an extra method to allude to the situation in a different way.

When we look at the work and the positions of artists such as Remy Jungerman, iris Kensmil, Sara Blokland, Dwight Marica and Felix de Rooij, and the positions they adopt, it becomes clear that what is designated as multi-cultural can also be seen as Black. It therefore depends on who is posing the question and which questions are raised. Regardless of borrowed styles and figures, it is essential to view the work also with due attention to the philosophical and visual baggage that the artist carries. The positions, criticism and new forms that are distilled from this can help formulate the idea of Black in the European continental visual arts. It is true, here, that the visual arts can help to describe Black as a European identity that

³ Négritude began as a literary movement of French-speaking black poets who were looking for an answer to the colonial situation; the term also describes a broader idea of solidarity in the search for a common, black identity.

⁴ Binder Lisa M., *El Anatsui: Transformations*, *African Arts*, Summer 2008, Vol. 41, No. 2, Pages 24-37



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contributes to how we see ourselves within an expanding Europe.

*This is an adaptation of the introduction to the debate evening Am I Black Enough for You?
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