Galerie
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Willem De Rooij

Selected Press

«Art commissarial : Le cas de Willem De Rooij», *Esse*, Spring - Summer, 2015, pp. 46 - 50.

ART COMMISSARIAL : LE CAS DE WILLEM DE ROOIJ

CURATING-ART: THE CASE OF WILLEM DE ROOIJ

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Galerie Chantal Crousel

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Willem de Rooij, *Intolerance*, 2010, Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *Pelican and Other Waterfowl in a Park*, c. 1650-1700, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
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Willem de Rooij, *Birds in a Park*, 2007, vue d'installation | installation view, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne.
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Au cours des deux dernières décennies, nombre d'institutions muséales ont invité des artistes à construire des expositions, parfois à partir de leurs collections ou avec leur appui logistique. On peut penser aux projets « carte blanche » du Palais de Tokyo, à la série Unilever de la Tate Modern ou encore au programme Artiste en résidence du Musée McCord. Au-delà des invitations lancées par des musées, on assiste à l'émergence de pratiques artistiques qui intègrent des stratégies commissariales et où l'exposition sert de dispositif. À partir d'une conception de l'artiste comme commissaire, je propose d'utiliser le terme « art commissarial », qui pourrait regrouper essentiellement les expositions mises en œuvre et déterminées par des artistes, qu'elles soient conceptuelles, critiques ou collaboratives. Ces initiatives méthodologiques soulèvent certes des questions. Quelle place laisse-t-on à la création dans les démarches commissariales ? Les artistes ont-ils une plus grande licence de pratique que les commissaires ? Comment établir un cadre éthique adapté à l'utilisation, à l'appel ou à la commande d'œuvres ? Comment la notion d'auteur, inhérente à l'acte de création, est-elle affectée par les démarches collaboratives ou de coproduction ?

Ces questions seront explorées à la lumière de l'exposition *Intolerance*, de l'artiste néerlandais Willem de Rooij, laquelle constitue un cas exemplaire d'art commissarial. Mais avant d'aborder spécifiquement ce projet, faisons un retour sur le cycle de trois expositions qui ont précédé *Intolerance*, voire lui ont préparé le terrain. En 2006, De Rooij présente une première exposition à la galerie Chantal Crousel de Paris, où il introduit son intérêt pour la peinture de Melchior d'Hondecoeter (Utrecht, 1636-1695). De ce dernier, De Rooij utilise le tableau intitulé *A Pelican and Other Birds near a Pool* – aussi connu sous le vocable « The Floating Feather » – pour les invitations à son vernissage et comme titre de son projet. *The Floating*

Over the last twenty years or so, many museums have invited artists to build exhibitions, sometimes with works drawn from the institutions' own collections or with their logistical support. One thinks of the Palais de Tokyo's "carte blanche" projects, the Tate Modern's *Unilever Series*, or the McCord Museum's Artist-in-Residence program. Apart from invitations by museums, we are seeing the emergence of artistic practices integrating curatorial strategies, in which the exhibition itself serves as a device. Starting from a conception of the artist as curator, I propose to use the term "curating-art," essentially encompassing exhibitions—conceptual, critical, or collaborative—conceived and organized by artists. These methodological initiatives naturally raise some questions. What role does creativity play in these curatorial approaches? Do artists enjoy greater creative freedom than curators? What ethical framework pertains to the use, solicitation, or commissioning of a work? How is the notion of authorship inherent in the creative act affected by collaborative approaches or co-productions?

I explore these questions in light of *Intolerance*, an exhibition by Dutch artist Willem de Rooij and an exemplary case of curating-art. Before dealing with this particular project, however, we should take a look at a series of three exhibitions that preceded and, indeed, laid the groundwork for *Intolerance*. In 2006, de Rooij presented a first exhibition at Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris, in which he introduced his interest in the painting of Melchior d'Hondecoeter (Utrecht, 1636–95). De Rooij used d'Hondecoeter's painting *A Pelican and Other Birds Near a Pool* for the invitations to the opening, and its more common name, "The Floating Feather," as the title of the project. *The Floating Feather* brings together three sets of work in the Parisian gallery: a sculpture by Isa Genzken, two videos by Keren Cytter, and designer clothes by Chinese-Dutch designer Fong-Leng. In the late 1970s,

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Feather réunit, dans la galerie parisienne, trois ensembles : une sculpture d'Isa Genzken, une vidéo double de Keren Cytter et des vêtements de haute couture de la designeure sino-hollandaise Fong-Leng. À la fin des années 1970, Fong-Leng traduisait, avec ses robes-manteaux, le passage du *flower power* aux prémices du punk. Dans l'installation de Willem de Rooij, les robes-manteaux sont présentées comme des sculptures : en exposant dans une galerie ces objets qui ont été créés « en marge » de l'art, De Rooij leur donne un nouveau point d'appui. Une deuxième exposition confirme l'intérêt de De Rooij pour l'art commissarial, cette fois à la galerie Daniel Buchholz, à Cologne. Intitulé *Birds in a Park*, d'après une peinture de D'Hondecoeter, ce deuxième volet est similaire à *The Floating Feather* en ce sens que De Rooij collabore avec les mêmes artistes ; néanmoins, les éléments diffèrent et se retrouvent dans une nouvelle mise en espace.

Ce n'est qu'à la troisième exposition de ce cycle que le projet de De Rooij prend un tournant révélateur, l'artiste nous amenant en plein cœur d'une déconstruction de la notion d'auteur. D'où émerge le discours ? Qui en est l'auteur ? L'image qu'il utilise pour l'invitation au vernissage de l'exposition *Birds* (2009), à la Cubitt Gallery de Londres, est issue d'une peinture longtemps associée à D'Hondecoeter, mais qui se révéla plutôt être l'œuvre d'un de ses contemporains[1]. De cette méprise, De Rooij soulève le caractère déceptif des ruptures d'authenticité. Suivant la logique qu'il instaure dès le carton d'invitation, l'artiste réunit ici un corpus qui problématise toutes les facettes de la notion d'auteur, bien au-delà de la double position d'artiste et de commissaire. D'abord, il signale l'absence de la peinture *Birds* en apposant sur un mur un panneau descriptif à la manière de Sophie Calle avec *Fantômes* (1991). Les robes-manteaux de Fong-Leng, uniques et sculpturales, font place aux survêtements des collections de prêt-à-porter que la designeure avait créés quelque temps avant la faillite de la marque. Ceux-ci sont présentés sur des mannequins banals, comme dans un magasin à grande surface. De Rooij réunit également des œuvres de Vincent Vulsma issues de la série *ARS NOVA E5305-B* ; il s'agit de monochromes noirs peints en appliquant une couche de peinture en aérosol sur des toiles chinoises prémontées et toujours emballées dans leur pellicule plastique. Plus loin dans *Birds*, De Rooij expose des affiches autographiées de *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, dernier film de Pier Paolo Pasolini. À ce propos, les affiches qui promeuvent une image d'authenticité au moyen d'une reproduction de l'autographe du réalisateur traduisent inévitablement un malaise lorsqu'on prend en compte le fait que Pasolini était décédé lors de la sortie en salle du film. À travers ces éléments, De Rooij se révèle, somme toute, un « artiste-sujet[2] » dont l'exposition est déterminée par ses gouts, ses intérêts du moment ou encore ses relations avec des collègues artistes. La critique Juliane Rebentisch avance que « [...] c'est son nom [De Rooij] en tant qu'artiste qui avale celui des autres artistes ; c'est dans son œuvre que les œuvres de ces derniers s'inscrivent – œuvres qu'il s'approprie ouvertement, dans cette perspective[3] ». Plus loin, Rebentisch cerne ce bris de l'auctorialité qui est si perceptible dans l'œuvre de De Rooij : « [...] les hiérarchies d'auctorialité (De Rooij comme simple "commissaire", De Rooij comme "maitre" qui crée l'installation) ont une autre fin : affranchir la subjectivité esthétique de sa fausse assimilation à celle de l'artiste[4] ». Suivant la pensée de Rebentisch, la hiérarchie auctoriale que déconstruit De Rooij mène à l'acceptation d'un auteur mobile, emprunté, « successif ». Car si De Rooij n'est point l'auteur des œuvres qu'il expose, il demeure l'auteur de leur sélection, de leur mise en dialogue, et il met à l'épreuve l'idée contestée – voire contestable – du commissaire comme « méta-artiste, penseur utopique et shaman[5] » empruntée à la pensée de Harald Szeemann

1. Juliane Rebentisch, « Montage and late modernity: Notes on Willem de Rooij's Intolerance », *Willem de Rooij: Intolerance*, catalogue d'exposition, Düsseldorf, Verlag Feymedia, 2010, p. 40.
2. Ibid., p. 41.
3. Ibid. [Trad. libre]
4. Ibid. [Trad. libre]
5. George Alexander, Tristan Sharp et NSW Art Gallery, *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, catalogue d'exposition, Sydney, Art Gallery of NSW, 2009, p. 4.

Fong-Leng's cloak dresses rendered the transition from flower power to proto-punk. De Rooij presented these garments as sculptures in his installation, and by putting objects created on the "fringes" of art on display in a gallery, he lent them new support. Another exhibition confirmed de Rooij's interest in curating-art, this one at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Cologne. Titled *Birds in a Park*, after a painting by d'Hondecoeter, this second instalment was similar to *The Floating Feather* in that de Rooij was working with the same artists; nonetheless, elements differed and were given a new spatial arrangement.

Only in the third exhibition of the cycle does de Rooij's project take a revealing turn, as the artist draws us into the heart of his deconstruction of authorship. Where does the discourse emanate from? Who is its author? The image he uses for the invitation to the *Birds* exhibition at the Cubitt Gallery in London (2009) is taken from a painting that was long attributed to d'Hondecoeter but has since been found to be by one of his contemporaries.[1] From this mistake, de Rooij highlights the deceptive nature of disruptions in authenticity. Continuing the logic set out with the invitation card, the artist brings together a body of work that raises all the issues relating to notions of authorship, going well beyond the dual position of artist and curator. First, he signals the absence of the painting *Birds* by affixing a descriptive panel on the wall, much like Sophie Calle's strategy in *Fantômes* (1991). Fong-Leng's unique and sculptural cloak dresses give way to the overdressed ready-to-wear collection the designer had created some time before the label went bankrupt. These are presented on ordinary mannequins, as in a department store. De Rooij also brings together works from Vincent Vulsma's *ARS NOVA E5305-B* series of black monochromes created by applying layers of spray paint onto pre-stretched Chinese canvases still in their plastic wrap. Further along in *Birds*, de Rooij exhibits signed posters from Pier Paolo Pasolini's last film, *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*. Here, though promoting an image of authenticity through the reproduction of the filmmaker's autograph, the posters inevitably create uneasiness as one realizes that Pasolini had died before his film was released. All in all, with these elements, de Rooij reveals himself as an "artist subject"[2] whose exhibition is determined by his tastes, his interests of the moment, or his relationships with artist colleagues. Critic Juliane Rebentisch observes, "... it is his name [de Rooij] as an artist that swallows up those of the other artists; it is into his work that their—in this perspective, clearly: appropriated—works enter."[3] Later, Rebentisch delineates the break in authorship so perceptible in the work of de Rooij: "... the double gesture, the constant inversion with regard to the hierarchies of authorship (de Rooij as a mere 'curator'; de Rooij as the 'master' who creates the arrangement) aims at something else: the release of aesthetic subjectivity from its false identification with that of the artist."[4] Following Rebentisch's thought, the authorial hierarchy that de Rooij deconstructs leads to the acceptance of a mobile, borrowed, "sequential" author. For although de Rooij is not the author of the works that he puts on display, he remains the author of their selection, of the arrangement of their dialogue, and he assays the disputed—and quite disputable—idea of the curator as "meta-artist, utopian thinker, and shaman,"[5] borrowed from Harald Szeemann as early as 1969. It is after this cycle of exhibitions—*The Floating Feather*, *Birds in a Park*, and *Birds*—that de Rooij presents the *Intolerance* project at Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 2010.

While the exhibitions that preceded *Intolerance* employ images of d'Hondecoeter's paintings, it is only with the financial and logistical support of Neue Nationalgalerie that de Rooij manages to bring several

1. Juliane Rebentisch, "Montage and Late Modernity: Notes on Willem de Rooij's Intolerance," *Willem de Rooij: Intolerance*, exhibition catalogue (Düsseldorf: Verlag Feymedia, 2010), 40.
2. Ibid., 41.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. George Alexander, Tristan Sharp, and NSW Art Gallery, *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, exhibition catalogue (Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW, 2009), 4.

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Fong-Leng, *Parasol*, 1979.
Photo : permission de | courtesy of Scheringa Museum of Realism, Spanbroek & Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne & Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

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Willem de Rooij, *Intolerance*, 2010, vue d'installation | installation view, (Hawaiian featherworks & Melchior d'Hondecoeter), Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
Photo : Jens Ziehe, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, permission de | courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

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dès 1969. C'est à la suite de ce cycle d'expositions – *The Floating Feather*, *Birds in a Park* et *Birds* – que De Rooij expose le projet *Intolerance* à la Neue Nationalgalerie de Berlin en 2010.

Alors que les expositions qui précèdent *Intolerance* font appel, sur le plan de l'image, aux peintures de D'Hondecoeter, ce n'est qu'avec l'appui financier et logistique de la Neue Nationalgalerie que De Rooij réussit à réunir en un seul lieu physique bon nombre d'entre elles. Par cette entreprise, De Rooij réaffirme sa position d'artiste usant de l'exposition comme d'un dispositif idéel. *Intolerance* présente deux corpus, soit une sélection de peintures du studio de D'Hondecoeter et des *featherworks*, objets fétiches ou usuels confectionnés à partir de plumes et provenant de l'archipel d'Hawaï. Que révèle au juste De Rooij en juxtaposant ces deux corpus ? D'un point de vue conceptuel, l'artiste choisit ces deux ensembles selon le principe qu'ils incarnent respectivement des signifiants d'un pouvoir situé dans leur époque et relatif à leur territoire. Avec *Intolerance*, de Rooij propose une réflexion « triangulaire » sur les débuts du commerce mondial, les conflits interculturels et les influences stylistiques.

Né en 1636 à Utrecht, aux Pays-Bas, le peintre D'Hondecoeter est surtout connu pour ses peintures animalières, ses natures mortes et ses scènes de chasse. Au début de sa carrière, il peint des oiseaux de ferme : canards, poules, oies, coqs. Ce n'est que subséquemment, avec l'essor du commerce maritime et l'introduction, en Europe, de nouvelles espèces d'oiseaux exotiques, qu'il élabore des compositions aviaires fantaisistes, des scènes illustrant des volées de bêtes à plumes. La carrière de D'Hondecoeter prend un tournant important lorsqu'il ajoute à sa clientèle le roi des Pays-Bas Willem III et la nouvelle élite issue de la bourgeoisie marchande, qui lui commandent des peintures où sont représentés des oiseaux exotiques, signe de prospérité et d'un certain esprit d'aventure. On pourrait souligner ici que ces peintures constituent des objets de pouvoir dépeignant d'autres objets de pouvoir. En somme, de 180 à 250 peintures sont attribuables au studio de D'Hondecoeter. Le succès que connait le peintre entraine une dissolution du principe d'auteur, comme le souligne De Rooij dans un entretien avec le commissaire Dieter Roelstraete : « Les peintures de D'Hondecoeter sont de facture inégale ; ainsi, une partie de son œuvre – qui est considérable

of the actual paintings together in a single place. In this endeavour, de Rooij reaffirms his position as an artist who uses the exhibition as an ideal device. *Intolerance* presents two bodies of work: a selection of paintings from d'Hondecoeter's studio, and some "featherworks," ordinary or fetish objects made from feathers and of Hawaiian provenance. What does de Rooij reveal by juxtaposing these two bodies of work? From a conceptual point of view, the artist has chosen these two ensembles because they embody signifiers of power from their respective eras and territories. With *Intolerance*, de Rooij proposes a "triangular" reflection on the beginnings of world trade, intercultural conflicts, and stylistic influences.

Born in the Dutch city of Utrecht in 1636, the painter d'Hondecoeter is especially well known for his animal paintings, still lifes, and hunting scenes. At the start of his career, he painted farm birds: ducks, geese and roosters. Only later, with the development of maritime commerce and the introduction of new species of exotic birds into Europe, did he develop whimsical aviary compositions, scenes illustrating flocks of plumed creatures. D'Hondecoeter's career reached a major turning point when his clientele expanded to include King Willem III of the Netherlands and the new bourgeois business elite, who commissioned paintings of exotic birds—a sign of prosperity and of a spirit of adventure. One could mention here that these paintings constitute objects of power depicting other objects of power. All in all, between 180 and 250 paintings are attributed to d'Hondecoeter's studio. The painter's very success dissolves the principle of authorship, as de Rooij points out in an interview with curator Dieter Roelstraete: "Not all of d'Hondecoeter's works are equally well made, and there is a certain element of conveyor-belt banality to some of his output, which is considerable in terms of volume.... This ambiguity of authorship is another facet that fascinates me, since it plays an important role in my own work."[6] The intense production of paintings in d'Hondecoeter's work engendered a repetition of subjects, even literally a repetition of compositions. "I [Willem de Rooij] found this repetitive aspect of the work quite attractive—as a visual strategy, but also as an artistic gesture....

6. Dieter Roelstraete, "Artists at Work: Willem de Rooij," *Afterall Online* (November 2, 2010), accessed February 9, 2015, www.afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-willem-de-rooij.

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en fait de volume – se caractérise par une certaine banalité typique du travail à la chaine. [...] Cette ambigüité de l'auctorialité est aussi un aspect qui me fascine, car elle occupe une place importante dans mon propre travail[6] ». La production intensive de peintures entraine, dans l'œuvre de D'Hondecoeter, une répétition des sujets, voire littéralement une répétition des compositions. « Je [De Rooij] trouvais cet aspect répétitif de l'œuvre plutôt intéressant, non seulement comme stratégie visuelle, mais aussi comme acte artistique. [...] C'est presque comme regarder un téléroman ou quelque chose de très convenu[7]. »

Dans le regroupement et l'articulation des corpus, De Rooij fait en quelque sorte ressortir les défauts des beaux-arts et les qualités des objets ethnologiques. Les pièces provenant d'Hawaï sont considérées comme d'une grande rareté et exigent des précautions quant à la luminosité ou au degré d'humidité de la salle d'exposition. Ces conditions transforment l'espace de la Neue Nationalgalerie, construction à la fois sévère et lumineuse de l'architecte Mies van der Rohe. Les fenêtres sont recouvertes d'un filtre, ce qui crée une pénombre constante, et De Rooij érige en plein centre de la salle un module où les éléments sont accrochés ou encastrés. Disposés sans intention didactique (absence de fiches descriptives ou de textes d'accompagnement), les artéfacts ethnologiques miment et confondent les codes de présentation de l'art actuel. D'un point de vue méthodologique, De Rooij emprunte au travail d'un conservateur de musée en réunissant en un même lieu des groupes d'objets dispersés dans toute l'Europe. La présence des *featherworks* dans l'exposition *Intolerance* est, comme le souligne l'artiste lui-même, le symbole du pillage culturel qui explique la présence de ces rares objets dans les musées d'Europe. Dans le catalogue exhaustif du projet *Intolerance*, la directrice de l'Ethnologisches Museum de Berlin, Viola König, souligne que les musées étaient complices d'une dissémination des biens culturels : « À une certaine époque, les musées d'ethnologie étaient des comptoirs déguisés, de grands magasins de biens culturels provenant du monde entier[8]. »

De Rooij ne souhaite pas établir une hiérarchie de valeur entre beaux-arts et artéfacts ethnologiques. Dans sa proposition artistique, les peintures de D'Hondecoeter, qui célèbrent une vision romancée de l'inconnu, sont associées à une production culturelle instrumentalisée et répétitive, alors que la présence à Berlin des *featherworks* témoigne des politiques d'acquisition, de conservation et de prêt de biens culturels appartenant à d'autres cultures. Parallèlement aux stratégies discursives qu'il déploie, De Rooij formule une définition personnelle de l'exposition comme médium distinct. S'il est en mesure d'explorer les différentes formes que peut prendre l'art commissarial, c'est entre autres parce qu'il se retire de la production pour se concentrer sur la sélection d'œuvres. L'analogie entre le travail de commissariat et le travail artistique est d'autant plus évidente chez les artistes dont la pratique est associée à une démarche indicielle ou idéelle plutôt qu'à la création d'objets. L'art commissarial contribue assurément, tout comme le commissariat, à rendre compte de l'exposition comme espace théorique, espace en constante définition.

6. Dieter Roelstraete, « Artists at Work: Willem de Rooij », *Afterall Online* (2 novembre 2010), www.afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-willem-de-rooij [consulté le 9 février 2015]. [Trad. libre]

7. Ibid. [Trad. libre]

8. Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer et Willem de Rooij (dir.), « Foreword », *Hawaiian featherwork: Catalogue raisonné of pre-1900 feathered-god images, cloaks, capes, helmets*, Düsseldorf, Verlag Feymedia, 2010, p. 8. [Trad. libre]

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It's almost like watching a soap opera, or anything based on a strong sense of the formulaic."[7]

In a sense, in the selection and articulation of the body of work, de Rooij brings out the faults in the fine arts and the qualities of the ethnological objects. The pieces from Hawaii are considered extremely rare and require tight control of light and humidity in the gallery. These conditions transform the space of Neue Nationalgalerie, a solemn yet luminous construction by the architect Mies van der Rohe. The windows are filtered, creating a constant half-light, and in the very centre of the gallery, de Rooij erects a unit on which the elements are either imbedded or hung. Arranged with no didactic markers (no descriptive text, no labels), the ethnological artefacts mimic and mix the codes of representation of contemporary art. From a methodological point of view, de Rooij borrows from the museum curator's work by bringing into a single space works that were dispersed throughout Europe. As the artist himself points out, the featherworks in *Intolerance* are a symbol of the cultural plunder that explains the presence of these rare objects in the museums of Europe. In the project's exhaustive catalogue, Viola König, director of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, points out that the museums were complicit in the dissemination of cultural goods: "Ethnological museums were once trading posts in disguise, department stores for cultural wares from all over the world."[8]

De Rooij does not wish to establish a hierarchical relationship between the fine arts and ethnological artefacts. In his artistic proposition, d'Hondecoeter's paintings, which celebrate a romantic vision of the unknown, are associated with a repetitive and instrumentalized cultural production, whereas the presence of the featherworks in Berlin attests to acquisition, conservation, and lending policies for cultural goods belonging to other cultures. Alongside the discursive strategies de Rooij employs, he formulates a personal definition of the exhibition as a distinct medium. If he can explore the different forms that curating-art may take, it is in part because he withdraws from production to concentrate on the selection of the works. The analogy between curatorial work and artistic work is all the more evident with artists whose practices are marked by an indicial or ideational approach rather than by the creation of objects. Curating-art certainly contributes, as does curatorship, to realizing the exhibition as a constantly redefined and theoretical space.

[Translated from the French by Ron Ross]

7. Ibid.

8. Viola König, "Foreword," in Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer and Willem de Rooij (eds.), *Hawaiian Featherwork: Catalogue Raisonné of Pre-1900 Feathered-god Images, Cloaks, Capes, Helmets* (Dusseldorf: Verlag Feymedia, 2010), 8.

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Maaike Lauwaert. «Willem De Rooij Weltkulturen Museum», *Artforum*, February 4 - March 29, 2015.
http://artforum.com/picks/id=50584

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Willem de Rooij, Double II, 2014-2015, camelhair, sheep wool, linen, 45 x 57».

Willem De Rooij's deceptively simple installation is composed of three similar striped blankets, in beige, light brown, and dark brown, displayed in seemingly identical vitrines. But, as the saying goes, the devil is in the details. The one installed in the middle,, Blanket, mantle, dates back to the nineteenth century and comes borrowed from the Weltkulturen Museum's ethnographic collection. Just the slightest bit fluffy, its uneven edges shimmering lightly from the overhead neon, this is one of only fourteen extant of its kind of Californian blanket. Credited to a variety of indigenous tribes, these status objects are composed of tightly woven duck and goose feathers. Flanking the original are copies commissioned by De Rooij. Titled Double I and Double II (both 2014–15), these feature straight edges, show no signs of use or age, and are made of camel hair, hence looking less downy and soft than the older version. Although his replicas are clearly expertly made, their main function in the show seems to be to rally around and uplift the original mantle's value.

Camels have featured in a sound installation by De Rooij before, as have objects from ethnographic collections, such as feathered ceremonial accoutrements from eighteenth-century Hawaii. The title of the exhibition as a whole, "double double," is also an appropriation, one of a more banal origin: the southwestern fast-food chain In-N-Out Burger's sandwich of the same name. This corporate evocation of the region from which the blanket originates adds a note of fatalistic humor to a historically heavy exhibition.

PARISart

Willem De Rooij
Black and Blue
27 oct.-24 nov. 2012
Paris 3e. Galerie Chantal Crousel

Quatre œuvres tissées main, et une composée à partir de tissu wax, se font écho et finissent par former une seule et unique installation s'articulant autour du bleu et du noir. Si «Black and Blue» apparaît d'abord comme un travail sur la monochromie, c'est surtout le glissement imperceptible d'une couleur vers une autre qui nourrit notre réflexion.

Par François Salmeron

Deux toiles se ressemblant à s'y méprendre se présentent à nous, et ce n'est qu'après un certain temps d'observation que nous réussissons à les différencier clairement: sur notre droite *Blue*, et face à nous *Black*. Si le titre de ses deux œuvres se rapporte évidemment à deux couleurs bien distinctes, leur tonalité respective demeure malgré tout assez proche, et leur format est quant à lui tout à fait similaire.
En s'approchant de *Blue*, on réalise qu'en réalité, le côté droit de la toile est plus foncé que le côté gauche. C'est comme si la surface était balayée par un geste qui fonçait peu à peu la toile, de manière quasi imperceptible. On a donc affaire à un tableau qui s'obscurcit du bleu vers le noir, alors que dans un premier temps, il peut donner l'apparence d'un monochrome.
Willem de Rooij actualise ainsi un principe de continuité entre deux couleurs, qui s'enchevêtrent et donnent l'impression de compénétrer l'une dans l'autre.

De même pour l'œuvre *Black* où, lorsque nous nous plaçons nez-à-nez face à la toile, nous nous rendons alors compte que nous n'avons pas véritablement affaire à un monochrome. En effet, la technique de tissage qu'emploie Willem de Rooij est fort subtile, et entremêle en fait du bleu avec du noir. Une vision lointaine ou à mi-distance de l'œuvre donne l'impression d'un monochrome, mais en plongeant dans le détail de la composition, il existe déjà une fusion entre le bleu et le noir. Ainsi, l'artiste néerlandais entrecroise différents fils de polyester

Créateurs
- Willem De Rooij

Lieu
- Galerie Chantal Crousel

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synthétique, et permet de faire participer le bleu au noir, sans pour autant altérer la tonalité noire dominante que nous percevons.

L'œuvre de Willem de Rooij s'attèle également à décliner d'autres genres de formats avec *Closure* qui se déploie sur 4,30 m, ou *Blue to Blue* dont les motifs nous séduisent. Aussi, nous découvrons étendue sur le sol l'œuvre *Blue to Black*, sur le bord de laquelle est imprimé «véritable wax imprimé au Ghana». Par là, l'exposition se réfère à l'histoire, et notamment aux anciennes routes coloniales ou marchandes reliant l'Europe au monde.
Ce tissu de coton typique de l'Afrique Noire se trouve à son tour imprimé de bleu et de noir. Cette œuvre offre un nouveau dégradé de couleurs, avec différents tons de bleu, virant peu à peu vers le noir.

L'art tisserand semble ici reprendre les connotations politiques que Platon lui prêtait d'antan: rassembler des entités hétérogènes et les faire évoluer sur un même plan, dans un ensemble qui les transcende. L'enjeu de l'art tisserand est de réussir à faire tenir ensemble des individus, et à créer un collectif qui ne se réduise pas à une simple juxtaposition d'entités hétérogènes. Le collectif comporte «quelque chose de plus» qui fait qu'il ne se réduit pas à une simple collection d'individus.
Et se lier les uns aux autres, c'est se reconnaître en autrui, sans pour autant perdre sa propre spécificité ou sa propre identité. L'art tisserand interroge finalement la possible articulation entre l'individuel et le collectif, entre la similitude et la différence.

Eva Maria Stadler, “Willem De Rooij/Kunstverein München”, Frieze, n°148, June July August 2012, p. 196-197.

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frieze

Issue 148 June 2012

Willem de Rooij

KUNSTVEREIN, MÜNCHEN, GERMANY

Taping Precognitive Tribes, 2012, needlework with thread

The light-flooded spaces of the newly renovated Kunstverein München – with their eight-metre-high ceilings and new grey-green floors – reopened to the public with an exhibition of large-format woven pictures produced by Willem de Rooij between 2009 and 2012, presented together for the first time. The show's title, 'Untilted', was not a misprint, but visitors were left to decide whether it was a playful allusion or a deliberate 'slip'. The spectrum of reference is a recurring theme for De Rooij. In the show's accompanying booklet, the artist chose to reprint Tom Holert's 2008 lecture '"I Was Interested in …": Interest and Intuition in Art Discourse', in which the art historian cites examples of interviews where artists proclaim their interest in a theme or subject. The lecture notes the subjective character of artistic referentiality, echoing psychologists of the 19th and early 20th centuries, who identified personal background and professional tendencies as the main motivations behind subjective influences.

In his hand-woven tapestries, De Rooij counters the often seemingly arbitrary 'I'm interested in …' of contemporary art – what he calls 'referential terror' – by attempting to block out references. Yet he does so as an artist whose last major exhibition, 'Intolerance' at Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie in 2010, was all about reference. In that show, De Rooij combined a selection of 17th-century works by the Dutch bird painter Melchior d'Hondecoeter, with feathered cult objects from 18th-century Hawaii. Although the woven pictures eschew this kind of subjective referential juxtaposition, it is clear that De Rooij can't quite escape the frame of reference of the aesthetic field.

Eva Maria Stadler, “Willem De Rooij/Kunstverein München”, Frieze, n°148, June July August 2012, p. 196-197.

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The ‘repetitive crossing of threads from two different directions’ that occurs in the woven works, as the museum’s introductory text puts it, remains a complex operation, however simple it may appear at first. Creating transitions from one colour tone of fabric to another, as De Rooij does in *Black to Black*, or between ten different shades of pink in *Mechanize her Jenny* (both 2011), evokes the classic topoi of abstract painting. Each work carries the self-referentiality of the picture as an aesthetic artefact, while the process of abstraction itself, as Theodor W. Adorno put it, requires a universal exchange of associations, links and ties within the framework of art’s referential system. The aesthetic charge of De Rooij’s woven works, therefore, depends substantially on the rich discourse of painting.

‘In fact, when men are fabricating thought, / It goes as when a weaver’s masterpiece is wrought. / One treadle sets a thousand threads a-going, / And to and fro the shuttle flies; / Quite unperceived the threads are flowing, / One stroke effects a thousand ties’, says Mephistopheles in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy* (1808). And which threads are being crossed here? De Rooij gleefully deploys anagrams, encryption and coding in titles or his works (*Vertigo’s Doll*, 2010, for example, is an anagram of ‘silver to gold’). But these puzzles are not intended to hide a particular meaning. The working viewer thus begins the task of weaving thoughts, crossing the threads and casting his eyes – for example in the show’s largest work, *Taping Precognitive Tribes* (2012), a horizontal panorama that combines the colours that occur in the other works in the exhibition – from blue to brown to silver to black to gold to pink. Or from the new colour of the gallery floor to the whitish green of the melted water flowing in Munich’s Isar river. The connections are not binding, but De Rooij’s show does raise fundamental questions concerning the institution’s role in image production and the system of relations and values governing aesthetic exchange.

Appearing monochrome at a distance, the colours of De Rooij’s tapestries shimmer and vibrate, shine and seduce. In this exhibition, the artist’s ‘no’ to reference becomes a clear ‘yes’ to impact. The question remains as to how emancipatory this inversion of the hierarchy of reference might be. One can enjoy the pictures on the basis of free association, embracing them and abandoning oneself to them. Yet their critical potential continues to benefit from the very references the artist sought to avoid.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

Eva Maria Stadler

De Rooij, Willem. *Bouquet VI*, 2010. Couverture, Metropolis M N°4, augustus / september 2011.

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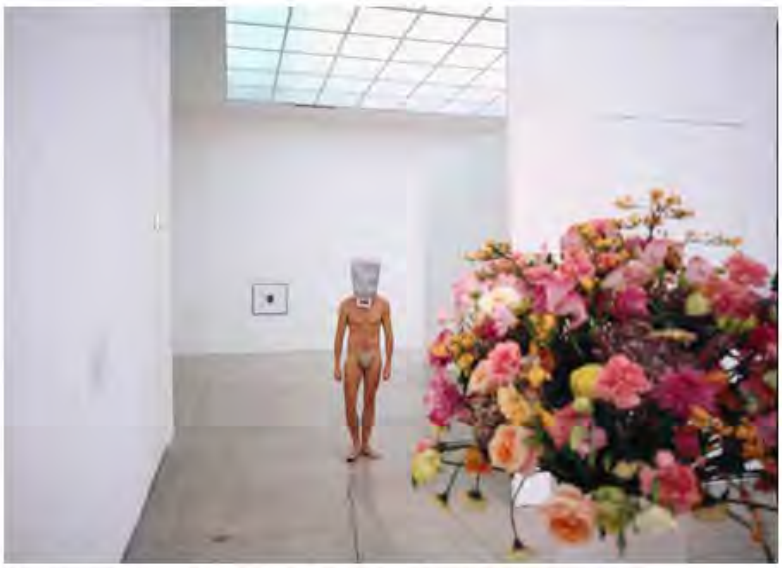
Issue 134 October 2010

As We Speak

INTERVIEW

American artist **Christopher Williams**' major solo show at Kunsthalle Baden-Baden this summer and Dutch artist **Willem de Rooij**'s current exhibition, 'Intolerance', at Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie, both highlight the connection between conceptualism and the image, between appropriation and autonomy. The artists discuss whether referentiality in art, if once polemical, has become an orthodoxy and if so, is there is a way out?



Matthias Herrmann, the president of the Vienna Secession from 1999–2006, photographing himself in the exhibition 'Christopher Williams & Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij', Secession, Vienna, 2005–6

Willem de Rooij As a starting-point for this conversation I sent Chris the transcript of a public discussion I had with Jeff Wall in the framework of the conference series 'Rotterdam Dialogues' (2008–9) at Witte de With in Rotterdam in April last year (the entire series of transcripts has now been published by Witte de With). Jeff and I spoke mainly about the notion of referencing, both from very different angles and experiences, obviously.

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Christopher Williams In this talk two particularly interesting points were raised: one was the idea of using a conversation as a model, and the other was the characterization of the period of art production in the mid-to-late 1970s as ‘the era of polemical referentiality’. He said he felt that after the project of Conceptual art, which involved the de-legitimization of the image, making pictures at that time was a polemical act. What struck me was that during this period Jeff published his first catalogue, which exemplifies that very idea. Each double-page spread had, on the right-hand page, one of Jeff’s transparencies – for example, The Destroyed Room (1978) or Young Workers (1978/83) – and, on the other side, a network of references or source material: a still from a Hitchcock movie, a Delacroix painting, a Chris Burden performance, a photograph by Richard Avedon or an album cover by Public Image Ltd. Since he has not used this tactic in subsequent publications, perhaps he has reconsidered such explications, but for me at that time it was perfect because I could see how complex layers of information could be condensed into a single photograph.
This came at an important time for me, amidst a backdrop of other cultural developments, such as Screen Magazine, T.J. Clark, Jean-Luc Godard’s videos, Fassbinder, post-punk music, and the first English language translations of Situationist texts.
WDR But in that conversation, Jeff also said that right now we’re at a point in time where we might have to revise that take on referentiality, because that way of working has turned into an orthodoxy. At the moment there is such referential proliferation going on in art that some pieces seem to legitimize themselves only through the interestingness of their references.

Jörg Heiser The orthodoxy of referentiality – do you see it more with younger artists?

WDR We all have to deal with it right now, artists of all ages. Whether we find our sources in books or on the Internet – so much of what inspires or triggers us has already been produced, or mediated or processed in another way by someone else, another author.

CW When I started working, using existing cultural material meant you were taking a critical position – and I find a lot of younger artists that I talk to claim it’s just material, and for them there is no reason to take a position.

WDR The actual appropriation is not problematized anymore.

CW Exactly, and I think that describing the kind of work being made in the era of polemical referentiality helps underline the culture that Jeff’s pictures came out of, and mine. I’m thinking, for example, of Argument (1978) by Anthony McCall and Andrew Tyndall. The film is a critical reflection on the economic situation of the artist – the accompanying publication included an essay entitled ‘The Artist as Businessman’ – and of masculinity, using The New York Times Magazine as the object of investigation. Yet the film was not the primary object of the piece; the discussion after screenings of The Argument was seen as an equal element of the overall project.
Another example is Frost and Defrost by Daniel Buren, a project realized at the Otis Art Institute Gallery in Los Angeles in 1979. Over the course of the show, workers removed the ceiling panels, covered them with Buren’s striped wallpaper, put the panels on display, and then put them back up into the ceiling, with the stripes facing up so that at the end of the show you would just have an empty gallery again. The work was a direct response to a work that Michael Asher had done in 1977 at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, where he had taken out the skylight’s glass panels,

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and – over the course of the show – cleaned and reinstalled them, the exhibition ending when they were all back in place. For me, as a young artist, these projects were very important because they presented the clearest idea of the art work as a dialogical activity. While it may seem strange now, at that time, when I first started working with photographs, the choice of medium seemed to have political implications.

JH What exactly made adopting photography political?

CW Photography at the time was still not considered a primary medium for art work. Also, the first generation of Conceptual artists had de-skilled photography to the point that it wasn't deemed necessary to develop it as a craft, creating a situation where anyone could feel that they could make art with readily accessible means. The fact that it didn't have much of a place in museums and the art market made it an attractive place for artists attempting to work outside of mainstream culture. Also, the most interesting female artists at that time – such as Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler and Sherry Levine – were beginning their work with photography, and so it seemed to me to also have feminist implications.

JH Do you think there is anything 'polemical' left in referentiality today?

WDR Rather the opposite. It has become a completely mainstream convention. I'm amazed by the flood of art pieces I've seen lately that consist of a photograph of a book that the artist finds interesting. Or a book in a showcase. Or sculptures that consist of a bookshelf on the wall with a number of books on it. Or a photo of a bookshelf. Or a photo of a book in a showcase. These books might be interesting, but the photos and sculptures are usually not. I find it so unfair to art that the form of the work gets ignored in that way.
It was so inspiring to see Rodney Graham's recent show at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel. A couple of works brought together the work of Sigmund Freud and Donald Judd. Graham ended up using Judd's works as bookshelves or pedestals of sorts for Freud's books – an artistic twist that touches on the problems of referentiality and appropriation, but brings them into a slapstick-like sphere, making it hilarious. None of the bookshelf pieces I've seen lately seem aware that these works exist.
I'm not saying that it shouldn't be possible to work with references. It just doesn't seem to be happening on a reflective level. In the process of referencing, artists often forget to make the art piece.

JH Maybe for younger generations of conceptual artists, this is about accelerating appropriation to the point of infinite regress. Christopher, you teach at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, and Willem, you teach at Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main – how do your students approach the question of appropriation and referentiality?

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WDR I don't think that for our students it's different from the way it is for us. We're all living in the same world at the same time and we can all gain inspiration from art history on the one hand, and all other cultural sources on the other, and we all experience the excitement as well as the burden of all that. I think we're in the same boat.

JH How did you deal with these questions when you and Christopher did your first collaboration, for the joint exhibition at Secession in Vienna, in 2006?

WDR I was working together with Jeroen de Rijke [who passed away in 2006] at the time and the three of us were invited to share the stage. We had been asked to produce two separate exhibitions but we decided to turn it into one collaborative project instead.

CW The conventional way of doing it would have been for one artist to be in the main hall, and one in the basement spaces. We decided to circumvent that hierarchical situation, by merging the two exhibitions. So you could wander through the exhibition and walk towards a De Rijke/De Rooij work and bump into Williams on the way, or vice versa. We had also turned the building's distinctive mobile wall system – designed by Adolf Krischanitz in the 1980s – into a part of the show by not covering up the modular aspects of the wall. We agreed that the outside of De Rijke and De Rooij's projection rooms was as important as the inside, so I did not hang my pictures on the outside of their spaces.

WDR But as a counterpoint, we decided to hang one of your pieces inside one of the projection rooms – it was only visible when the projection was running.
CW There was actually a third collaborator on the project, Mathias Poledna, whom we invited to design the two separate catalogues for the exhibition.

WDR The covers of these two catalogues look the same, so they have our three names on the covers. Each volume shared the same authors and the same installation shots – but then the images of individual works are different. The whole design plays with the idea of the doubling. Mathias designed the text into two columns per page, but only one of the two columns is used for print. On the back of that same page, again only one column would be used for print. In this way,
he used the fact that paper is always lightly transparent: next to each column of text one can see the text-column that is on the backside of the page shine through. Next to each column of text, you see the absence, as well as the backside, of another column.

CW It was about confusing identities: whose catalogue is this? Who are the collaborators? On the cover it says De Rijke and De Rooij and Williams, so has Williams joined the other two? Is it a group now? Who is responsible for the catalogues? Where is Poledna's name? We used the catalogues and posters, etc., as an opportunity to open a field of questions as opposed to merely providing information about the exhibition.

WDR Later you were asked to do a show with Mathias Poledna at Kunstverein Bonn, which took place last year, and you decided together to deal with mobile wall systems, and how these systems related to the history of exhibition making in the Rhineland area.

CW Mathias and I took the architectural elements of the Secession exhibition as a starting point. The project was conceived as a literal study of several examples of temporary or mobile wall systems being used by institutions in the region around that time. We borrowed and exhibited the walls without refurbishing or repainting them. We actually were proposing a typological study of mobile wall systems in use in the Rhineland at that time of the exhibition, not a metaphorical or allegorical

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at that time of the exhibition, not a metaphorical or allegorical structure. It wasn't about Vietnam.

WDR Christopher and Mathias asked me to respond to their work by organizing an evening in the installation. I screened two films. Mirror of Holland (1950), a short film by Dutch filmmaker Bert Haanstra of Dutch landscapes reflected in water. It's about national representation and identity, popular topics in the era of postwar reconstruction. The film depicts a set of reflections of clichés of icons of Dutch identity (windmills, cows, sailboats, bicycles). The entity that threatens the Dutch landscape most – water – in this film is the one that makes it visible. It's a symbiotic interdependency not unlike the way art works relate to museums walls. The second film I showed was The Divine renewal of Ise Shrine by Seijin Koga, from 1973. It's about a 2,000-year-old Shinto temple complex near the city of Ise in Japan, that every 20 years is ritually deconstructed and moved to another location, on which it is then reconstructed – an ancient form of mobile architecture. The film shows all the steps of how the building is taken apart and reassembled. The entire temple is built for a sacred mirror hidden inside a box that no one is allowed to lay eyes on.

JH In both of your respective oeuvres there is a trajectory coming from Conceptual art, Minimal art and Institutional Critique, of looking at things in a sort of sober, matter-of-fact way. At the same time there are elements that are very playful, almost a bit crazy ...

DWR I don't see what we do as crazy. I think it's a process of very deliberate decision-making. Maybe we don't want to get bored along the way.

JH Not crazy literally, but counter-intuitive – like the invitation card for the Bonn show, which showed not mobile wall systems but a photograph of three parrots, or De Rijke/De Rooij's The Point of Departure (2002), which, after a series of films working with single static shots, suddenly introduced special effects and unhinged camera moves exploring a Persian carpet. Are these decisions arrived at in a playful, intuitive way, or fully consciously, strategically even?

CW When working together, most of the decisions were made in a very fluid way. I don't know if 'playful' is the right word, but we were having fun and we were agreeing on things more often than not. The parrots might be playful, but the photograph of the parrots is not.

WDR 'Playful' is such a confusing word. I kept hearing it when I first came to Los Angeles to teach at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. The students kept using it to describe their work. Of course we have fun when making art, but 'playful' sounds like kindergarten to me.

CW And we're very serious about our fun.

JH Christopher, in the catalogue accompanying your recent show at the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, there is an introduction by the then-director Karola Krauss but right underneath it in the layout is another double-act: the transcript of the speech she gave at the opening, covering very similar ground.

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CW When I first started coming to Germany I was surprised by the length of speeches at opening receptions. For me they were a strange form of theatre and I wanted to play with that idea. For some time I have occasionally orchestrated performances that have intervened in the conventions of these speeches. After doing this kind of thing a few too many times, people were starting to expect that it would happen, so for Baden-Baden I introduced audio feedback into Karola Krauss' opening speech. I had somebody standing near the speaker with a microphone clipped to the back of his shirt, and when I gave a signal he would lean back and the speakers would feed back. So in the catalogue, the coloured elements in the speech refer to when the feedback was hitting.

JH So what seems like a hypertextual element, a meta-level of reference, actually comes back to the literal, in this case the indication of interference noise.

CW Yes, and in the exhibition you also had that literalness. There is one room where I exhibited three pictures that foreground the basic elements of a space. One work depicts a mobile wall system from Secession, another is of one of the Buren ceiling tiles which I referred to earlier, and the third is
a socked foot pressing onto a floor. So the wall, the ceiling and the floor are referred to with one image each, and in that way it relates to the literalness of work from the 1960s and '70s, just clearly describing and delimiting the space. But also, each work is referring to another space, and, with the exception of the sock, spaces where art has been exhibited.

JH Willem, in your work with Jeroen de Rijke describing and delimiting spaces seemed central.

WDR Our films were never looped but shown as timed screenings, with intervals that would often take as long as the film itself. This meant that more than 50 percent of the time we would exhibit the empty exhibition-space. I first investigated how to put the exhibition space on display in 1993 in a work named 'Route along 18 Corners' – it's actually on show at the Temporary Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam at the moment. This work is a series of images of corners in the Stedelijk that are grouped together in a leaflet; visitors can take it along as they walk through the building.
When Jeroen and I made Mandarin Ducks for the Venice Biennale in 2005, counter to earlier works that had been very pared-down, we tried to reach a point of referential exhaustion by referring to as many things as possible in one work. When we were asked to show Mandarin Ducks again in Amsterdam in the Stedelijk Museum later that same year, we were able to frame it by showing some works from the museum's collection. Some of these had been formative for the script of the film, including for example Gerrit Rietveld's Elling Buffet (1919), a group of cubist collages from Kurt Schwitters' Merzmappe (1923) and two works by James Ensor.

JH Is this in line with the idea of explicit referentiality in Jeff Wall's aforementioned 1970s catalogue page?

WDR Yes, exactly. To use works by other artists in installations under my name – I think of that increasingly as collage. Keren Cytter,
Isa Genzken and Vincent Vulsma allowed me to include their works in my installations. Different formats of shared authorship have always been important in my work. The 'Bouquets' p. 184 – actual flower bouquets – I make are always co-produced with a florist. To use found footage or works by other artists as autonomous material is for me also a way to collaborate. In recent

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years, for invitation cards announcing my shows, I started to use reproductions of paintings by Dutch 17th-century painter Melchior d'Hondecoeter, who painted only birds for more than 40 years. These images became emblems of sorts for those installations, which often contained works by other artists. These images of very different kinds of birds fighting for space in the same pictorial frame – for me they echo the idea of different heterogeneous elements coming together, in a pictorial way as well as in a conceptual way.
In the same period I discovered ceremonial feather-covered objects from 18th-century Hawaii at the Museum of Ethnography in Berlin-Dahlem – helmets, capes and larger-than-life heads depicting gods, worn by chiefs and carried around in processions. Trying to find out whether these fascinations had anything to do with each other, I started to combine images of the paintings and objects on paper. But I soon realized that what I really wanted was to simply see the actual objects combined. So I decided to bring together a number of those paintings and objects, without the usual layers of mediation, not trying to claim ownership other than putting them into a different context. I've been basically working on making that happen for four years now: these pieces come from collections all over the world. As no substantial catalogue on either D'Hondecoeter's work or the Hawaiian objects was ever made, it became quite important to produce knowledge. The work that I've now made at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin is an installation on the one hand, and a threefold catalogue on the other. We produced the first book on D'Hondecoeter's work, as well as a catalogue raisonnée on all Hawaiian feathered objects known.

CW And how have you installed the work?

WDR I designed one purely functional freestanding wall inside Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's glass cube, which serves only to display both the bird paintings and the feather-covered objects. I wanted it to look like the paper collages I made as sketches when I started to think of these two groups of objects in combination. So it looks quite flat. Another important element is a set of window treatments that serve to bring the light down but leave some of the building's key characteristic, its transparency, in tact. It was not harder to deal with Mies' space than with other spaces. Making an installation fit in a space is always the same challenge, no matter how connotated the space is or what size it has. 'Intolerance' does not refer to Mies, but it does deal with notions of nation and national representation.

JH What exactly is it that interests you in this combination?

WDR In pre-Christian Hawaii these feathered objects were meant to create a connection with the divine and scare off the enemy. These capes and helmets were worn by chiefs, so they were indicators of power. D'Hondecoeter's bird paintings often depict birds that come from four or five different continents. Exotic birds were rare and expensive imports – so these paintings depict status symbols, and at the same time they are status symbols. So for me the idea of representation, political as well as pictorial, is the nexus of this group of objects. They represent establishment. D'Hondecoeter used certain motifs again and again in his images, with the help of students and assistants. Sometimes these assistants, Adriaen Coorte for example, would later use these motifs in their own works. Just like the feathered objects which were produced by different groups of specialized craftsmen, in D'Hondecoeter's images authorship is something very ambiguous – I like to look at them as being produced by groups of people rather than by one person. I like the idea that copying, borrowing,

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referencing and appropriating were at the time completely mainstream and accepted artistic strategies – they had to be due to the high demand.

CW Do the works have allegorical titles?

WDR Some of them do. For example, the one of the raven robbed of the feathers that he had stolen from other birds in order to look better himself (The Raven robbed of his false Feathers, undated). It's based on a fable that was often used by painters and writers at the time. The picture shows a gang mob scene basically, with the raven being brutally attacked by a large group of other birds.

CW On the frozen canal in Amsterdam last winter, my partner and I suddenly heard the most insane sounds, and what we witnessed was a group of white birds that had encountered a single black bird in their neighbourhood, and they were attacking it. It was literally along the lines of black and white.

WDR Holland can be a tense place, and looking at those images of birds fighting I often think about that. It is remarkable that someone spends his life painting conflicts.

CW I was going to ask you if there was a relationship between Mandarin Ducks and these bird paintings, and then I realized the very title implies there is.

JH People behaving like birds, the cock, the peacock ...

WDR The set of Mandarin Ducks was decorated with representations of the exotic, like a faux-Japanese screen that is very central in the film, on which two Mandarin ducks are depicted. Everything on that set that relates to another culture is fake – the mask from Japanese Noh theatre, the African zebra-hides, the Islamic patterned stained glass windows – all were made in Amsterdam.

CW Bringing two things together, the bird paintings and the feather objects – do you have an idea of how they're affecting each other, or how one affects the reading of the other?

WDR Well, that of course is what this entire project is about – I want to see what happens.

CW For me, one of the most attractive features of your project is that you are not only referring to something, but, through commissioning scholarly work on the material, you are also producing real knowledge about the subject.

JH For both of you, because of the way you display objects, it seems that the exhibition itself often becomes the art work.

WDR I'm not too comfortable with the word ‘display’ because it makes it sound as if we're working in a department store.

JH By display I simply mean the way you make something available for being looked at.

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WDR Invites, press release, websites – everything is part of the work for me. I started to see the rooms in which my films were shown as part of the work for a very practical reason: it was a way to escape from curatorial terror. I would continuously receive requests for my films to be shown next to or under or behind someone else's work. It never worked, and that's why I started to understand that the work should come with a room.

CW But the Hawaiian feather objects never knew they were going to be next to the Dutch bird paintings ...

WDR No, that's true, and their makers did not leave us any instructions for how to show them either...

CW I saw a performance in Paris some years ago where dancers used very specific African head-dresses. The headpieces were almost six-feet tall – taller than the performers wearing them. To be able to dance and bow with these huge things demanded incredible skill. A few years later I attended on of Jean Rouch's weekly film seminars at the Musée de l'Homme, and I then saw the context that these headdresses had originally been made for. It was for a village where the houses were about eight-feet high, with very narrow streets between them. The bodies of the dancers remained invisible behind them, and you just saw these wooden shapes going by – like a puppet show. At the performance, there was no reference to the reason why these things were so high in the first place. It's a really simple kind of critique, but within ethnography there's always a discussion about whether you present enough context or not. What I find interesting about your exhibition project is that you are actually amplifying the alienation

WDR That process of alienation for me is one of the main subjects of 'Intolerance'. I'm not an ethnographer – I'm looking at how the process of becoming exotic changed these objects and what that changed status means for me now as a producer and consumer of images.

CW The different specialists you got involved to contribute to the catalogue – do you know what they make of the project?

WDR They all seem to be very excited and curious about it – but we have encountered problems in terms of loaning the Hawaiian objects. Especially American institutions are sensitive to the fact that these objects are still sacred to some people in Hawaii, so they don't want them to travel. I went to see two feathered gods in the depot of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, and they were stored in boxes that were open on the front, but covered with very light linen curtains: in that way the gods would not have to stare into the empty depot!

CW When you chose the title Intolerance, were you thinking of the D.W. Griffith film from 1916?

WDR There had already been some quotations from Griffith's movie in the script for Mandarin Ducks – so yes, I was thinking about that. For a long time, I had 'Intolerance' on a list of possible titles, and this was finally the time that I felt it fitted.

CW Are any of the Hawaiian gods happy ones?

WDR Yes, there are the ones with the corners of the mouth pointing downwards – a sign of disrespect towards the enemy. But there are also the ones that have a happy face – the gods of prosperity. They operate in a constellation that Adrienne Kaeppler (who wrote the featherwork section of the catalogue) refers to as 'paired opposition'.

JH Will any of that information be provided in the exhibition?

WDR A little bit but not too much because it's very much about the visual encounter between the objects. I don't want to explain too much. There is the publication though that excessively illustrates and contextualizes the exhibits.

JH That's the back-story problem in art making today – what information to include or to withhold, or to put in a separate place?

WDR I'm working in two ways at the moment, it's kind of schizophrenic. The show in Berlin is a very referential project that needs a lot of text, but the exhibition 'Slit or Gloved' that I made at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Cologne last February was completely devoid of text, and quite abstract. I showed a flower arrangement named Bouquet V and a large tapestry of linen interwoven with silver and gold threads, a slow gradual colour shift from silver to gold (Vertigo's Doll, 2010). I'm thinking of that piece as a work that refers to nothing – or at least that's what I was aiming for. So I'm pulling it towards one extreme with one project, and towards the other with another project.

JH Christopher, your last show at Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne had a very distinctive press release, which in a good way didn't match the show; it seemed like a different layer.

CW At a certain point I became frustrated by the necessarily reductive nature of the standard press release, so instead I adopted a collage style, allowing me to lay down facts or information in the hope that it could spark more complex associations. So it's not about telling people how to read it, but just about providing more information. For example, the knowledge that a certain percentage of the rubber in the Michelin tires of 1968 was produced in Vietnam. The idea of riding around in Paris in '68 on Vietnamese rubber has a kind of resonance, but it speaks in a very different way than the picture itself, which is more related to industrial photography. I think of the press releases as functioning in an analogous way to Jeff's idea of creating a model of a representation of a thought process.

WDR Christopher, I'm currently working on a list of rules, kind of like Lars von Trier's Dogme 95, to facilitate the production of works that refer to nothing: non-referential art. Do you have any tips?

CW I have three rules but I'm not sure that they relate to non-referentiality.
WDR On my first day in art school I was told: you cannot make art about or with shoes, and also not about or with suitcases.

CW And what was that about?

WDR It was probably about Christian Boltanski being fashionable with art students at that moment.

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CW On my first day in art school I was taken aside by an older student who said the way to be taken seriously here is to make audio work – those were his words; have the four-track tape recorder ready. And the next older student told me: don't produce objects – collect them and keep them in a warehouse, but just provide inventories. He collected vacuum cleaners. But I was interested in the idea of montage, in the sense of reframing and layering information, and of bringing as much history about specific issues as possible into a single picture that was apparently pretty straightforward. I wanted it to be really disproportional in that regard.

WDR So that it would have a really heavy representational burden?

CW Yes, that it would be stacked with multiple narratives, multiple historical frameworks, and that it would have a real weight to bear on that level. Nowadays I'm trying to make simpler pictures that have less of a representational burden, that provide another way of speaking.

JH Do you think there is a kind of historical exhaustion of the possibility of invention in art?

WDR It could be great if we'd end up again in a situation like 17th-century Amsterdam, when it was possible for entire groups of artists to all use the same motif, or all use the same iconographical structure for a piece; when it wasn't a problem to do what has already been done. The idea that art is something that has to constantly renew itself is really an incident in art history. Was it invented in the Romantic era, let's say 200 years ago? You only have to go back a couple of centuries to a time when this notion was not so central in the production and consumption of art.

JH But aren't we always on the lookout for things that are interesting, that surprise us?

CW I actually have an interest in the specific opposite of what you are proposing, which is to photograph something in exactly the same way it was photographed before. It's also why I had the idea to not only appropriate a certain kind of image, but appropriate its very site of production – for example working with professional object photographers and their studios. That means if I want to make a photo of apples I find an object photographer who often makes photos of apples. So the image produced that way is basically like the images they use in the supermarket around the corner. But if you look at the kind of descriptive clarity, and the amount of information implied in my apple picture, it's something that you won't find in the advertising. So it's a simple strategy: that there's always a lot more to look at. It's a way of not only using found imagery, but also gaining control over its production. In terms of the political implications of what I'm doing, it would be about creating the context for a certain kind of looking: to use an image associated with advertising, but create the conditions to slow down and look at it in a way that industrial images are almost never looked at. The art context is one of the few places where speculative thought and disinterested observation can still happen.

JH And can polemical referentiality still happen, too?

WDR When I started teaching at Städelschule I used a logo for my class that was an image of Nancy Reagan lobbying against drug-use by kids in the 1980s; it included the slogan ‘just say no’. I used it as a motto for the class because I wanted to talk with the students about saying no to the demands of the art world – saying no, in my understanding, is one of the most important weapons that you have as an artist.

Jörg Heiser

Sam Williams. «A chat with… Willem de Rooij» Exberliner, October 2010.

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A chat with… Willem De Rooij

by Sam Williams

Ever wondered if it were possible to have art without references? Berlin-based artist Willem De Rooij investigates 'non-referential art', art that just 'is'. Hung on a temporary wall in the darkened glass cube of Ludwig Mies Van de Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie are paintings of fighting birds by 18th-century Dutch artist Melchior d'Hondecoeter. Set back further are feathered masks and capes – 19th-century ceremonial objects brought to Europe from Hawaii.

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Book launch: Willem de Rooij's Intolerance

Intolerance, which took four years to complete, brings together objects from collections around the world. De Rooij wanted to see what happened when they met…

The piece at the Neue Nationalgalerie is described as a three-dimensional collage. A three-part publication is part of that. Where is the work exactly?

It lies in the conversation between these two groups of objects – the feathered objects and the paintings. And, even more, between the installation and the 400 images that form the core of the catalogue. I've taught myself to read images since I was quite young. That's basically what I do: I consume images in the way other people consume text.

If you walk around that wall a few times, the objects seem to turn into a frieze – or a tapestry or a triptych.

I constructed it like a storyboard. Combining and selecting the images felt like cutting a film – like editing – and as you move past, it feels like a story. On the front wall, where you come in, I tried to focus on representational and confrontational elements. That's where you find the objects with the most visual impact. The rear side feels more intimate, more spiritual, and there are more exotic birds.

The paintings seem allegorical. But they're hard to figure out.

Right. I suspect metaphorical content, but there's no art historical proof. Only one piece has proven allegorical content: it shows a raven being attacked by this heterogeneous group of birds, because he has stolen their feathers and dressed himself in them to look better. So all these different birds come together to attack one isolated bird: it's something I found quite interesting – how scapegoating unifies a group.

Hondecoeter's religion isn't known, but a recurring motif of his, the pelican, is a Catholic symbol. In 17th-century Amsterdam, Catholics weren't allowed to build churches. But they could hold sermons in 'hidden' churches in houses and barns. These churches often had bird's names. It's much like how, in our times, European societies ban minarets, but it's much less a problem to build a mosque in a school or a garage.

Is your work about excavating images?

I'm not an archaeologist. But this project became a bit of an excavation because there was nothing published about these two groups of objects. I would rather say my work is about combining, grouping, comparing and analysing images.

Why is this piece called 'Intolerance'?

The title isn't supposed to explain everything… I'd see the title as the 12th feathered object or the 19th painting in the installation – one of many ingredients in the story. It has a lot to do with whether these two groups of images would be able to meet. I find it exciting to make two entities clash, or test their capacity to mingle and this notion of 'the two' has always been important in my work.

So it's not about colonial intolerance?

Many visitors automatically mistake the feathered objects in this installation for loot. That annoys me, because in this case, and many others, the story of global exchange is much more interesting. Hawaii was a sovereign state at the time these objects were brought to the West. Most were given away in acts of diplomacy designed to strengthen ties with the Western world.

So, what is it about?

The paintings visualize global exchange of another kind: the exotic birds painted by Hondecoeter were transported on the same Dutch ships as slaves taken from Ghana to the Caribbean. One way of looking at *Intolerance* is that all these objects and paintings were produced to indicate, decorate and radiate power. On a visual level, they want to impress. But it's not a riddle I can explain… if I see the installation now, it's still an accumulation of loose ends trying to meet and merge. Where the electricity is located is hard for me to say.

What kind of artist are you?

I don't sincerely feel at home with just one medium. I've done all sorts of things – film, installation, photographs and sculptures. In art school I started as a painter, but I couldn't stand paint. I guess I'm not a dirty hands-type person.

INTOLERANCE | Through January 2

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December 23, 2010

Dieter Roelstraete, “Artists at Work: Willem de Rooij”, Afterall, November 2010.

Artists at Work: Willem de Rooij

Dieter Roelstraete

Published 02.11.2010

Willem de Rooij, 'Intolerance', 2010, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Painting, Melchior d'Hondecoeter, Pelican and other waterfowl in a park, c. second-half seventeenth century, 132 x 161.5cm. Collection Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photograph: Jens Ziehe

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If the basement of Berlin's iconic Neue Nationalgalerie is currently home to a (marvellous) display of works from the museum's permanent collection that has been titled 'Modern Times', how do we identify the time evoked in the temporary exhibition now on view on the ground floor, Dutch artist Willem de Rooij's magnificent 'solo' project 'Intolerance'? Timeless, perhaps: that certainly, and somewhat paradoxically, seems to be an apt description of the effect produced by de Rooij's idiosyncratic, tightly choreographed juxtaposition of two families of object that, at first sight, do not seem to have terribly much in common: animal portraits from the Golden Age of Dutch painting on the one hand, and feathered ceremonial objects from eighteenth-century Hawaii on the other hand. De Rooij's richly layered three-dimensional collage is the subject of the following conversation, conducted in the artist's apartment in Berlin shortly after the exhibition opened in September 2010.

DIETER ROELSTRAETE: I know that this show has been a long time in the making. Perhaps you can tell us a bit more about its genealogy. What was the basic impulse behind this unorthodox juxtaposition of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting and feathered ceremonial objects from eighteenth-century Hawaii?

WILLEM DE ROOIJ: I've been interested in the work of Melchior d'Hondecoeter for a long time. I used reproductions of his paintings on several occasions since I started incorporating works by other artists in my installations - or spatial collages - in 2006. In this context, the paintings by d'Hondecoeter functioned as emblems of sorts: I used his imagery on invitation cards, so that on a conceptual level they operated as some kind of summation. Even though my interest in his work was always there, I could never find much information on it, so producing text on his work became an important part of the development of 'Intolerance'. Another important decision was to install the actual paintings and the actual feathered objects - rather than reproductions, since I did not want to talk about reproductions or the act of reproducing in the installation. The book, of course, contains tons of reproductions.

DR: As for the relative dearth of information regarding d'Hondecoeter, his work is something of an acquired taste - the kind of painting that is easily overlooked.

WdR: But I grew up looking at his work; he is well known in the Netherlands. Some of his most important works are in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, where I first got to see them. It's interesting how one develops a kind of tunnel vision growing up in the Netherlands, looking at Dutch painting primarily. Someone who grows up in, say, London or Paris can go see work by Titian, Velázquez and many more artists from all over Europe, but the Rijksmuseum is almost exclusively dedicated to Dutch art.

Anyway I had long been interested in d'Hondecoeter's rather unusual position, and as I spent more time with his work I started noticing that particular motifs kept on repeating themselves - there was something almost Warholesque to his method. The big white pelican is one particularly striking visual element in that regard, but there are many more. The positioning of certain elements is repetitive, as well as the paintings' overall composition and structure. I found this repetitive aspect of the work quite attractive - as a visual strategy, but also as an artistic gesture. It's almost like watching a soap opera, or anything based on a strong sense of the formulaic.

Not all of d'Hondecoeter's works are equally well made, and there is a certain element of conveyor-belt banality to some of his output, which is considerable in terms of volume. He did run a large studio, and it is likely that different assistants would take over parts of the process of producing these paintings. This ambiguity of authorship is another facet that fascinates me, since it plays an important role in my own work.

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Willem de Rooij, 'Intolerance', 2010, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Symbol of the war god Kukailimoku. Hawaii, 18th century, feather, mother of pearl, human hair, canine teeth, height 60cm. from the collection of James Cook. Collection Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photograph: Claudia Obrocki

As for the Hawaiian objects: when I moved to Berlin in the spring of 2006 I got to see one of those feathered objects in the Ethnological Museum in Dahlem - a head depicting the god of war. I became interested in those objects and discovered a lack of information, much like the lack of information on the work of d'Hondecoeter. I wanted to know more, but couldn't find anything - because it didn't exist. So I decided to facilitate the production of the knowledge I'd been searching for, in the form of a set of publications that can be used for further academic research in the future.

Anyway at first I didn't think about combining these two different groups of objects I was looking at, and I didn't think they had much in common.

DR: Other than the fact that they are, quite literally, 'birds of a feather'...

WdR: I honestly didn't even think of that - it wasn't like I was so interested in *feathers*. But I was struck by certain methodological convergences in the production of both groups of objects, as well as by the relative lack of 'research' around them - a highly charged term that I am very hesitant to use in the context of this project, but that, to a certain extent, is what it is: 'research'.

I work with images - that is to say, looking at images is what I do for my work: I have tables standing around my studio that are covered with prints, postcards, books. I want to know about the genealogy of images, how they relate to each other, what their original context is, and how this context influences the reception and meaning of an image. Images of d'Hondecoeter and images of feathered objects started to merge and mix simply because they were lying on the same desk. The visual dynamic that started to crystallise interested me. I started wondering whether there *is* any deeper relationship between the two - and that state of wonder is where I still am. I never meant to reach any conclusions; I just wanted to see whether some of my most basic assumptions had some degree of validity.

DR: Tell us a bit more about the feathered objects.

WdR: They date back to the late eighteenth century; that is to say, from around the time James Cook first set foot on land in Hawaii. Cook was actually killed there, and his body was brought back to England along with the first set of ceremonial feathered objects.

DR: As loot...?

WdR: It's more complicated than that. Many of the objects were stolen for sure, but many were also produced as gifts or souvenirs, and many were traded or bought. In Hawaii these sacred objects were always made for one person in particular, and when this person - a chieftain, king or religious leader - passed away they could no longer be used, and this probably facilitated their release into the colonial commercial circuit. Some of the objects were actually made for export purposes only - and this is probably related to the fact that Hawaii was Christianised rather quickly, very soon after Cook's 'discovery', after which these objects took on a very different meaning. The objects' previous ceremonial meaning had not only been religious (all across the Southern Pacific feathers were used to establish a relationship with the divine), but also political: they were carried around in situations of conflict for instance. But in all circumstances they represented the political or commercial establishment.

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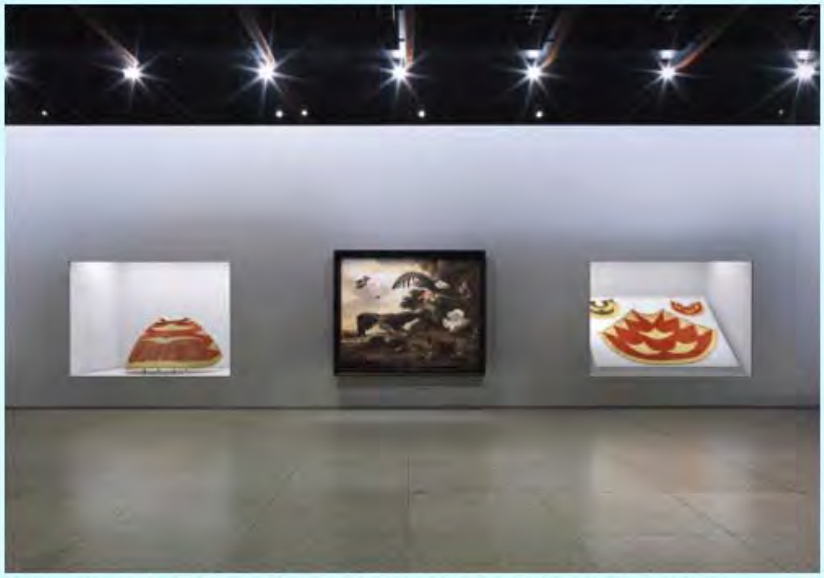

Willem de Rooij, 'Intolerance', 2010. Installation view, Neue Nationalgalerie. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photograph: Jens Ziehe

DR: So the feathered objects were made a hundred years after d'Hondecoeter painted his birds. It is interesting, though, that many of his paintings feature the types of birds of paradise whose feathers were so sought after in the Southern Pacific societies you just described - you could say that he was painting at the very edges of Pacific exploration.

WdR: In one of his paintings you can actually see birds hailing from four different continents - clearly a reference to the Dutch exploratory achievement. I am very interested in such allegorical subtexts. If you imagine d'Hondecoeter's original audience, the well-to-do burghers of seventeenth-century Holland, the first thing that comes to mind is the turmoil that marked the Golden Age as a whole: a society that was in constant flux, not in the least because of the influx of immigrants from the south following the fall of Antwerp in 1587, which did so much to transform the existing cultural and intellectual climate. But there were also profound demographic changes whose impact spread beyond the cultured upper classes - unskilled labour also poured into Holland from the East. It is likely that these demographic shifts generated a lot of stress, and one thing that can be said about d'Hondecoeter's birds is that they often appear stressed out. They are always fighting, pushing each other away - I often think of my own experiences of living in Amsterdam, which is a very dense place. However, from an art historical perspective there is no literal proof that d'Hondecoeter reflected on his physical surroundings when he painted these scenes. There is really only one painting in the show with 'proven' allegorical content, namely *De raaf wordt beroofd van de veren waarmee hij zich had getooid* (*The raven robbed of the feathers he wore to adorn himself*, 1671), and that one definitely has a Protestant subtext.

DR: And as such, the installation certainly demonstrates to what extent these paintings were the subject of a culture of *literacy*: this was art that invited *reading* more than anything else. Now with regards to the actual way you installed these works, the series of four paintings with identical pelicans hung next to each other inevitably makes for an entertaining moment. Do you mean with this to distinguish your installation from mere exhibition making?

WdR: There certainly is an element of slapstick to d'Hondecoeter's paintings: besides many other things I also find them quite ridiculous - it is a rather hysterical position. The same could be said about some of the feathered heads that have a certain Muppet-like appeal. I'm not primarily a fan or admirer of these objects; I'm more interested in their analysis. For me, these objects are material that I use to produce a piece. It is hard to make art with material that one is in awe of.

DR: The accompanying publication will feature essays by the world's leading experts on both Melchior d'Hondecoeter and the Hawaiian feathered objects. How did the representatives of those two very different professional spheres respond to the project?

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WdR: The response to my proposal to confront these two groups of objects with each other was mostly enthusiastic. A couple of loans (of the Hawaiian objects more specifically) didn't materialise in the end, though. Institutions in the United States in particular seemed to object to *the title* of the project. Some Hawaiians still consider the feathered objects sacred, and the negative connotations of the title scared some owners off. What is interesting is that when we started to install 'Intolerance' and the first feathered objects came in, the couriers that came along with them were always extremely interested in the other feather objects - but supremely indifferent to the paintings, as if they weren't even there. And the reverse was true for the people who brought in the paintings. Specialisation obviously produces specialised viewing habits...

DR: You mentioned the title just now, and that certainly is worth exploring in greater depth. That the show was going to be called 'Intolerance' was something you had established quite a bit in advance, it seems.

WdR: I had wanted to use this particular title for years, and when this project started to take shape I decided to use it as a working title. It just never left; it grew with the project and stuck to it. The title was never intended to *explain* the project - that's not what any title is for, in my opinion.

DR: To see the word 'Intolerance' printed on a flag in front of the Neue Nationalgalerie is a strong image though - it does seem to comment on the confusion of ethics and aesthetics that was so typical of the culture of high modernism that Mies van der Rohe's building embodies emblematically. That building stands at the end of a trajectory that began many decades before with the publication of a treatise by Adolf Loos titled 'Ornament and Crime'... And 'ornament' *is* at the heart of this project.

WdR: I don't really believe there is such a thing as a 'difficult' space, placing an object in a room is always a challenge. In that sense I approached this space like I approach any other space. Although I wasn't interested in engaging with Mies van der Rohe I felt that the building and the title mix in an interesting way: it is a national gallery after all, and I've represented a nation once before, in the Dutch 'national' pavilion in Venice in 2005. The very notion of 'representing', of 'imaging', is what my work is most deeply concerned with.

DR: It is all the more striking, then, that not a single image adorns the walls of your apartment.

WdR: If I hung an image on my wall, I wouldn't look at it any longer. I'd be looking at other things instead - the blank spot next to it perhaps. I don't own much, but I do own a couple of artworks that I love, and I'm very happy to have them packed away and to think of them instead. I don't have to hang them on my wall to relate to them. Moreover, I do enjoy looking at an empty wall very much. I don't like to engage with images out of coincidence - I prefer to do so out of choice.

'Intolerance' is on display at Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin until 3 January and also at www.intolerance-berlin.de