

A Twenty-Year Long Success Story **Museum De Pont in Tilburg**

Whereas the city, regional and national museums in the Netherlands are going through hard times now that the government is carrying out large cuts to culture, the situation is different for museums that have resources of their own. Independent museums such as Beelden aan Zee in Scheveningen, De Buitenplaats in Eelde, in the province of Groningen, Singer in Laren (Noord-Holland), Panorama Mesdag in The Hague or Beeldengalerij Het Depot in Wageningen have been proving for years that they can put on an attractive show for their benefactor (often the person who founded the collection or provided the basis for it) with relatively small means.

To the examples named above can be added the De Pont Museum in Tilburg. The museum is named after Jan de Pont, an entrepreneur who originally came from Brabant, who left part of his fortune to three worthy causes, one of which had to be art. De Pont has a small jubilee to celebrate: in 2012 it will have existed for twenty years. In itself a twentieth anniversary is not so exceptional, of course, especially as there are other much older private mu-

seums that have remained independent from the government. But De Pont is definitely a maverick in other ways. With its consistent choice of contemporary art, which until the 1980s was exhibited almost exclusively in the famous national museums (the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam and Van Abbe in Eindhoven), De Pont scores surprisingly well. The 65,000 or so visitors come not only from Tilburg and the surrounding area, but equally often from elsewhere in the country. Moreover, the museum also attracts visitors from abroad. These are nice figures, but the museum is even more pleased with the fact that its consistent acquisitions and exhibition policy stands it in good stead with internationally renowned artists; such good stead that they are more than willing to have their work displayed there.

Those who criticise that the museum is treading "well-worn paths" are overlooking the fact that in the 90s De Pont was the first Dutch museum to exhibit a number of names that have since become well-known. De Pont got in early with Luc Tuymans, for example, in 1995 – and not by Dutch standards alone. In the previous year the Belgian painter had been preceded by Jeff Wall and Roni Horn. The Tilburg museum was also the only place in the

Outside view of Museum De Pont in Tilburg © Peter Cox.





Exhibition view of Giuseppe Penone at De Pont © Peter Cox

Netherlands to manage to devote a large exhibition to Rosemarie Trockel. Moreover, it quickly established one of the largest museum collections of work by Thomas Schütte. Those are names with a reputation that is directly linked to shows like Documenta in Kassel and the international biennales.

De Pont's selection policy has been consistent now for twenty years and that is mainly down to its director, Hendrik Driessen. He was already director of the museum when the decision had to be made about premises, a former wool-spinning mill built on the edge of the city centre of Tilburg just before the Second World War. Over the years, when making his selection, Driessen has taken into account where the works of art would be hung. Although the location has been radically changed by Benthem Crouwel Architects (who are also renovating the Stedelijk Museum and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam) to bring it into line with all the requirements of a modern museum, the industrial character of the former textile factory has not been obliterated. Large installations do well here because they have space in the vast rooms, as was already evidenced in 2011 at the Mark Wallinger exhibition. At the opposite end of the scale, work by Thierry De Cordier, Richard Serra and Marien Schouten, is shown to advantage in the cabinet-like wool stores.

Yet the industrial setting was not the deciding factor in going for these names. From the beginning Driessen sought his strength in limitations: no more than three large exhibitions in a year. The museum works with a permanent group of artists

that is slowly growing. The group of artists whose work is included in the collection consists of sixty or so names at present. Among these are artists such as Sigmar Polke and Marlene Dumas, whose earlier purchased works would now be unaffordable for the museum. So De Pont seems to collect with an eye to the future. Moreover, Driessen focuses on three different types of artist. There are those who continue the tradition, the artists who present themselves as anarchists and those who operate primarily as soloists, who cannot readily be assigned to a style or trend or be placed within a movement. In this way a varied permanent collection is being built up in which, above all, there is plenty of room for contrasts. This means you can confront the cerebral approach of Gerhard Merz with the "romantic" Richard Long, who looks for the controlling factor in nature in his landscape art. But also the work of a soloist such as Thierry De Cordier is thrown into relief by the anarchist Luc Tuymans (who, one must admit, can also be included in the two other categories). "Contrariness", an attitude that can sometimes cause an uneasy feeling, may well be the guideline to the De Pont policy. There are not many museums like this.

CEES STRAUS

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

www.depont.nl. In 2012 there are exhibitions of Ai Weiwei and Berlinde De Bruyckere, among others.