

CURATOR'S INTERVIEW

Rudi Ekkart, interviewed by Geerte Broersma

Rudolf Erik Otto Ekkart (1947) studied art history at the University of Leiden. After completing his studies, he worked at the Academisch Historisch Museum in Leiden and then at the Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum / Museum van het Boek in The Hague. In 1987 he was appointed deputy director and three years later general director of the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History). In 1997 he obtained his doctorate at the University of Amsterdam, having written his dissertation on "Portrettisten en portretten: studies over portretkunst in Holland, 1575-1650" ("Portraitists and portraits: studies on the art of portraiture in Holland, 1575-1650").

Since 1997 he has also served as chairman of the "Ekkart Committee," which carries out research into works of art stolen during the Second World War. In 2004 Ekkart was appointed Affiliate Professor of Methodological Aspects of Art-Historical Documentation at the University of Utrecht. In addition to these activities, he serves on the board of numerous organizations in the national and international cultural sphere and is the author of many articles, books and catalogues. On 1 November 2012, Ekkart will retire as director of the RKD and hand over his duties to Chris Stolwijk, Head of Research at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

A lot has happened and many things have changed at the RKD in the past twenty-five years. What was it like when you arrived, and what kind of institution are you leaving behind?

In general it can be said that twenty-five years ago the RKD was not a very popular institution. In those days the RKD actually consisted of at least ten separate, small RKDs, all of which had their own rules and regulations. So it was difficult to find one's way around. It was reproached for being too static and introverted. But in spite of that, I arrived here to find an institute with good, hard-working people. That's still true, only now there are many more of them. In all those years, four important things have happened: the RKD has become an organization that has built up, and operates within, a network of national and international contacts in the museum world and the sphere of scholarship. It collaborates constantly with others. I can say, not without pride, that it has acquired some degree of popularity.

The second point is the revolution we have undergone in digitization. Computerizing a documentation center hasn't been easy. This has been going on for the whole of my tenure and continues to be a "work in progress." We've come a long way, but it's a never-ending process. We've already achieved a great deal, though: the RKD is no longer accessible only to physical visitors, but also, increasingly, to virtual visitors.

I had also set myself the task of ensuring that the RKD would become an indispensable center of excellence for nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, just as we were for old art. Our areas of specialization thus had to be filled in more evenly, and this has been accomplished. The fourth important change was, of course, our accommodation. It took years for this change to come about, but the RKD is now modern and welcoming, completely different from what it used to be.

In addition to these changes, I can also point out a similarity between the period of my arrival and that of my departure: the climate of economic austerity. I started at a time when the national government was cutting back sharply on spending, and I'm also leaving at a time of severe budget cuts. In the intervening period there were also several rounds of cutbacks, but my arrival and departure happen to coincide with the most serious reductions in government spending I've ever experienced.

Last year Halbe Zijlstra, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, asked if the RKD and the Rijksmuseum could work together to form one top-notch institution. This led to the founding of the Karel van Mander Institute. Broadly speaking, what form will this institute take in 2013?

That isn't entirely clear yet, but we do see possibilities to collaborate closely with the Rijksmuseum. Together we have a broader base of expertise; we complement and reinforce one another. An essential feature of the Karel van Mander Institute

is that it will have its own research agenda and the capacity to develop into a service institution. For example, it could collaborate with other museums in conceiving exhibitions. One thing in particular will be important to the success of the new institute: it must remain rooted in both organizations and not become detached from either of them.

Do you think that CODART has a role to play in the Karel van Mander Institute?

Yes, of course. I imagine that CODART will organize special “expert meetings.” There is a need for seminars with a strong emphasis on content, as was the case in Prague at the last CODARTfocus meeting. CODART is very capable of organizing such events, and has a lot of experience in this field. It would be better for the Karel van Mander Institute to call upon CODART for help than to try and do such things itself. So CODART can certainly be a good addition to the new institute, but it should retain its own character. After all, CODART is not a scholarly institution in itself, but an organization that maintains and encourages contact among its own members and with other institutions. So on the whole, CODART can certainly offer the Karel van Mander Institute support and backup.

You joined CODART quite soon after its founding, first as a member of the board and more recently as an advisor to the board. What exactly is the connection between the RKD and CODART?

CODART and the RKD are both networking organizations that overlap to some extent. The members of CODART – those who work in the museum world – also make use of the RKD. The two institutions complement one another in fulfilling the needs of their “clientele”: the RKD does this mainly by providing museum curators, for example, with scholarly material and documentation, while CODART provides them with a structure for their professional networks. The RKD organizes symposia as well, though on a much smaller scale, and is also a kind of meeting place, whereas CODART is a networking system for professional contact among those occupied with Dutch and Flemish art. So we give one another a tremendous boost.

How important is an organization like CODART to the museum world?

I think it’s extremely important – indispensable, in fact. If Gary Schwartz hadn’t had the idea, we would have had to invent CODART ourselves. In the modern world, collaboration is vital: big plans are realized only with the help of others. An example of one small but very useful thing is CODART’s listing on its website of the e-mail addresses of all its members. The news items sent through its notification service keep us informed about each other’s activities. The website is terribly important, especially if you’re unable to attend the congresses, so that members who work in a rather isolated context still feel involved and can keep abreast of what is going on elsewhere. This infrastructure for maintaining ties with colleagues is very important.

You’ve collaborated on numerous catalogues and exhibitions at museums in Central and Eastern Europe. What draws you to these countries and why do you have special ties to them?

Soon after I started working at the RKD, the Iron Curtain fell, which increased the opportunities for working together and made collaboration a more attractive option. As early as the 1990s, I was in rather close contact with museums in such countries as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Russia. My connection with these countries is actually bound up with the history of the RKD, because at an earlier stage, in the days of Gerson, it was one of the few institutions that maintained ties with museums in Eastern Europe. The RKD was already known there, and it was easily accessible to them. Whenever they needed advice, they turned to the RKD. In the early 1990s, moreover, there were nice opportunities to do something there, because in those days there were subsidies for projects in Eastern Europe.

What was the single most important event in your RKD career?

A lot of nice things have happened, but something concrete that finally came to fruition after nearly fifteen years of work was the move to our new accommodation. The opening even coincided with our seventy-fifth anniversary, which was wonderful of course.

You're the director of the RKD, an Affiliate Professor and a member of several boards. You also collaborate on exhibitions and write scholarly books and articles. In short, you do a wide variety of things. Do you see yourself more as a manager or as a researcher?

I consider myself an art-historical researcher and a schoolmaster of sorts, but unfortunately I have too little time for these things. I've gradually had to take on more and more managerial tasks. Those tasks are not my calling, and my scholarly research suffers as a result.

What are you going to do after retiring at the end of October?

One of the nice things about retirement is that I'll be able to devote myself again to research, at least that's what I intend to do.

In addition, I have the right for another five years to supervise PhD students; I have more than ten students whose doctorates I'm supervising at the moment. That takes up a lot of time, but I enjoy it immensely. Of course I'll continue to hold a number of administrative positions, but I'm looking forward to returning to research.

What do you wish the RKD for the future?

A productive period of further growth, characterized by alertness to the opportunities offered by, among other things, technological and political developments. In any case, the RKD shouldn't mummify in the form in which I leave it. It should continue to flourish, and of course go on benefiting from its fruitful collaboration with CODART!

Geerte Broersma is temporarily working for CODART as a Project Associate. A member of CODART since 2008, she served as Assistant Curator at the Mauritshuis from 2008 to 2012.