

## **Gendered (In)visibilities: Contemporary Art and Curatorial Practice in Russia and Europe**

**THU 22 Nov 18 Garage Museum for Contemporary Art, Moscow**

*International seminar about curatorial research and practice*

*(Spoken text)*

Climate and avoidance in The Netherlands

Let's start with a short intro. My name is Zippora Elders and I am a curator based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. I studied art history and curatorial practice, was a curator in training at the modern art museum the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and a master coordinator at the Sandberg Instituut, the master's education of the Rietveld Academie. For a couple of years I was a curator at Foam museum for photography. And became an advisor for the Netherlands' larger funds for the visual arts. Since 2016 I'm artistic director of Kunstfort bij Vijfhuizen, Island for Art and Heritage, located in a 19th century fortress in the margins of Amsterdam. Enough about me – but to summarize: I was educated and brought up in the hearts of the Dutch institutional climate.

You might be familiar with the Netherlands. The Dutch consider themselves liberal and tolerant. This has a long history, with one important incentive: trade and entrepreneurship. The Netherlands is a country of Calvinism, of De Stijl, of Dutch Design, of Anthony van Dyck and Jan Vermeer: simplicity, harmony and pragmatism are in charge. Quirkiness is fine but Van Gogh was too crazy. The Dutch like security: when new lands were “discovered”, often by others, the Dutch would follow to rule there and trade the local sources and people through a.o. the Dutch Indies Company. Still today our identity is strongly linked to this so-called “Dutch Indies Company mentality”: we're practical entrepreneurs and we don't bother too much about sensitivities. It's not so much about values as it is about gains, so it seems.

Indeed in the Netherlands political refugees were often welcome, but as long as they would invest and partake in the local market economy – that's as far as “liberal tolerance” often goes. Legalized marijuana and sex working – of which a significant part is still connected to human trafficking – are the main tourist attractions in Amsterdam, and the capital earns a lot of money out of that.

The Dutch, like many other nations, prefer to be proud of their identity and reputation and don't “tolerate” critique on history and traditions. A painful example is Black Pete, “Zwarte Piet”. During this time of the year, a Dutch Santa Claus arrives in the Netherlands with his entertaining and annoying “workers”: acrobats in renaissance page costumes with black faces, golden earrings, thick red lips and curly

hair. In heated discussions many people of colour and sympathizers have stated that this is stereotype and racism. But many Dutchmen are as pragmatic as always about this: that's not possible because we aren't racist, we're liberal and tolerant and you're welcome – as long as you think alike.

So that's about my, truly beloved, homecountry. As you can see, coincidentally I don't look much like a "traditional" Dutch person, since I'm not white. And as a curator working in a wealthy and happy country as the Netherlands I've considered this a privilege, too. It proves a fruitful ground for at least recognizing and hopefully understanding "the other".

Since the Netherlands considers themselves liberal, topics are seldomly a taboo. What often is a determining factor though is money. "Trending" topics like feminism, gender and inclusivity get capitalized and consumed rather than intrinsically implemented in the leading discourse. Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily, because still something happens... In the Netherlands the challenge is rather in the cores of the institutions. I vividly remember one of my first art history classes, and my female professor asking to a group of 200 students: why is it that I see only 10 white males in this room, and yet the art world is ruled by them? Again, this is an "annoying, non-pragmatic" issue many Dutch would rather avoid than discuss. They might call it wining and wining costs time and time is money. Another "solution" these days is working with quota: so many *non-white* artists, so many *female* managers, so many *non-heterosexual* board members and then we're cool. But can otherness and marginal groups be categorized and represented as easy like that?

Therefore the challenge in the Netherlands – how liberal we may come off – is still this: to go beyond pragmatism and to revise intrinsic values. To implement inclusivity in thinking and feeling, rather than in numbers and appearance. If the thinking is there, there might be room for collectively recognizing black face on black pete. And indeed I believe this implementation should in itself be inclusive and open to exchange and critique, too, to avoid a counter-movement of those who feel excluded by the elite.

So far about context and background. I'm looking forward to discussing this in a broader conversation around our professional practice. Curators are mere intermediates and today we are bridging international borders: how can we take and refresh our responsibility in issues that are much older and larger than we are?

- ZE