

An Inconspicuous Difference

: and a collection's pocket

:

gerlach en koop

Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht

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by Brenda Tempelaar

After *Lorenzo Benedetti* curates an exhibition with *gerlach en koop* at *De Appel*, the collective artist stitches together the right pocket of his jeans. It's September 2015 when the pocket is listed as *Untitled* among the works in the exhibition *Choses tuées*, just like *Lessened Space*; a piece made by turning one pant leg of a pair of jeans inside out into the other one. Over the next few months a political conflict shakes *De Appel's* foundations, putting *Benedetti* and his useless pocket out on the streets.

Lessened Space is also included in the comprehensive collection presentation currently on view at the *Bonnefantenmuseum* in Maastricht. The work is prominently featured in one of the galleries, positioned on the wooden museum floor. On the opening night, the city's art scene passes by it, while *gerlach en koop* reap the rewards. Taking on the curator's job, they have put together an exhibition with objects from the collection, works on loan and works of their own making. *Lorenzo Benedetti* attends the opening along the banks of the Meuse and he has my unbridled attention. Is he wearing *Untitled*? I don't see him looking for a loose coin to open a wardrobe locker with, or inconspicuously declining an incoming phone call. His pocket is left untouched, which is possibly just chance.

There is an inconspicuous difference between *gerlach en koop's* two pairs of jeans. *Benedetti's* jeans witnessed the directorship of *De Appel* slipping through his fingers. Meanwhile, *Lessened space* could avoid the stir — covered in bubble-wrap after the show, I imagine. *De Appel* wrapped it back up like a fragile and costly object, while *Benedetti's* closed off pocket was brutally exposed to current vagaries.

The museum hosts the both of them on the opening night, albeit one as a garment and the other as art. The exhibition title — a colon — wordlessly describes the difference between a collection and its periphery.

Jeremiad

Lessened space is presented in conjunction with a rectangular white column whose corners have been notched. The design recalls the stereotypical pedestal and was made by *William Graatsma* in the 1960s. They resemble each other, the column and the jeans: parts of both went missing but our minds can still complete them with ease. For pedestal or blue jeans: our collective memory presents the both of them untainted.

Museum collections unite objects like that, but they are also susceptible to the notching of corners and the acceptance of excess. If you are as receptive to that as *gerlach en koop* are, you might see the banality of the things elevated to art inside the museum. It presents itself to you from a long white wall that *Lily van der Stokker* drew a few blue stripes on — thick and thin, vertically, horizontally and all equally straight — assessing our entire art history in a single comment, handwritten in two corners of the museum: '*we don't have it easy*', it says in Dutch.

Not Easy (1993) was a sketch for a mural in the office, but became an artist statement in an exhibition on the work of art as public property. A dead-end gallery of the museum provides a stage for the jeremiad that being an artist really is. *Van der Stokker* barely made it in.

Showcase

Was *Not Easy* present at the *Bonnefantenmuseum* before *gerlach en koop* translated the sketch into a mural? Does art only begin to exist when someone points it out to you? : points at something all the time and then asks whether art is present, like in a work by *Marcel*

Broodthaers. The guest curators claim that you can picture a tank in a lump of marl lying in a showcase that was borrowed from the municipality of Saint-Gilles. The moment I lean towards the glass, I see how much the rectangular cut-out on top resembles the manhole on the roof of a tank.

Even though *Tank* (1967 - 1970) was ascribed to *Marcel Broodthaers*, a kid worked the marl until it looked like a tank. *Broodthaers* traded it with the kid over a photograph. *gerlach en koop* compare a tiny stick — inserted into the marl like a barrel — to one of *Broodthaers'* photographs depicting a child who picks a stick off the pavement. *Tank* was placed on the green, felt-covered surface of the nineteenth-century showcase from *Broodthaers'* birthplace. The showcase draws institutional attention to a piece of marl, but it also takes *Broodthaers'* appropriation decades back in time.

The museum's curator Paula van den Bosch would have overplayed her hand on this one, but does the same count for an appropriation done by a collective artist? I'd rather think of their interventions as part of an artistic practice. I think *gerlach en koop's* excessive curatorship binds the collection into a loose-leaf system that your thoughts get trapped inside of, described by Van den Bosch as follows on one of the walls: '*like a branching river, each artwork in itself is the starting point for all sorts of imaginary links*'.

Loan carrousel

I thought connections in art were undeniable: they either exist or they don't. But in the gallery all the way back in the museum, in front of *Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap* (1631) by *Pieter Brueghel the Younger*, I am introduced to an imaginary one. According to the text, the painting on view is a copy ascribed to *Brueghel the Elder's* son, his workshop or his consecutives. The old-fashioned canvas appears lost in a conceptual art show. Is it an appropriation again, like *Tank*? In *Brueghel's* days, a copy wasn't remotely associated with the author's crisis it presented to *Broodthaers*. No, this crisis is within me, I realise after reading a mind-blowing question: what would happen if all owners of approximately 127 copies were to agree to a loan carrousel so that, if you return to the museum in a year's time, you'd be standing in front of another painting?

The carrousel is immediately activated. A bird trap is depicted in the bottom right corner of *Brueghel's* icy scene. Birds are pecking through the snow in search of some thrown grain. A thick, wooden panel is alarmingly inclined above them. A child is playing close to an opening in the ice and the raves in the foreground predict that a random death is imminent. I am as unsuspecting as the birds are, but a spectator is just as likely to have a door slammed in his face.

The pant leg tucked away in *Lessened space* conceals a piece of *De Appel*, that doesn't evaporate if the stitching is undone. The museum's walls will be painted back to white, but it takes more to hide *Van der Stokker's* complaint. Because even as a picture in your head, : continues to touch the raw nerve of a country that is — from *Brueghel* to *Benedetti* — blazing with randomness and disappointment.

This review by Brenda Tempelaar was originally published in Dutch as 'Een verschil dat je niet kunt zien, : en de broekzak van een collectie'.