

RE-THINKING THE MUSEUM FROM THE BOTTOM-UP.

The case of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen's
project 'Zuid. Boijmans'



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*This project has received funding from the
European Union's Horizon 2020 research and
innovation programme under grant
agreement No 870691*

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Abstract

To obtain a more diverse audience, museums usually try to persuade so-called 'non-visitors' to come to their building. This is a case study of a museum that does the opposite by moving towards these non-visitors. Zuid is a project of the Dutch Museum Boijmans van Beuningen. How does Zuid carry out its move to Rotterdam South, an area whose residents seldom visit museums? This question is explored through interviews with Zuid's management and observations of three of its artistic projects. Zuid relies predominantly on the 'cultural democracy model', a bottom-up approach to inclusion based on residents' needs and preferences. It does so in a profound way by rethinking what a museum is in the first place for visitors who have little experience with canonised art. By continuously asking this question, the Zuid project stays tuned into the wants and needs of an audience that is constantly shifting because of globalisation, growing inequalities, and migration.

Keywords: cultural democracy, bottom-up, museums, participation, inclusion

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Cover illustration: *Art Workshop (Kunstwerkplaats) in Hillevliet.. Picture taken by the author*

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Introduction

Rotterdam is a so-called 'super-diverse' city where minority backgrounds form the majority (see Börger & Jongstra, 2016). However, the visitors of Rotterdam's biggest and most renowned art museum, the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen (henceforth: Boijmans), do not reflect this diversity. Through a zip code survey, the museum learned that it was hardly frequented by residents from Rotterdam South. Especially the residents of Feijenoord—a Rotterdam South district—are the average museum visitor's opposite: they are generally less educated, young, and from a non-Western background (Allecijfers.nl, n.d.). Since the museum wants to be inclusive of all Rotterdammers, there is evidently a task in connecting to Rotterdam South.

The Boijmans opened a new location in Feijenoord called 'Zuid. Boijmans' ('South. Boijmans', henceforth: Zuid) to accommodate Rotterdam South's residents. Zuid makes an interesting case as it seeks to connect a canonised institution with people who do not usually consume the canon by moving towards them rather than the other way around. This case investigates how Zuid approaches and executes its move through interviews with Zuid's initiator and producer. It also includes observations of three of Zuid's artistic projects. Data collection took place between November 2022 and March 2023. By showing how Zuid's bottom-up approach engages with the wants and needs of people who previously did not visit established cultural institutions, the study aims to contribute to the formation of inclusive and democratic European cultural policies. The goal is to help increase cultural participation in societies that are continually shifting due to globalisation, growing inequalities, and migration.

The cultural democratic turn in Dutch cultural policy

The collection that Boijmans Museum manages is municipal property. This means that, in principle, its 151.000+ artistic objects belong to all the people of Rotterdam. The democratisation of the collection is, however, not self-evident. As in the rest of the Netherlands, museum visitors in Rotterdam are predominantly highly educated and relatively wealthy (Rotterdam Festivals, 2021a: 12–20; 2021b: 15–24). This is partly because what is typically on display in such institutions is a body of artworks considered 'the best' by 'an elite group of scholars and critics' (Morris, 2018). Consequently, such a choice does not find a 'natural' connection with lower-educated, underprivileged audiences.

Since World War II, the Dutch central government has problematised cultural non-participation—or, more precisely, a lack of participation in the offerings of established, often highbrow, institutions. Taking part in cultural consumption would be vital for anyone's personal development, creativity, and well-being, and therefore, as many people as possible should engage in it (e.g., Rijksoverheid, 2023; Schrijvers, 2018).

During WWII and beyond, cultural participation policies were primarily concerned with what was defined as engaging the working class with canonised culture (Boekman, 1939). With the increasing diversification of Dutch society because of immigration, another societal group became conspicuously absent: visitors with a non-Western background (Van der Ploeg, 1999). Their absence also likely finds its roots in the composition of the canon, which generally represents Western artists. More recently, an expanding appreciation of diversity has driven the Ministry of Culture to emphasise the necessity of including people from different educational and cultural backgrounds and of different ages, genders, and physical abilities (e.g., Van Engelshoven, 2018).

To include non-visitors, cultural policymakers and artistic institutions generally rely on the 'democratisation of culture model' (Evrard, 1997). This model engages in 'downward propagation and education from the top' (Lim, Im, & Lee, 2019). In other words, policymakers and artistic institutions

try to promote and cultivate a taste for existing canonical collections among non-visitors (Evrard, 1997).

Despite such attempts, visitors to established artistic institutions in Rotterdam still lack diversity (Berkers et al., 2018; RRKC, 2016), indicating the modest success of the democratisation of culture model (Van Eijck & Bisschop Boele, 2018). Moreover, critics argue that the tendency in Dutch cultural policy to ‘lend a hand’ to young people or people with a migration background ‘who have not yet found their way to the theatre or museum on their own’ is very paternalistic (Menso and Daamen, 2019, *translated from Dutch*; also see Iqbal, 2020). Rather than celebrating diverse cultural preferences, the democratisation of culture model ‘takes the taste of one (bourgeois) group of people and presents [it] as the natural taste of civilised people everywhere’ (Kelley, 1985: 3).

Critics propose a shift in power dynamics from the top-down democratisation of culture model to the more bottom-up cultural democracy model (Evrard, 1997). In this model, cultural institutions strive to create space for diverse voices in decision-making processes, support community-led cultural initiatives, and ensure that a diversity of people’s needs and artistic preferences inform their policies. The Dutch cultural sector has taken steps toward the cultural democracy model. In 2011, the cultural sector developed the Cultural Diversity Code (*Code Culturele Diversiteit*), which since 2019 has been operating under the name Diversity and Inclusion Code (*Code Diversiteit en Inclusie*).

The code is an instrument of self-regulation for the Dutch cultural and creative sector, aiming to better represent ‘the broad diversity of Dutch society’ (Codedi, 2021: 3, *translated from Dutch*). It offers several directives for cultural institutions to make their organisations more inclusive on the level of programming, partners, personnel, and the public (the ‘4 P’s’). In the spirit of cultural democracy, it argues that ‘it is essential that everyone is part of the decision-making process [of cultural organisations] and has the opportunity to contribute ideas’ (Codedi, 2021: 6, *translated from Dutch*). The funders of Zuid ask for compliance with the code. Indeed, one of Zuid’s *raison d’être* was to ‘ensure that residents of Rotterdam South, where relatively many socio-economic problems converge, are not excluded from the city’s cultural ecosystem’ (Hoefnagels, 2022). As we shall see, the inclusive and democratic ambitions of the code are found throughout Zuid’s approach.

Research question and methodology

This case builds on the question: How does Zuid approach the inclusion of people who hardly, if ever, visit museums? It uses semi-structured interviews with Zuid’s initiator, Yoeri Meessen, and Zuid’s producer, Birgit van Beek. The interviews address why and how Zuid was founded, how it connects to Rotterdam South’s residents, and how the interviewees experience their presence in Rotterdam South as employees of a canonical institution. Additionally, two observations at Zuid were carried out. The first one took place during a guided tour of the building where Zuid is located and where two of its projects— ‘Mahjouba’ and ‘Kom’—were displayed. The second observation occurred at the Art Workshop (*Kunstwerkplaats*) that takes place in Zuid twice a week. The analysis also includes online desk research based on articles written by Zuid’s staff members and articles written about Zuid. Data collection was done between November 2022 and March 2023. All interview citations have been translated from Dutch. Interviewees have given permission to use their full names.

Zuid: collaboratively re-thinking the museum through the cultural democracy model

Boijmans, the main museum to which Zuid is connected, closed in 2019 for major renovations. Its finalisation is projected—but not guaranteed—in 2032. The agendas of Boijmans’ employees, usually filled with the planning of exhibitions, were suddenly freed up. Birgit van Beek, Zuid’s producer, remarks that the closure led to ‘a kind of existential question: what is a museum without a building?’ Since its closure, Boijmans has been making its collection available to the public through collaborations with other museums and institutions in the Netherlands and abroad. Additionally, the museum brought objects from its collection into schools as part of an educational program. In 2020, ‘De

Hillevliet', a social real estate project that houses various cultural, artistic, and welfare organisations in a former crafts school in Feijenoord, came to Meessen's and Van Beek's attention. They eventually rented four rooms. In this way, the Boijmans regained a physical location, but now in Rotterdam South (*Rotterdam Zuid*), which they therefore called 'Zuid. Boijmans'.



Figure 1. De Hillevliet. Picture taken by author.

Importantly, Feijenoord is one of Rotterdam's lowest-educated, youngest, and most culturally diverse districts—the inverse characteristics of the average museum visitor. Zuid's initiator, Yoeri Meessen, notes that 'Zuid is for people who don't go to museums, but [it] is also for a museum that normally doesn't go to those people.' Having had 'little exposure to art and culture' (*Fonds21, translated from Dutch*), Rotterdam South's residents are unlikely to be spontaneously drawn to the museum in its original form. Van Beek therefore argues that 'it quickly became apparent that [we] couldn't work here like [we] did in the museum. That what we would do here couldn't just be a huge exhibition space.'

What, then, can a museum be for people with little affinity for museums? Outlined below are the steps that Zuid takes to address this question: involve the community from the onset; connect to the community through the community; ensure visitor participation and ownership; take visitors' tastes seriously; and prioritise use value over aesthetic value.

Involve the community from the onset

Meessen remarks that change—more specifically, re-thinking what a museum is—cannot happen without the input of people from outside the museum field. When one works only with museum staff, 'a museum will start doing what it is very good at [...] and that is making an exhibition, putting flags in front of the building, explaining what we mean [with the exhibition].'

Involving a neighbourhood whose residents have little experience with museums may be just what is needed to rethink what a museum is. Zuid therefore started with one room at its disposal, which they called a 'listening post' (Boijmans, n.d.-a). In this phase, it held open conversations with Feijenoord's residents and existing social and cultural organisations about what Zuid could do for the community with the knowledge, skills, and resources it possesses.

In this way, Van Beek says, Zuid developed its plan step by step 'from the point of view of the desire or the hiatuses in the community' (also see Boijmans, n.d.-b; Hoefnagels, 2022). Cultural democracy likewise emphasises the importance of giving everyone a say in shaping cultural practices and policies (Evrard, 1997). These initial conversations concluded that Zuid could make a positive contribution to the community of Feijenoord by increasing equity of opportunity in the area, especially through offering creative after-school activities for children.

Namely, whereas such activities abound in wealthier areas of Rotterdam, they are scarce in Feijenoord. Zuid now helps change this through the Art Workshop it offers twice a week, which is led by artists and accessible to all but—as was evident during the observation—mostly participated in by children. The conversations with residents and local organisations also pointed to a lack of structure in Rotterdam South for creative individuals’ talent development. Zuid addresses this gap by assigning projects to talented locals or engaging them in artistic creation with established artists. Finally, the conversations indicated that residents from diverse cultural backgrounds often did not interact despite living in the same area. Zuid seeks to bridge such social boundaries through art, for example, through its recurring Art Workshop and, as we shall see, artistic projects that bring together various residents.



Figure 2. Art Workshop (Kunstwerkplaats). Picture taken by author.

Connect to the community through the community

However important Zuid believes involving the local community is, Meessen and Van Beek recommend caution in approaching residents. Many have financial and social problems—an artistic project may be the least of their worries. On top of that, ‘vulnerable’ areas such as Rotterdam South are magnets for social researchers studying inequality in the city and for cultural organisations and artists looking to make a social impact. As Van Beek points out:

We must be careful about doing surveys or asking questions and asking for knowledge and input from people who often don’t see anything in return. That’s just not fair. So, making use of structures that already have knowledge or connections with neighbourhood residents who want to contribute to this from their own motivation helps a lot in making sure you don’t use residents to serve a particular purpose.

Zuid especially collaborates with social-cultural organisations also housed in De Hillevliet. Being under one roof with multiple social-cultural organisations, van Beek argues, is crucial: ‘[W]ithout them, we would have been nowhere, or we might have been overcharging the residents in this neighbourhood.’

Another avenue Zuid deploys to raise awareness in the community about its projects is the engagement of individuals with social capital in the community. Van Beek says that usually, ‘museums look at their collection and what stories they can tell with it, and they just expect the visitors to come.’ She advises institutions that want to connect with areas that are excluded from the cultural infrastructure against such an approach, instead urging them to ‘[w]ork with ambassadors, for example, key figures within existing communities, to reach larger groups’ (Van Beek in Hoefnagels, 2022).

In this way, residents may find their way to Zuid more ‘organically’ than when it would program something for which they must find an audience post-hoc. For Zuid, artists who are themselves from Rotterdam South or have a strong connection with the area are important ambassadors. An example is the exhibition *Kom* (in Dutch, this means both ‘bowl’ and ‘come’) by the artist Fenmei Hu during the observed tour. Hu exhibits Chinese ceramic bowls provided by acquaintances and visitors to Zuid.

Since the artist is already connected to the Chinese community in Rotterdam South, Van Beek says that ‘through her, we can then connect with this group. We would not have been able to do that on our own.’ Instead of only sending out invitations unilaterally from the institution, by using existing networks, Zuid can communicate with the community on the community’s own terms.



Figure 3. Fenmei Hu, *KOM*. Photographer: Thomas Mutsaers. Courtesy of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen.

Ensure visitor participation and ownership

Artistic objects on display in museums are generally attributed to one artist, and the visitor is supposed to absorb them from a distance. This creates a boundary between the ‘common’ visitor and the ‘talented’ artist. Much in contrast, a mainstay in the cultural democracy model is that visitors actively participate in cultural institutions (Evrard, 1997: 33) to feel involved in the institution and its art (Arts Council England, 2018: 10).

Following this approach, Zuid suggests ‘[a] new museum model that is not just about “visiting” but about “participating”’ (Boijmans, n.d.-b, *translated from Dutch*). In several instances, Zuid reduced or removed the customary boundary between artist and visitor through the active participation of visitors in artistic creation together with artists.

For example, during the observation of the guided tour of De Hillevliet, several mopeds built by internationally renowned artist Éric Vanhove and several craftsmen were on display in the project ‘Mahjouba.’ One specimen was still under construction; this was a collaboration between Vanhove, students from Rotterdam South, and interested residents. Such an example of engaging residents in

the creation of art together with recognised artists might help ‘demystify’ the artistic status and take away boundaries to pursue an artistic career—or to simply enjoy engaging in artistic creation.



Figure 4. *Éric Vanhove, Mahjouba*. Photographer: Thomas Mutsaers. Courtesy of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen.

According to the cultural democracy model, participation is significant as it ‘enable[s] individuals to feel a sense of ownership over the arts and cultural provision in their local area’ (Arts Council England, 2018: 1). In this spirit, Van Beek emphasises that it is not so much the work of art that is displayed at the eventual exhibition. Rather, it is ‘a process in which people from the

neighbourhood were involved. They're building something together.' She adds that this gives residents a sense of pride, as 'the people from here are put on a pedestal.'

It should be added here that being put on a pedestal is not necessarily a familiar experience for people from Rotterdam South. The area is notorious for its high crime and poverty levels and is repeatedly characterised as a 'disadvantaged neighbourhood' by social organisations (e.g., Bos, 2020) and in the media (e.g., NOS, 2022). This term carries negative connotations; residents indicate such connotations hurt their self-image and negate their resilience (Kullberg, Mouktadibillah & De Vries, 2021). Programmes emphasising visitor participation and ownership help change these negative perceptions.

Take visitors' tastes seriously

Classically, a museum dictates what visitors should learn: art history experts curate an exhibition, and visitors take it all in. Van Beek argues that this model would be patronising in Rotterdam South. Namely, with it you are saying: 'The way we see and present art is the only right way,' while Rotterdam South's residents are likely to have different conceptions of artistic quality than the museum.

Similarly, the cultural democracy model emphasises 'people's understanding of their needs and culture,' which necessarily leads to the inclusion of 'a multitude of values, lifestyles, and activities of everyday life' (Virolainen, 2016: 67). Van Beek says that Zuid responds to the visitors' wishes and adds that they 'will then hopefully respond to that.' Rather than unilaterally imposing its view of what good art is, Zuid approaches learning as a two-way street. As argued by Meessen, 'Zuid is a testing ground to see what we can bring to Rotterdam South, but also vice versa: what can the museum learn from working in Feijenoord?' (also see Boijmans, n.d.-b).

Van Beek gives an example of celebrating residents' artistic preferences through the project 'In the Cupboard of...', in which two of her colleagues went to residents' houses and asked them about objects from their kitchen cupboards that they found particularly valuable. These objects were assembled and exhibited in Zuid, featured in a performance about residents from Rotterdam South, and pictorially displayed in public spaces throughout the area (Boijmans, 2021).

Asking residents to bring objects they value—which also happened in the aforementioned *Kom* project—could signal to residents that their preferences are worthy of institutional display. Such projects have the added benefit of bringing together the owners of the objects. Van Beek says contributors to the exhibition 'might have already been neighbours, but now they had something to talk about.' While not all participants continue to visit Zuid, van Beek hopes that such projects nevertheless 'create a lasting connection outside our building.' In this way, Zuid responds to the need for bridging cultural boundaries that came up during its 'listening post' phase.

Prioritise use value over aesthetic value

Stemming from the Kantian principle that artworks have a universal value that the viewer can only encounter by appreciating the work for its own sake (i.e., 'aesthetic disinterestedness'), museum visitors are customarily expected to enjoy art from a distance. We have already seen negations of this principle in Zuid, as it encourages visitors to actively participate in the production of artworks and puts the contributing visitors rather than the created artworks on a pedestal.

However, Zuid is a museum project, and museums are formally bound to their collections. Zuid wants to 'engage with residents to explore the connection between contemporary cultures in the city and the museum's collection' (Boijmans, n.d.-b, *translated from Dutch*). Interestingly, it is hard to find projects in which Zuid works with objects from the collection. Meessen argues this is because of security issues: 'We cannot physically bring [objects from the Boijmans collection] here at the moment. The security [at Zuid] is not good enough for that yet.'

Nonetheless, Zuid has ideas about how it will eventually put the collection to use. To find common ground between the collection and Rotterdam South's residents, Zuid turns the classical Kantian principle of art appreciation on its head. In this view, rather than having a universal value, artefacts have different meanings to different people. Also, in stark contrast to the Kantian principle

of aesthetic disinterestedness, Zuid argues that all art forms have use value and can serve a societal function (also see Van Beek, 2021; Matarasso, 1997).

Van Beek argues that ‘it’s not so much about [visitors] liking that object from our collection but seeing how it might also tell them something about their connection to the city, about their personal histories.’ Van Beek’s idea is that, eventually, objects from the collection will function as tools rather than ends in themselves: ‘I find it interesting how museum collections are often perceived, like [artworks] must be preserved, protected, and managed, at the expense of all the added value it could have if you used it.’

Still, Boijmans’ collection is largely made up of canonical works from the so-called ‘great European tradition.’ There seems to be an inherent tension between the cultural democratic approach and the use of canonised works in the engagement of people who normally do not consume such culture. Meessen points out that this is indeed ‘an area of tension that we deal with on an ongoing basis. [...] It is certainly not the case that Boijmans in Rotterdam South is strictly engaged in the cultural democracy model. We are still very much engaged in democratising culture in many areas.’

However, referring to the collectively built moped in the Mahjouba project, he adds that there is also an inverse movement from Zuid to the collection: ‘That moped is going into the depot after this. So instead of bringing the collection in here, we started doing it the other way around, making things here that go to the depot.’

Rather than completely discarding the canon, Zuid looks for a middle ground between cultural democracy and the democratisation of culture. Meessen explains this approach as follows: ‘It is precisely, I think, in the *and - and* that you can change things. You can get a museum to work more with the cultural democracy model step by step. Our model here is “learning by doing.” I am convinced that if you want to bring about systemic change, you should not set fire to everything you have but take an evolutionary approach, meaning you must take an awful lot of small steps.’

Challenges to applying the cultural democracy model in Zuid

While not formally subscribing to the cultural democracy model, the above analysis shows Zuid is exemplary of it in many ways. Nonetheless, Zuid’s ‘institutional upper hand,’ as Van Beek herself calls it, prevails. There are two main reasons for this.

Firstly, there is a lack of formal community ownership of the organisation. While Rotterdam South’s residents have ownership in Zuid’s projects, this ownership is symbolic rather than formal: they have a say in Zuid’s plans, contribute to its artistic projects, and are ‘put on a pedestal’ by Zuid. However, Meessen and Van Beek—and most other employees of Zuid—are not from Rotterdam South. Van Beek explains that ‘this is still something we must work on. What came into being here started very much from a coalition of the willing, as we call it, from the main museum. [...] And, yes, the team still consists mostly of people who came from the museum and started working here.’ Meessen adds that ‘one needs to temper expectations’ of actual ownership through the employment of Rotterdam South’s residents. He continues: ‘That doesn’t happen so easily. [...] There is a huge gap to bridge between the institutional structure of an existing museum like Boijmans and how this neighbourhood works.’

Secondly, as a project of an established institution, Zuid has several privileges over smaller, ‘grassroots’ social-cultural organisations. With four rooms at its disposal—one for workshops, one collaborative space, and two exhibition spaces where artists and residents work together on projects—Zuid is one of the largest organisations in De Hilleliet. Van Beek acknowledges this:

What we sometimes hear is that [...] smaller, less experienced organisations at De Hilleliet—those grassroots organisations that are trying something new—[...] don’t get those funds, [because] they don’t have the experience in writing such applications or [because] funders perhaps have more confidence in an institute like Boijmans.

Being part of Rotterdam's most prominent and significant art museum, Zuid has the advantage of having the status and expertise to obtain funding—indeed, Boijmans permanently employs a fundraising officer. This calls into question the extent of democracy present between Zuid and other organisations within De Hillevliet, and by extension, between Zuid and cultural organisations in the whole neighbourhood. Van Beek explained that Zuid can still ensure that funding reaches smaller organisations by delegating assignments to them. However, it would still go through Zuid, allowing its institutional power to determine the field. At the same time, Zuid also offers smaller organisations the opportunity to talk to Boijmans' fundraisers, even when [the museum] may be competing for the same funds. 'If that means we don't get that money,' Van Beek adds, 'then that's too bad [laughs].'

Conclusion and implications

Specific societal groups—notably younger, lower-educated, non-Western individuals—are historically underrepresented among audiences of established artistic institutions, such as museums. Usually, policymakers and cultural institutions try to 'include' these so-called non-visitors through the democratisation of culture model—i.e., by promoting and cultivating a taste for museums' existing, often canonical offerings (Evrard, 1997). Zuid, a project by the renowned Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in the super-diverse city of Rotterdam, does the reverse: it tries to accommodate non-visitors by adapting to their preferences and literally moving to where they live—Rotterdam South.

To adapt itself to the needs and preferences of Rotterdam South's residents, Zuid opts to re-think what a museum can be, especially for people who hardly visit museums. Many of its activities are done in a bottom-up manner. This has been achieved in the following ways:

- Firstly, Zuid engaged the community from the project's onset, and as such, it founded much of itself on the community's preferences and necessities.
- Secondly, it connects to Rotterdam South through individuals deeply rooted in the community, thereby communicating inclusively on the community's terms.
- Thirdly, Zuid's visitors are encouraged to actively participate in the construction of artistic objects so that they may gain a sense of ownership and pride in their contributions and neighbourhood.
- Fourthly, Zuid attempts to democratise the process of artistic legitimation usually reserved for experts by taking the community's tastes seriously and elevating residents' everyday objects to artistic status.
- Finally, when planning to use objects from the Boijmans collection in its projects, Zuid replaces the Kantian 'art for art's sake' approach with one seeing artistic objects as tools visitors can use in ways that are valuable to them.

In sum, Zuid shifts away from the democratisation of culture model in which the established institution's view of art, culture, and society predominates to an emic, cultural democracy perspective in which the institution welcomes and equalises the perspectives of the diversity of people whom it seeks to engage, thereby hoping to find a better connection to Boijmans' 'non-visitors.'

While Zuid is thus exemplary of the cultural democracy 'wave' taking place in the Netherlands, especially since the instalment of the Diversity and Inclusion Code in 2011, its approach is by no means new. In the community arts, for example, the cultural democracy model has always been a daily business (see, e.g., Bennet, 2017; Hadley & Belfiore, 2018). But the cultural democracy approach is still rather innovative for an established institution such as Boijmans, whose offerings are still primarily characterised by the Western canon and thus generally lack an inherent connection to lower-educated, younger, and non-Western audiences. Zuid's most significant lesson for other established cultural institutions regarding inclusion can be said to be in its readiness not to know what it is in the first place.

The modest success of the 'democratisation of culture' model in bringing in new audiences urges cultural institutions to radically rethink what they are from the bottom up. Together with the

people they want to include, they need to ask: What is a museum? What is a theatre, library, cinema, concert hall, etc.? In Meessen's words:

People are very inquisitive. They ask, 'What is that, then, this Zuid?' And especially: 'What is it going to be?' And then I have [repeated] and want to keep repeating: 'We don't know that yet.' Because if you already know what it's going to be, you're not making something new. This [Zuid] is asking that question out loud. It is a testing ground, a pilot [project]. To really make something new, you must also want to change yourself.

Importantly, Meessen argues that this existential question does not demand a definitive answer. It should be asked ongoingly: as societies change through growing or diminishing inequalities, migration, and globalisation, audiences change as well, as do their needs and preferences.

If one takes seriously the idea that a level of 'reflexive ignorance' on the part of institutions about what they are and where they are heading can lead to fundamentally innovative and inclusive practices, this has implications for cultural policy. On the other hand, to reduce investment risk, funding bodies increasingly expect applicants to account in detail for what they will do with the money (e.g., Peters & Roose, 2022). This study urges funders to be open to open-ended grant proposals, where the emphasis lies less on what an applicant will do or make and more on the questions the proposed project asks and how it will approach the process.

The formal prerequisite for an institution to call itself a museum is that it manages a fixed collection. This means that museums do not have full agency in deciding what a museum is. While collections are continuously expanded, they are bound by their (often canonical) offerings. However, cultural democracy does not necessarily mean the cultural canon must be completely thrown away. Specific societal groups still hold classical, canonical conceptions of artistic quality. However, in the cultural democracy model, canonical works become one preference among many rather than the gold standard.

The example discussed in this case study has yet to show concretely to what extent it is possible to use a canonical museum collection to foster a cultural democratic agenda. There are also challenges regarding Zuid's institutional privilege over smaller cultural organisations and achieving actual community ownership. Nevertheless, Zuid's cultural democratic practices can serve as an interesting example for European policymakers and other cultural institutions on how to approach the shaping of inclusive cultural policies.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank several renters from De Hillevliet for taking the time to enlighten me about their work in the area: Ella Broek of Tailors & Wearers; Penny Nugteren of Bureau Straatliefde; and, of course, Birgit van Beek and Yoeri Meessen of Zuid.

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