

Frits Gierstberg
Nederlands Fotomuseum
Rotterdam

Origins

The Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam is a very new museum. It was founded in 2003 and opened on its new location in May 2007. The Queen came to open the Fotomuseum officially, which gave it a big push. The museum was based on three pre-existing organisations that merged: the Nederlands Foto Institute (since 1993), the National Foto Archives (since 1989) and the National Foto Restoration Atelier (since 1990). The museum is a foundation, independent from national and local governments. An umbrella system for museums as in Berlin does not exist in the Netherlands.

Money

As a financial basis the Fotomuseum has an annual budget of 3.000.000 €, of which the largest part is provided by the ministry of Education, Culture, and Science and the City of Rotterdam. The latter is paying about 20% of the budget, mainly for the building. The Wertheimer Fund is another substantial aid. It came into being about ten years ago when an amateur photographer, Mr. Wertheimer, took a wrong step during his vacation in the Himalaya mountains. He fell and left, to everybody's surprise, 22 billion Dutch guilders for the foundation of a national photography museum. As he had not told anyone where he wanted this museum, the fund is the main reason why there are now so many photo museums in the Netherlands. Suddenly every major city had ambitions to host such a museum. However, the Wertheimer fund decided to give the money (the yearly revenues) to Rotterdam, as the perfect basis for a photo museum was already there.

Other money is coming from founders, sponsors and through project financing. Founders and sponsors are for instance the Rotterdam Port Authority, OVG Developers, BankGiro Lottery, Fortis Bank, Loyens & Loeff, and others. The Netherlands is quite rich of cultural funds: the Mondriaan Foundation, the Prins Bernhard Culture Fund, the Prins Claus Fund, and the VSB Fund are the most important ones. Sales generate more income, via print sales for instance, the bookshop, and the rental of office space.

Venue

The museum is in the Las Palmas building, located in a former harbour area of Rotterdam. The building, once owned by the Holland-America Line company, comprises 1.500 m² of exhibition space, a knowledge centre, library, offices, climate depots, restoration labs and a bookshop. Unfortunately, it has no restaurant, but there are many in walking distance.

Organisation and staff

For a cultural organisation we work in an unusual way. We have no personalised offices but only three types of working places that everybody can use: places to talk, make phone calls and other noise; places to concentrate and be silent, and rooms for meetings. Members of staff come in in the morning and pick his or her laptop, mobile phone and papers and choose a work place. Even the director has no office. So everybody works with different colleagues around him/her every day, which is keeping everybody mentally fresh and alert and supporting the information flow within the organisation. Being a project based organisation, this makes the work also more efficient. Besides, since many are only working part time or often outdoors, there is very efficient use of the limited office space. We have 22 full time posi-

tions for staff, summing up over 30 people altogether. In addition, there are some volunteers and many interns.

Ambitions

Our ambitions might differ a little from those of a classical museum. Of course, it was relatively easy for us to formulate ideas about a new kind of museum: we started almost from scratch. This weekend we are talking about photo museums in particular, but I am sure you know that the whole concept of a museum, what a museum is and what social function it could take these days is under discussion as well. For us, it is very important not only to look at classical concepts and traditional ideas of museums, but also to what a museum *could be* - especially in the globalizing world of today, where different cultures meet and with all the image technologies coming up so fast.

Our aim is to be a national portal for knowledge about photography in the Netherlands. As keepers of important archives and projects we want to be an active partner in the visual education and cultural production. This means, we not only show photography but also want to produce it as a cultural medium, with a direct function and a direct meaning for social discussions in the city and beyond.

Exhibition policy and programme

The range of exhibition themes is very broad: from vernacular photography to family albums, documentary and photojournalism, scientific, commercial, and other applied photography – even art sometimes. The programme naturally overlaps with all kinds of science. The Netherlands is, culturally speaking, quite dense, especially where we are located. Important other cultural institutions in the neighbourhood are for instance the museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, the Netherlands Architecture Institute, and the International Film Festival. So we are not alone, and we collaborate with these institutions and festivals who are dealing with other media than photography. These collaborations create a broader and more interesting context for photography and provide us with a potential wider audience. At the same time, we collaborate with academies and universities.

Our interests include historical and contemporary photography, national and international, monographic exhibitions and theme exhibitions. These themes range, for instance, from family photographs kept by war refugees on their mobile phones to 'the baby in photography since the 1860s.'

We organise four larger exhibitions a year, ten smaller ones, and one semi-permanent exhibition. Since the history of photography cannot be seen permanently at any other place in the Netherlands, we produce one long lasting theme exhibition each year based on the history of photography. We started with an exhibition born from the idea that wherever one stands, one can write an almost complete history of photography of that place. So we took the Wilhelmina-pier, where the museum is based, next to the river Maas, as a starting point to search for photography that was produced there during the past 150 years. The results were shown in an exhibition.

In addition, we organise one or two exhibitions abroad per year, mostly in cooperation with a partner. Besides from producing in house and travelling shows our ambition is to educate young curators by giving them a chance to work in a museum. Many curators working in museums - myself included - usually stay for years and years in the same position, which makes it difficult for young curators to develop their skills in making exhibitions. Therefore, we invite young people to curate exhibitions for us.

Knowledge centre

The knowledge centre is kind of a new department. The name sounds a bit strange since it is not really about knowledge, but about learning and about experiencing images. Conceptually and physically, it is placed between exhibitions and the library. The idea is to develop new kinds of interfaces for people to get to know the collection and to see photographs. This attracts especially younger generations that have no interest in looking at pictures on the wall but want to be active instead, and prefer to play with images whilst learning something about photography. We collaborate with artists and ask them to develop these interfaces. One example, developed by Rotterdam artist Geert Mul, consists of four consoles with joy sticks next to each other that you can use to browse through the digital collection of about 20.000 images, and make your own selection according to names of photographers, geography, periods, or themes. Your selection is being projected in front of you on a big screen. This physical part of the knowledge centre is joined by the virtual part, the website. Our site is developed not only to provide information about the museum (like opening hours and other usual stuff), but to present lots of information on photography. It is functioning not only as a sort of database about photography in a specific museum, but about photography in the Netherlands in general. You can take a look at the very extensive site on www.nederlandsfotomuseum.nl. You can browse through the collection and also find all kinds of dossiers there. Being the National Museum, we create tools that everybody can use. Last year we created a National Agenda of Exhibitions and Events that is being updated every day. So, if you feel like going to an exhibition, you can just go to this site and see what is on in the next hour or the next day. See www.photostart.nl. We are also involved in www.photog.nl, a virtual meeting place for the Dutch photo community, with news, information, gossip, and discussion on international photography.

Library and study centre

The library is focussing on Dutch photography, but not exclusively. The international history of photography can be found here, as well as the international theory of photography. There are only one or two more really substantial photo libraries in the country, however these are housed in universities and therefore not open to the public. The Fotomuseum's library is the only publicly accessible photo library in the Netherlands, with more than 60 subscriptions of international magazines in free access. We collaborate with other, smaller photo libraries in different institutions like the Fotomuseum Amsterdam and the Noorderlicht Festival in Groningen. We created one search engine (www.fotografiebibliotheek.nl) for all photo book collections. On our website, the book search takes you first to books about the given topic and in a second step to the location of the book in one of the connected institutions somewhere in the country.

Education

Education is of course very important. We collaborate with the Beeldfabriek, the image-factory which is in the same building as we are. This photo and video school is for amateurs and very popular as well with schools and school kids. In the framework of their programme at schools, they are being prepared with all kinds of lessons before they come to the photo school to make images themselves. Sometimes, they first visit the exhibitions, and sometimes they use the exhibitions later on to make photographs or small video films. We offer special programmes for first and secondary schools, art academies, universities, and photo amateurs. Photo amateurs are a special group for us, because the Wertheimer Fond – the amateur photographer that left so much money for the museum – stipulated to pay special

attention to amateur photography. So we develop lots of programmes for them, not so much exhibitions but all kinds of educational programmes and meetings. It proved to be a very large group of potential visitors for the museum, too. And then there is the usual stuff, lectures, debates, guided tours, web lessons, workshops, and what we call the 'kijkwijzers' – suggestions for young visitors on how to look at photographs.

Higher education

The museum also engages in special collaborations with universities. Only four years ago, there was no photography course in universities in the Netherlands. The Fotomuseum contacted two universities: one in Leiden, where there is an important photographic collection, and one in Rotterdam, where there is an important media department (Erasmus University). At the initiative of the Fotomuseum, two special professors were appointed: I took up teaching in Rotterdam at the Media- and Journalism Department; Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas took the job in Leiden at the Master of Photographic Studies. Many students come to the museum, the library, and the collection, where they get a look behind the scenes. Many of them get very interested in working in a museum and becoming a curator, researcher, or education person. Besides these two university professors, Flip Bool, Researcher at the Fotomuseum, was appointed Lector at the Master course of the Photography Department of the Art Academy St. Joost in Breda.

Restoration and Conservation

The department of restoration and conservation is very important for the Fotomuseum. The 2,5 colleagues working there are in charge of our own collection but also take on commissions by other museums from all over the world. This provides them with an income that facilitates their work and brings to light interesting photographs that would otherwise remain in private collections. We give advice to people who come to us with their private collections, family albums or the 19th century portraits they possess, and offer to assess, restore, and explain how to keep the objects. The department also educates living photographers on how to keep their negatives. Most photographers keep their negatives in boxes under their beds, especially older generations. Photographers we are interested in and of whom we want to acquire their work or archives are asked to describe their own archive and to already pack their objects in material that is PAT. The restoration department also offers master classes to foreign photo restorators. Both students and professionals are invited to come over and learn, especially from countries where this kind of knowledge is not present, but where important photographic archives exist. Sometimes these are in danger of complete deterioration, and we try to help repair the damage, as in Bam, Iran, where we helped to restore a complete archive with glass plate negatives after the big earthquake. Other projects are ongoing in Tbilisi, Georgia, and Johannesburg, South Africa. Those projects are sometimes founded and supported by the Dutch Prins Claus Fond.

Collections: collecting

The collection consists currently of 130 archives, about 4 million negatives and slides, and about 100.000 prints. These are all of late Dutch photographers and due to the history of the museum, being partly based on the Netherlands Photo Archives, founded in 1998 in order to preserve photographers' archives. Some of the names might be familiar to you: Katharina Behrend (1888–1973), Ed van der Elsken (1925–1990), Paul Julien (1901–2001), Cas Oorthuys (1908–1975), Paul Schuitema (1897–1973), Piet Zwart (1885–1977). Most of

them worked after 1945. We also have a growing number of 19th century archives, which means a lot of glass plates.

The collection's policy is based on the policy of the former Photo Archives, i.e. to collect author-based archives. We collect professional and amateur photography. Some years ago, we started to communicate with all collecting institutions in the Netherlands, trying to find out who was collecting what and why. Not every museum has a clear collection policy. With the help of the Nederlands Fotogenootschap, a kind of national *Vereinigung* for photo collecting institutions and photo archives, we managed to draw a more or less clear picture of what is being collected and we based our own collecting policy partly on what others are doing. There are several reasons for this. Political and financial issues made it impossible for the National Museum of Photography to start a collection from scratch. Besides, all the major photographs from Dutch history are already in collections.

We also developed some more or less experimental new directions in collecting, again looking at what other museums collect and where the gaps are. For example, we collect complete documentary projects by single photographers. If somebody works on a project on immigration for years, publishes a book and makes an exhibition – we collect all the materials of that project and not just a couple of photographs. So far we have collected about 20 projects like that, for instance by Hans Aarman, Theo Baart, Wout Berger, Geert van Kesteren, Bertien van Manen, Ad van Denderen, and Hans van der Meer. This is not only interesting for the history of photography but also for the general history of the country, because these projects are usually documentary or have a social or political meaning. So there is also a strong link with the archives that are already in the collection.

We also try to collect on the basis of cultural and historical themes and to collect digital works, including digitally born work. One of our collection themes is for instance: The Netherlands and the water. Water has naturally been very important in the development of the culture and the prosperity of the country. The tradition of depicting the landscape and the water already existed in Dutch painting, it goes a long way back. Photography has since its beginnings in the Netherlands gained a lot from commissions on waterworks. Obviously the former colonies and issues of (im)migration are of primary interest for us, too.

Collections: how is it all organized?

Now, the real special thing about collecting the archives is how we have organized it all. First of all, the archives are not owned by the museum. The families or heirs keep the ownership. Agreements and contracts with the families ensure that the museum will keep them, take care of them, show them, and digitize them, partly for use in publications, in exhibitions, and for research. Copyrights will be paid to the families or other copyright owners whenever the material is used.

We have not found a final solution regarding the very difficult question of selection. On the other hand, we decided not to worry too much about that. Every curator, every conservator, every period of time has a new way of looking on what is important and what is not. In fact, it is very difficult to predict what will be considered important in 50 years. So better just collect what you think is important now and not bother too much about the future. However we have installed an 'independent' committee of photo historians and curators who are meeting up once or twice a year. They look at all the proposals people have brought in regarding archives to keep and they give us advice, which makes it easier for us to accept or refuse certain donations.

Digitizing the collection

Of our 4 million negatives, about 100.000 have been digitized and out of those 2.000 are directly usable because of their good quality. This is still a very small portion but we are working on that. It might not be interesting to have all 4 million pictures digitized. And because it is so much work, daily practice leads to project based scans: when somebody wants to make an exhibition on a photographer or about a certain theme, this particular selection is digitized, put in a database, and on the website. One of the major projects helping us is called 'Het Geheugen van Nederland', which connects all the historical archives in the country to one large internet project, the 'Memory of the Netherlands'. This database, the virtual collective memory of the country permanently under construction, includes photography and film as well as painting, literature, and all kinds of other media. And it goes back to the oldest collections in the country. The interesting fact for us is that it creates a broad historical context for photography, in particular our own collection, in the company of other collections and media.

When we digitize images, we always make two scans. One is sent to an external server for security, it stays untouched. This is a very clear technical scan. The other one is being reworked by a professional photographer, who brings the scan close to the aesthetics of the 'original' print, because a print is always an interpretation of a negative. Some photographers made simple straightforward prints while others worked on it in the darkroom for hours. This process needs to be done again when scanning from a negative. The scan is then put in the database and linked with the website, so people can see and order it without having to visit the museum.

One of the strong points of the database is the direct link of all of the scans to the website. This way, the website does not contain different images. By clicking on an image on the website, it is taken directly from the database – without of course being a downloadable high resolution image. Images that are being processed or worked on, can temporarily be made invisible for the outside visitor.

One of our research areas is the preservation of digital image files. We have to, because we have such a big collection. With so much expertise in keeping digital files and working with a number of specialised companies, we started to collect digital born work. New problems arise in this context, like: what kind of agreements do you make with photographers about copyright? About the way their work is represented in the future? But practical issues also come up, as to what happens if the technology changes – and it changes all the time. You can not show a CD-rom from ten years ago. The computer simply cannot read it anymore. And this goes faster and faster. So, how much room do you have as an institution to decide about the future presentation of the work and what kind of agreements can you make with the maker of the image about that?

Work load

One of the difficulties that we meet from day to day is the time consuming and boring work. Registration and description of negatives are very time consuming and very difficult, especially for the older archives from older generation photographers. You just get boxes full of negatives. Everything is thrown in a box. Nobody can tell you anymore why these images were made or when, who is on it, and where it was published. There really is a lot of research needed and sometimes we ask elderly volunteers, especially when we know where the images were made, since these people might recognize something they remember from old times. As a result from project based scanning and disclosing of the archives, what you have on the website and what you have in our database in the end is not representative of what is in our collection. And this is one of the bigger problems.

Ethics

When you own an archive, you have to deal with ethical questions all the time. Facing all these negatives one might sometimes think: „Well, maybe this image was printed by the photographer, but the one next to it, doesn't it seem better or more interesting?“ So, what can you do? Who makes a decision? And what about the images, that the photographer did not completely print? He left some parts out, which we might find more interesting after so many years, because this building is there or this person is there. What can you do? Another problem is that new technologies create new possibilities for presenting. Projections in exhibitions, for instance: Sometimes we put computers in exhibitions to show part of the database. But looking at the screen is very different than looking at a vintage print. It is simply not comparable. You have to raise the question whether this is in the line of what the photographer would have done. Nobody knows the answer. You make a decision, but it is very important to think about these issues and to tell the public and share these questions about dealing with the collection.

Collection exhibitions and other

The collection department develops a number of special activities, like the 'The Past in the Present' programme. Here, we look in a more conceptual way at the topicality of historical images. We invite one or two artists each year to work with the images from the collection and to make an exhibition or a project out of that. Another special collection project is the collection of photography books. Photo books are being collected more and more and get so expensive that we actually can not wait anymore to leave it to private collectors. Besides, The Netherlands has a long tradition of making beautiful photo books. A third project is the collection of films and videos made by photographers. More and more young photographers make moving images. So we started to collect those as well.

More information?

And finally, here are few websites that might be of interest. You're all invited to come to Rotterdam and see what the Nederlands Fotomuseum has to offer.

www.nederlandsfotomuseum.nl

www.fotografiebibliotheek.nl

www.photostart.nl

www.photoq.nl

www.laspalmascultuur.nl

www.geheugenvannederland.nl

www.fotogenootschap.nl

www.pictura-im.nl

www.nederlandsfotomuseum.nl

<http://erasmusmedia.net/homepages/Gierstberg/index.html>

Diskussion

Frage:

Thank you for this excellent presentation. I have two questions. One concerns the last part. When you see at the number of negatives you have got, four million negatives, and so many scans, how much of what you own as a museum have you been able to show to the public and how much actually remains unseen so far? My second question is: You talked about guest curators. Did they get a topic to curate or were they free to interpret one thing they would like to do falling back on your collections?

Frits Gierstberg:

Interesting questions! To the first one, I wouldn't know the exact numbers. You can't show so much in exhibitions, and we do international exhibitions, not only our own collection. Only a very small portion is presented in exhibitions. Of course, we persuade others, other people or institutions, to make exhibitions on historical photography or historical issues that use our collection. So this is one thing that we try to pursue, and the same goes for publications. One of the reasons that we develop new interfaces in the way of presenting and working with the collection is, of course, because there are so many images and we hardly know ourselves what is there. How can you know about four million pictures? It is impossible! This is why websites and all new kinds of browsers are so important. As for the second question about guest curators: People can come with their own ideas, of course, because that is what they are interested in. But we always say that if your theme somehow can be open to items we have in the collection – we show them what we have and what could be there and, of course, we ask them to work with the collection, too. But if someone comes with a contemporary issue then it is not possible.

Frage:

You mentioned visitors of your museum can purchase some of the prints or some of the works as prints. Do you sell them through your bookshop?

Frits Gierstberg:

Yes, we sell them through the bookshop and we have a special corner in the building where you can see a selection from the collection. But of course these are all new prints.

Kommentar:

Working in the gallery business, I really see a huge demand for this kind of prints. Many people come to our gallery and look for specific prints of specific artists. They want to purchase high quality prints. I am constantly amazed that a lot of museums hardly ever make this use of their collection, because with old images it must be pretty easy since there is no copyright on the images.

Frits Gierstberg:

There is copyright but we pay the families, if a print is sold.

Kommentar:

Well, if the artist is dead for sixty years there is no problem, at least in Germany.

Frits Gierstberg:

In this case, there is no problem. The European standard is seventy years now. We have a photographer in the darkroom in house, making traditional silver prints and we now have a

deal with HP for the digital printing. In effect, a couple of weeks ago we opened what we call „the print shop“, which is fully automated. You can browse a pre-selection of images on a computer, and just press a few buttons and the printer makes a print in the size you want. You pay cash, get a code and you can take the print home. It works very well for people who do not have so much money. People who want to start a collection maybe or people who are very fond of just this one image. Prices vary between 100 and maybe 400 €. It depends on what kind of print and the copyright etc. So it is much cheaper than a real artwork. It is a little more expensive than a poster but the quality is really good. And it provides us with an income as well.

Frage:

Are these limited editions? Or is it 1000 copies or an open edition?

Frits Gierstberg:

They are open editions. This is an interesting issue. There was a lot of discussion for good reasons. Another experiment we did with the photographer Hans Aarsman might be interesting in this context: We bought one important project that he did in the late eighties. All the images from the projects we bought are put on the internet for people to see. We also put the books, often out of sale, on the internet and you can browse in the books. Hans Aarsman chose one image, available for download and printing for free, unlimited, maximum A3 size. This led to a lot of discussion: You should ask for copyright and you ruin the markets. But no such thing happened. Because we asked everybody who downloads the prints, to print two prints to send them to us, to sign one and send it back and we would keep the other. So the project is a very nice overview of the kind of printers that people have at home and what they print. It is very interesting because none of the 200, 300 prints that we got, does even remotely look like what the artist prints for himself when he makes an exhibition. So it was a very interesting experience.