

2003

THE BATTLE

Three years ago, the Boekman Foundation, a study centre for culture, arts and related policy which is linked with the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA), published the volume of essays *Cultuur tussen competentie en competitie* ('Culture between competence and competition', 2000) in association with the Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP). The title suggests that the tension between competence and competition constitutes a threat for our art and culture. A long history of popular culture, however, teaches us that excellent artistic and cultural progress can be achieved through the integration of competence and competition. The pivot around which popular cultures have repeatedly manifested themselves is formed by the 'battle' – the game in which individual and collective competence is increased by mutual competitiveness. In the 'battle', 'skills' or proficiencies are driven to ever-greater heights. The 'battle' establishes who is good at something and who still wants the necessary grade. Reggae, dancehall, Hip Hop, rap, R&B, turntablism, breakdance, graffiti, sticker culture, comics, skateboarding, poetry slams, veejaying, fashion and other expressions of contemporary pop culture owe their very development to the 'battle'.

The classic 'battle' made its appearance in Europe around 1970. In obscure little halls and pubs in London, Jamaican sound systems battled for the favour of West Indian migrants. Two, three or four sound systems with DJs and MCs competitively spinning reggae and dancehall records decide among themselves who will win eternal fame. The public and the dance floor perform as jury, making it clear, which sound system they think competent with boisterous and noisy cheers or boos. However, the 'battle' was considered to be at loggerheads with Western notions of art, culture and public order. In the 1970s, London's police lustily pitched in on partying immigrants every weekend. That repression culminated in 1976 in a big riot during the annual multicultural carnival in Notting Hill.

With the advance of multicultural society, the 'battle' also underwent an enormous development. Our streetscape, our social lives, fashion, radio and television – all are unthinkable without the Hip Hop and graffiti culture. Last year, the Rotterdam Hip Hop promoter Mike Redman collaborated with filmmaker Victor Vroegindewij to produce a wonderful documentary, *Walkmen* (2002), in which he captured the history of Rotterdam's Hip Hop, graffiti and breakdance scenes. This film makes it crystal-clear to what degree the 'battle' has come to constitute the very core of our urban culture. The 'battle' also embodies a criticism of Western arts and cultural policy, in which artificial categories such as 'purity', 'originality' and 'authenticity' still persist as criteria. A select nomenclature of insider art experts still all too often decides who is 'in' and who is 'out': who is allowed to make 'state art' and who is doomed to remain an amateur.

Even in Rotterdam there is a 'battle' going on between a new generation of bureaucrats who wish to see art as entertainment and an established cultural sector that wishes to safeguard the exclusivity of its arts policy. The result is a foregone conclusion: 0-0. After all, a 'battle' demands competence and that is precisely what

both parties are lacking. So long as new cultural generations formed by the 'battles' of our urban culture play no part in policy-making and administration, then support for today's arts and cultural policy will continue to dwindle. Until then we will muddle on, watching Redman's *Walkmen* again and again, and dreaming of an E-Life as Alderman for Culture.