

2003

CONQUEST

A Dutch Entry To The 2003 Venice Biennale

Three years ago, the Boekmanstichting 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. Alongside countless other recreational activities, art and culture have ended up becoming market commodities in a market where there is stiff competition for a scarce amount of free time. The cultural sector is nervous and warns against 'selling out our civilization' and 'the rise of the experience economy'. In a free market, so the underlying argument goes, art and culture are being ruined by the visual culture of advertising, fashion, computer games, video clips, amusement parks and other merits of post-modern society. In his *Conventies in de hedendaagse kunst* (*Conventions in contemporary art*, 2002), Valentijn Bijvanck states that art and culture are 'weak interests' which merit the 'protection' of the state. Isn't this taking a rather narrow view of art and culture? Why should art and culture not be able to survive on their own? Is it only those forms of cultural expression which have reached maturity under the protectorate of an enlightened government that deserve the predicate 'art' or '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 competition. In the battle, skills or proficiencies are driven to ever greater heights. The battle establishes who is good at something and who is still wanting the necessary grade. Reggae, dancehall, hip hop, rap, R&B, turntablism, break dance, graffiti, sticker culture, comics, skateboarding, poetry slams, veejaying, fashion and other expressions of contemporary pop culture owe their very development to the battle. The battle is a universal and intercultural criterion of quality that 'autonomously' became fully fledged, in other words outside the preserve of government protection.

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 - the fans - perform as jury and make it clear which sound system they think competent with boisterous and noisy cheers or boos. The battle was imported from Jamaica, where it appeared in reaction to the colonization of radio stations, record companies and nightlife in the 1950s. Frustrated by the lack of a cultural offerings that corresponded with the demands of the public, a new generation of cultural entrepreneurs decided to satisfy that demand

themselves. Sound systems were set up in public gardens and parks, on squares and beaches, giving the Jamaican public a new perspective on identity, language, lifestyle, music and fashion. The names of Coxsone Dodd, Duke Reid, Prince Buster, King Tubby and Lee 'scratch' Perry, without whom the current hip hop, R&B, dancehall, rave and dance cultures would be inconceivable, are still intimately associated with this cultural movement.

Even in London, and later elsewhere in Europe, cultural elites warned against 'selling out civilization' when the battle intervened in the metropolitan fabric. The battle was not only considered to be at loggerheads with Western notions of art and culture, but was also perceived as a threat to 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. Black youths threw stones at the police, accompanied by sound systems on the pavements playing Jamaican evergreens such as 'War Inna Babylon' and 'Police and Thieves'. Out of solidarity, the sound-system fans Malcolm McLaren and Johnny Rotten launched their Sex Pistols and moulded a new youth culture. In exchange, the sound-system owner Don Letts opened the doors of his reggae club, The Roxy, in the West Indian neighbourhood of New Harlesden to white punks, giving them their first stage.

With the advance of multicultural society, the battle also underwent an enormous development. Our culture, our streetscape, our social lives, fashion, radio and television - all are unthinkable without the self-regulating medium of the battle. Last year, the Rotterdam hip hop promoter and artist Mike Redman collaborated with filmmaker Victor Vroegindewij to make a wonderful documentary, *Walkmen* (2002), in which he captured the history of Rotterdam hip hop, graffiti and break dance. In a jam-packed Off Corso, a popular Rotterdam music venue, the public was made acutely aware of the way in which the battle has grown to form the very core of our urban culture. Countless battles on countless stages separated the wheat from the chaff, and Rotterdam designed new cultural elites: the breakers Edson and Paolo, the graffers of Bad Boyz Inc., hip hop pioneers like Postmen, E-Life and Def Rhymz. As in Jamaica earlier, a new generation of entrepreneurs provided a cultural choice that had no priority on the agenda of cultural policy.

That is why the battle also incorporates a criticism of the current arts and cultural policy, in which hazy and even xenophobic categories such as 'purity', 'autonomy', 'originality' and 'authenticity' still persist as quality 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 be labelled 'folklore'. However, outside the ivory tower, society seems more vocal and creative than might ever have been suspected: cultural audiences seem perfectly capable of deciding which quality criteria a good work of art must satisfy.

Viewed from the perspective of cultural competence and competition, Jeannevan Heeswijk's contribution to the Dutch entry for the Venice Biennale is interesting. Her program *Langs de lijn van De Toekomst* (Along the Lines of The Future) entailed making an inventory of alive and kicking notions about competition, rules of play,

codes of honour, professionalism and - lastly - competence in the multicultural society of the Dutch town of Gorcum. Around the globe, the battle proves to be a wonderful driving force, not only for sport and play but also for art and culture. Individuals and groups have an inexhaustible desire to show others what they are good at, possibly to surpass others, and if their level falls short of others then to zealously prepare for a next confrontation, time and again. According to Guy Debord and the Situationists, probably a source of inspiration for Langs de lijn van De Toekomst, this is where the essence of cultural progress lies: culture as people's desire to present themselves to each other and then to others.

Van Heeswijk's crowning of her Venice presentation of the Gorcum project with a game of 'Conquest' ('Landjepik') is more than a waggish joke. This universal children's game brings together competition and competence, and the participant is invited to lay bare his or her deepest motives at the most basic level. In the context of the Biennale, the game poses a pressing question: how, as culture makers accustomed to preserves without competition, do we deal with the battle and what role do we attribute to it in intercultural society? The game's call for knives makes her choice politically relevant as well. To give the battle the benefit of the doubt is also to consider the dark side of the game: war, territorialism, machismo, pride. This theme is not sidestepped in the film *Walkmen* either: a turntablist explains that this is how the battle becomes success, that also people 'who couldn't do a thing' eventually threw their punches in the battle to command cultural respect. What does the noble notion of cultural competition embrace in the reprehensible survival of the fittest? For the moment Van Heeswijk is not giving any answers, but at least the debate is on.