

Interview with Rein Wolfs

Garance Massart-Blum and Amber Hickey

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As director of an influential institution – the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel¹ – what do you think the role of the curator is, in the context of the art world today?

Rein Wolf:

There are different possible roles. First of all, this depends on the difference between institutional curating and independent curating. An institutional curator is working with, and for, a specific community and, in my opinion, is trying to strengthen this community. An independent curator is delivering a specific input for a specific situation; he/she does not have to think in terms of the mid-term or long-term continuity, but is delivering specific content for a specific situation. There might be situations where it is, for instance, necessary to curate a show to be as global as possible, but there might also be situations where it is needed to curate on a more Western or even national or regional level. It might be necessary to confine yourself strictly to visual art, but it might also be necessary to broaden the scope of an exhibition in terms of cross-over and multiple-disciplinary dimensions. It is important that a curator knows his or her own strength and boundaries and the situation that he or she is part of. We do not always need the extremely 'creative' or the 'shamanistic' curator. A curator should also be a good craftsman, somebody who knows the job, and somebody who knows how to create the necessary conditions.

GMB&AH: As you've been working in an institutional context for many years, what are the challenges you find most interesting in this context?

RW: I like the possibility of profiling an institution over a certain period. I very much like to develop a certain 'style' and 'attitude' with an institution by programming in a more or less coherent way over a number of years. Furthermore, I like to influence questions relating to mediation and communication in a continuous way. These are all very impor-

tant and decisive instruments in implementing this 'style' and 'attitude'.

GMB&AH: You were the founding director of the Migros Museum in Zurich, back in 1996. What were the main issues at stake in starting an arts institution?

RW: We wanted to find a way of linking the patronage of Migros with the idea of running an institution. Essentially, I was looking for some kind of integral fostering of arts: commissioning, exhibiting, collecting and mediating (also in terms of opening for a market). For me it was important to work on a high international level, but also to translate this for a local context and using the polarity between a retailer and a museum, as an almost playful starting ground for communication.

GMB&AH: In 2008 you became director of the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel. What were your goals upon arrival in Kassel, and how have they changed since then?

RW: I wanted to define the difference with the other player in our house, Documenta, by focusing very strongly on solo exhibitions with an intense and gestural type of approach. I wanted to show the quality of the building with its extreme tension between classical outside and almost industrial inside. I also wanted to renew the relations with the people from Kassel and with the students from the Kunsthochschule. I wanted to create a community in and around the Fridericianum again.

GMB&AH: You have worked in various European cities such as Zurich, Rotterdam and Kassel. What challenges did each of these institutions present?

RW: Not only are Zurich, Rotterdam and Kassel very different cities, but also the Migros Museum, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, and



Kunsthalle Fridericianum are very different institutions. Zurich was commercially very strong; Rotterdam was changing very rapidly from a very left-wing society into a populist society. Kassel is the absolute paradox between certain marginality and a huge global competence in terms of contemporary art. I liked to work in all three environments because I could find ways to get along with the very different kind of communities. It is a continuing challenge to try to find a relationship with the existing communities and turn them into something new, in and around the art institution.

GMB&AH: In your first text for the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, you wrote, “the Art at the Fridericianum was to be human and humane.” Can you elaborate on what it means for art to be human and humane?

RW: I felt like making a statement against a program, which would be oriented towards the formal aspects of art too much, against a program, which would reduce contemporary art to a pitch for formal and immanent questions. I felt like going for universal questions in terms of content. It might sound like a bit of a cliché, but I think it is working.

GMB&AH: Were you able to achieve this aim?

RW: I think we are on our way. I think we were able to turn the Kunsthalle Fridericianum into a very specific kind of institution in which the visitors feel and experience that art does want to mean something in our world, that art does care and that art is not only something in its own right.

GMB&AH: In the same text, you also wrote, “The future in the Kunsthalle Fridericianum was to not be completely free of risks, was to be as courageous as possible, and was to now and then be provocative as well.” Do courage and provocation come hand in hand?

RW: Courage does not always provoke, but provocation has to do with being courageous. I like an institution to present itself as a coming together of strong attitudes, strong gestures. I believe that it is necessary to use provocation every now and then, to make clear on a broader societal level that art still exists and still cares for society. I don't believe that art is capable of changing the world completely, but I do believe that we need art, which is tackling our own, very human questions about life and death, about engagement, commitment, about history and about context.



Captions

1 Christoph Büchel, *Deutsche Grammatik*, 2008. Installation view Kunsthalle Fridericianum (detail)

2 Teresa Margolles, *Muro Ciudad Juarez*, 2010. Courtesy FRAC Nord Pas de Calais, Dunkerque. Installation view Kunsthalle Fridericianum. Photo: Nils Klinger

3 Rikrit Tiravanija, *A Retrospective (Tomorrow is Another Fine Day)*, 2004. Installation view Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (detail). Photo Nils Klinge

Notes

1 Rein Wolfs is now director of the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, Germany.

Rein Wolfs was appointed in 2013 as director of the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn. Since January 2008 Rein Wolfs has been the Artistic Director of the Kunsthalle Fridericianum. From 2002 until 2007 he was the Director of Exhibitions of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. In 2003 he curated the Dutch pavilion at the Venice Biennial. From 1996 until 2001 he was the first director of the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich.