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A speech by Edy De Wilde

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Rudi Fuchs has invited me to tell you something about my experiences with a museum of modern art. His invitation has to do - of course - with the Castello di Rivoli. Let me say first that it is getting time that an institute in Italy becomes involved in contemporary art. Because since long the contribution of this country to the artistic development of the western world is of great importance. I do not mean only during the first decades of our century but particularly the last 20 or even 30 years.

This Italian contribution has been shown in the museums of France, Germany, Switzerland and Holland, but hardly in Italy itself. The reason is simple: in Italy an efficient instrument to introduce contemporary art to the public did not exist. But this situation has changed since the Castello di Rivoli opened its doors. Here Italian art is placed in the context of the art in the western world. This museum made a brilliant start. The Castello has already got a reputation in the international art world. So it is time to define its policy for further development. This means that decisions for the future must be made.

We know that art of our time develops rapidly. A museum of contemporary art has to follow that development. A museum functions as the art it presents. Consequently such a museum is always in motion. Let me explain what I mean: in the 50's a museum of contemporary art exhibited paintings and sculptures which reflected rather traditional ideas, realized within traditional disciplines. That was the spirit of that period. There was a constant evolution. The revolution came in the end of the 50's and the beginning of the 60's. The spirit and imagination changed on all levels of our society. In European art Zero and Nouveau Réalisme, with its forerunners Fontana, Yves Klein and Manzoni, came up. With Pop Art the vulgarity of our consumer society, its publicity and supermarkets, intruded art. In New York the EAT corporation was founded (EAT = Experiments in Art and Technology). The painter Bob Rauschenberg was the vice-president. The moonlandings were emblematic for the 'great expectations' of that period. Jim Turrell bought an extinguished volcano in the painted desert, in order to create in its crater a physical shape of sun- and moonlight and the light of the stars: 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, an art for astronauts. In the end of the 60's the Italian artists took position. Arte Povera was a profound European answer to American vitality. The change of the sensibility in the 60's, the enormous scale enlargement of imagination and realization produced a landslide in our ideas concerning a museum.

The concept of the Centre Pompidou was born in those years. Its architecture manifests clearly the spirit of the 60's: a hangar building; no walls; no fixed disciplines in art anymore; the password was flexibility. But already at the opening of the building a new attitude, opposite to the ideas of the 60's, began to appear: the will to cross the borders had given way to define them. Time had come to defend the dignity of art. This proves that the adaptation of a museum building to living art will always create problems for the next future. Now the Centre Pompidou looks very dated and so does its concept.

The Castello di Rivoli does not suffer from this problem. Its baroque architecture radiates its own culture. The decorated rooms offer a great variety of spaces, which are not neutral like in most modern museum buildings. The Castello is a challenging environment. In this place the fast development of the spirit of our time is confronted with the quiet stability of its architecture.

For a museum of modern art there are two main concepts: one is based on the art-historical way of thinking, which means that art is divided in various movements. A museum based on such an approach shows art in a chronological way. As an example we could take the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Looking at the new presentation of the collection we see the earlier works by Picasso in the neighborhood of Toulouse-Lautrec and in another room the cubist Picasso together with Braque and other cubists. The surrealist Picasso follows in the room devoted to Surrealism. Thus the personal development of Picasso is split up in the images of successive periods in art history. What I say about Picasso's presentation is also true for Braque, Newman or De Kooning etc. This approach is, in a way, very justified, but the art works look like illustrations in a book.

I have an opposite view. For me the unique creativity of an artist is more important than the development of the artistic and intellectual climate of our time. I have always emphasized the personal view of the artist. This 'point de vue' has many consequences for the acquisition policy as well as for the exhibition program. Between these two different activities exists a narrow relation. What is important for the exhibition program is of course also considered important for the collection. It is clear that the best moment to compare one work with the other and to make a decision for an acquisition is the time when one is organizing an exhibition. In the Stedelijk Museum I have tried to organize first group shows of the upcoming art, like American Pop Art in 1964, Zero in 1965, colour field painting in 1967, Arte Povera in 1969, fundamental painting in 1975. These exhibitions were appropriate to find the key figures of the new spirit. Of those key figures we have organized personal exhibitions.

The exhibition program forms a lively, dynamic element, but the permanent collection is essential for the identity of a museum. In the collection the museum takes a clear stand. It is a manifest of the museum's conviction.

At my arrival in the Stedelijk - in 1963 - I made one decision which I never have regretted: in principle I decided not to buy art which originated before 1960. The alternative is always: one can spend a lifetime in filling in the gaps in a collection or one makes a new start. I have chosen for a new start, 'in principle' as I said, because dogmas do not fit in a museum policy. So I felt free to buy a big paper-cut by Matisse and paintings by Picasso, Newman, Dubuffet etc., made before 1960. Those acquisitions were exceptional but vital, vital in relation to the art of today. But I have never tried to make a complete collection. Museums which aim at completeness look similar. They miss character. I prefer a collection with many gaps but with strong representations of well chosen artists to a collection of samples.

There is one point which seems to me essential for a museum of modern art: the good relationship with the artists. I consider the artist as the closest collaborator of a museum. First he must feel at home. No good exhibition of a living artist can be made without his cooperation. He is also the best guide for museum people, because he has the most direct information about his artist friends. A good artist sends you always to another good artist. And a discussion with him keeps our mind more alive than the usual art-critical essays.

There is another point which I would like to mention: I do not think that a museum policy can be realized within the usual democratic procedures, which are normally based on the majority of votes. They lead to compromises. Generally a good artist evokes resistance with the one and enthusiasm with the other. He does not fit in a compromise. So in my opinion a committee can only function if the members share roughly each others opinions.

I want to finish my talk with some practical remarks. During 22 years I have been the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Amsterdam has one thing in common with Turin: it's an historical city, with many monuments. Amsterdam has taken advantage of this quality. It attracts more tourists than the rest of Holland. The politicians know very well that the cultural institutes, namely the museums, are important elements of the attractive power of the city. In the Stedelijk an independent commercial research institute has made an inquiry among the visitors of the museum, which is half a million a year. The results were as follows: in April 37% of the visitors are foreigners, in August 87%. 40% of the foreign visitors have planned their visit to the Stedelijk before leaving their country. The average stay in Amsterdam is 3 days. 65% of the visitors are younger than 35 years. It's evident that these facts are not only of cultural interest. So the city-fathers wanted to know the economic value of all cultural institutes in Amsterdam together. They have asked the economic faculty of the University of Amsterdam to supervise a serious research. That research took 2 years. It was found that the indirect income, caused by the activities of the art institutes in Amsterdam, is more than 500 million dollars a year. I must mention that Amsterdam's population is much smaller than the population of Turin.

Today artists, art critics and museum people come to Turin for the exhibitions in the Castello. Tomorrow the tourist will arrive. That is what we wish, because a museum must be used by the public. But it is even more important that the museum is a lively and stimulating place for the artist. To him the museum must offer an always changing confrontation with vital ideas of his colleagues. Thus he becomes conscious of his own identity as an artist. This function of a museum is always overlooked. Nevertheless it is essential for an art centre.

It is evident that a coherent policy and a continuous activity is necessary for the function and the prestige of this museum. It's my experience that museums in other countries need desperately a serious partner in Italy to share exhibitions and to organize them together. The Castello di Rivoli could become such a partner. The condition is: a solid base for its organization and financial structure.

A speech given by prof. Edy De Wilde on occasion of the presentation of the 1987 program for Castello di Rivoli.