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Interview with Wim Crouwel

former Director of Boijmans-Van Beuningen Museum

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Museum is not just an ordinary building. So, can you say what is a museum for you?

Perhaps the question seems obvious, however, the answer isn't so obvious because expresses different priorities, sensations and believes.

Well, in the Seventies we made a little booklet here in Holland on what museums should be. It was a little booklet that I made to get with a curator and the director of the museum of modern art in Amsterdam and we opted in that time for the "grey box", very simple, so that the work of art is number one.

But now, about 25 years later, I think a little different because the art scene is changing quite a lot, is it?

You have always an opinion in the time when artist creates and art constantly changing so your all ideas on what museum are and should be is constantly changing, at least I feel by myself, that I have different ideas on museums every time. The more you work with a museum, the more you discover and the more you feel.... Today it should be this and tomorrow you think it should be that. But a museum should be recognisable, so it should be interesting architecture.

But it should not be an expression of the building like Bilbao Guggenheim. I mean Bilbao Guggenheim. Is wonderful as an architecture, as a sculpture, as an expression, but is not so good for art. The Serra's exhibition in the large space that was okay because Serra is stronger than the building, but for the smaller paintings and things you really need.. the galleries for the museum are just straight square galleries, you see, within that building art doesn't fit to my opinion at all, so the expression of the building gives completely different idea of what you expect inside, and that is to my opinion wrong in this building.

But on the other hand, a building should be very interesting, that means, it should be good architecture, it shouldn't be a neutral shed, or anything like that, but interesting architecture so that it will be a kind of tension between the content and the building, that is always interesting this tension between the two things.

I could remember that in Bregenz symposium you said that the white box is not a bad place to make art.

Is not bad at all, is very good even.

The thing is, if you speak to artists, they always like better an old shed rebuilt to an art gallery. Frances, my son, which is an architect, he made a museum in the south of Holland, in Tilburg, it's an old wool spinning factory, beautiful shed from around 1900, top lights, and all these small wool boxes, where they had the wool in. And they left the building as it is, and painted it white and a nice new floor and it is absolutely one of the most fabulous museums. But in the same time, that building has something very intriguing: is not pure white box, not a shed that is nothing, but if you come along it is already a very industrial building, so the building is interesting, the plan is interesting, the material is

interesting, partly brick, partly concrete, but very industrialise done around 1900, so you only need it some small changes to make it a fantastic....

And a lot of artists always... have you for instance been to the Saachi collection in London? It's a very old garage or something that they rebuilt, they put white walls in a beautiful top light and it's fascinating, so most artists like such building very much because there the piece of art is number one. I think this is a typical view from an artist, I think if you look from the point of view of the public, then also the building should be interesting, and it should be very good architecture. At least the level should be all the same, should be high level architecture, high level art inside. This is the nicer museum you can think of.

**How do you think an architect ought to conceive the design of a museum?
Should the architect take the objects that will be housed in the museum space into consideration?**

I think he should at least take into consideration the main core of the collection, he should have a good idea on what the collection is. You see, you can have different opinions on what architect fits to it. But once an architect is shown for a museum, he should have a very good idea of the collection. I think the director of a museum should show the architect for an intense period the collection, and tell him a lot about the collection and why the collection was there and what was the history of the collection.

All these things the architect should have in his head, in order to conceive for certain idea. It may influence in one another way, but what I see is that many architect do museums and they have no idea of the collection. They just make maybe well-functional museums, but they have no idea of the collection. I think, each museum has a history with its collection, why is it and is it old masters or is only modern art, it's very different.

For instance, frank Gehry....even Richard Meier that did the Getty centre in LA, he of course like to do all the galleries himself, but the curators of that museum invited the French interior architect to do the galleries because they though Meier was not the right architect to do galleries for old masters. So that, it came this French interior decorator who made a very French interiors in these galleries, with the door in it, and Richard Meier hated it.

But on the other hand, I can understand why the direction of a museum thinks it should be careful, if Meier hangs his old master on the white walls it would be horrible, the white is overbold....

Richard Meier museums are fabulous for modern art, for bright large contemporary pieces, but for old masters is very difficult. and especially, if an architect like him and like Gehry has a such very specific idea on architecture and do not want to give any concession in the direction of above idea. I like Gehry as an architect very much, I like Meier as an architect very much, but for museums I don't think I would either give commission!

What's for you an unavoidable necessity in a contemporary art museum and what, on the contrary, something you wouldn't even see?

Well, more or less I've already set this. For a modern art museum, the constant changing of collections is more important than the permanent installations. If I would start from zero with a modern art museum, I would made my gallery such that, where I can very fast and constantly change every 8 weeks my installations. Again except for the most famous pieces, the international famous pieces that you always want to see. So, make a part of the museum with nice cabinets where you put these things quietly and you leave them there for a year or 2 years. But there should be much more rooms for a flexibility.

DO YOU THINK A MUSEUM SHOULD BE A VERY OPEN AND FLEXIBLE SYSTEM?

Very open flexible system, but on the other hand it should never show that because we know museums that have that kind of flexibility, with flexible walls and flexible sculpture-stand, entablement. They are part of the system and the system is shown, you should not see the system. It should be very neutral, it should be as if it has never been different. Because in the period of structuralism in architecture, so in the Sixties, you saw these buildings where the system of flexible walls was the ideal of the museum, and that is awful because you always came in and you see first the structure and the flexibility and then you see the pieces of art. So that's not what I mean.... I mean the system that you use to make it flexible should be very invisible... very invisible! should not show his technical site, that should be fine, it's difficult but should be fine.

Does an ideal location for a contemporary art museum exist?

Well, as I told you, some of the old building that are renovated they are absolutely perfect for art, but for modern art only for modern art. They look for the sheds, they look for the unexpected environments, since the modern art much more than the old art it is influenced by the environment. The environment and the pieces of art go into discussion with each other. And a piece of art put here is different than a piece of art put over there. In the minimal art period, in the Sixties, if you saw, they made especially only let say "white cube". But with the old masters is completely different, they are autonomous pieces in itself and they do not change if you hand them here or there. I cannot answer what there is a real perfect place, I can only say what is to my opinion a fantastic museum!

Donald Judd said "museums have become exaggerated, distorted and idle expression for their architects, most of whom are incapable of expression" and he posed the question: "why are artists and sculptor not asked how to construct this type of building?". What do you think about that?

Well, this a very difficult thing. Up to the moment now, with every planning of new museums never the artist is calling, it's very strange. On the other hand, you shouldn't always listen only to the artist because if you do that you will get the Saatchi gallery and not architecture at all.

Because sometimes I think, art, artists and architecture are enemies. some architects you can see from the architecture that they don't like art, at least they are fighting with the art you see, they think they are more important than the artists and the artists think that they are number one, and so there is always strong tension between the architects and the artists, in almost every museum building the artist has a remark, they always think it's a lousy building however good it is.

I have an experience in the Biennale in Venice. Holland has a nice pavilion, is done by Rietvelt. in the 50's. Inside the building there is a beautiful white space and three years ago or four years ago, before last Biennale, a Dutch artist came in and said "I don't like this building at all!" and he started to build it completely: he raised the floor, he put other colours on the wall to make his work coming out. Well, I can understand him but in the same time this Rietvelt building is very well design for architect: very good light, is a nice atmosphere, not too big not too small...so listen to the artists, coming to your question, is good I think you should take into consideration the remarks, but on the other hand, you should not listen too much, the architect should play its own role.

There is a designer Walter Nichols who works a lot for... like me a designer..... he does catalogues for museums and he is a professor at the Dusseldorf Academy. He did a museum in Cliff in Germany, with a very specific idea almost the idea of the Saatchi

Gallery, you know, almost do will nothing, but there he had already an interesting existing building, an old museum building, he only did some rebuilding. He tries always to talk to artists first because artists are his friend, he works a lot with artists he makes catalogues for artists, and he was given the chance to do this museum, so that's quite interesting.

Can this relationship generate positive synergy?

Absolutely. But there are so many kinds of artists - the painter, the sculptor, and the one who makes an installation and the one who does just a performance - they all have a different idea on what a museum should be. So how the museum should have any multipurpose spaces when you go in every direction? it's very difficult. I think what you ask for the permanent collection is a different space that for exhibitions. So a museum should have at least 2 kind of spaces for the permanent collection and for the exhibitions.

Donald Judd criticised the modern exposition machine: he argues that displacement and travel can be dangerous for art works. What do you think about the successful of temporary expositions?

Yes, sure it's very different makes..... absolutely, it's absolutely the case especially for the paintings and all paintings, you should be very careful. It's becoming more and more difficult to get a good exhibition. For instance, they are now doing in Rotterdam at Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, the Jheronimus Bosh exhibition in the autumn when the building is ready, and, well, they did not buy many paintings, but I think they only get about 10 out of the 20-25 existing because people do not allowed travelling these paintings. It's difficulty, it's high risk, so I think Judd is right by say you should be careful.

Temporary exhibition has a lot of success, hasn't it?

That's true. so you have always to be in the middle. In my time, when I was the Boymans' director, I made some very good temporary exhibitions because you got people at the temporary exhibitions. And you never get too much people in the permanent collection..... except for the larger museums, in the Van Gogh Museum, the pinacotheca in Munchen and in the Uffizi in Florence, the famous museums with famous collections, where the tourist go, so they have the 90% tourist and 10 % people from the own city. And this is the same with the Van Gogh Museum here, it has five-six hundred thousand people easily, maybe a million. Only because all tourists want to see van Gogh and the Anna frank's house, they want to see. So, it all depends on what kind of museum you are building. If it's a very famous collection than the permanent installation is the more important, if is not such a famous collection than should be more important the temporary exhibition.

People are very interested in the events, aren't they?

The events, the new things.... and that means.... when I was in a museum, I introduced the constantly changing permanent installations, we made exhibitions instead of permanent collection because we knew when there is one but not exhibition the visitor now became down to almost zero. So, you should open an exhibition. So that we said why not making out of role the collection exhibition? and that would be did. Only the most famous pieces we always maintained, and all the other pieces we went in changing. So you have a lot of

variety, but you should always be careful to have your most important famous pieces of art always on display because tourists otherwise are very very very angry on you! Yes, we had a lot of complains when one of your famous painting is in another exhibition, for instance, we have the "tower of Babel" that was a very..very important painting... and sometimes you have to send it to an important exhibition and you put the piece of paper on the wall saying "temporary away" and you see always angry visitors who came especially for that. Absolutely... it's very difficult to be an architect for a museum! (he laughs) ... very difficult!

Should a museum be a close structure consisting of rooms, corridors, bookstands, storage facilities, a cafeteria, etc. Or should it be a very open flexible structure that would allow for a continuous adjustment to a broad conceptual variety of works?

Yes, it should be a close structure but in the same time a large... in my museum I had a large room 30 metres by 30 metres by 8 metres high, and it was a fantastic room, but we had a system of walls' separation in it because some paintings you cannot hang in such a whole because it got lost.

That's a problem we have here with the Van Gogh Museum. V. G.

Museum is designed by Rietvelt, as a model and when R. died his companions worked out his basic idea and built this museum.

We always thought that the building was 5/4 of the size it should have been, it was just a fifth oversize too big. It should have 20% smaller, the all things, every room then should fit.....

because there were large galleries and these small paintings of V. G. they were like stamps on the wall, it's a pity.

So, you must be very careful if you make large flexible rooms that should be a possibility to make them intimate and smaller. Not every piece of art is able to withstand a large space.

Is it better to guide the visitor to a prearranged itinerary or leave them the freedom to move around? Do you prefer strictness or, on the other hand, the risk of confusion?

Oh no no no no..... don't think so, I've understand your question. On one hand I like the Le Corbusier model, the thing you go all around like a shall and then you go out, that is an interest idea if you have to tell a linear story. If there is a story with a beginning and an end, then you should use something like that.

In some exhibition, for instance, with a certain theme it's nice that you see object 1, object 2, object 3 and go thought the exhibition. I made an exhibition now here in the city, in a new church in the centre of the city, it's an exhibition one-go, you start with number 1 and you see the different objects with the sound system so they tell story with it, it's a Middle Age pieces. There I specially made a certain order to go otherwise you wouldn't understand the exhibition.

But for a museum this is much different, you know, I would like the museum is so clear in its layout that you understand the building as a visitor. The old fashioned classicism buildings with an entrance in the middle, with the stair in the middle with the windows on one side and the window in the other side on one floor, and the second floor with only one line of galleries around a court, are still the best museums in order the people understand it, because is so simple that you know if you go here you go there, you go up you go there.... so, they understand how the layout of the museum is.

Such museums never need a guiding system, never need arrows, name, nothing... But if you make a complex building, very interesting complex building like Gehry you need a

signing system otherwise you get lost and you never know where you are. I mean, it should be a clear building that from the outside you almost more or less understand how it is, so that you can find your way. How do you choose your own way to follow every room or you can go in between out and say "well I've seen that and I now go to another side"

What about the Tate Modern layout?

Very simple shape. It's a very symmetrical building, with the tower in the middle. It's more or less like the 19th century museum, that's Schinkel's model, like Schinkel has done in the 19th century in Germany. The simplest system of a museum still is a very good system, but modern variations on that are not bad at all.

And there is another thing that is very important to my opinion, that is the most awful thing in a museum is the "museum fatigue": if you get tired in a museum after one hour you cannot see it anymore. So that means you have to make a museum such that it was in the old museum in Rotterdam perfectly done originally: it was U shaped building with a garden in the middle and the side wings to close it off and half of each of the wings you have the windows to look out. So you went through the 1 2 3 4 galleries and you were in a little room where you could look out. And you could sit. And then you went another few rooms and then you came to the crossing to the other room and they are opened and they only had this long chair and you could sit out and look in the garden. That was in the 30 when the opening of the museum, all photographs with long chair put together the chairs...you know....near each other, and no art. People could sit there wait for quarter of an hour, look in the garden, relax and go on.

And that is so important, that is so nice, that museum give time to relax. Sitting in a museum is very important, much of the modern museums has no sitting at all. I think sitting is very important because in every museum you get tired. Because looking, walking, and standing all time on your feet is a very tired business. So, I think you should think on that all ideas.

Which is the best criterion to show art works: chronologically, by subject, by artist...?

That's is very difficult. For the old masters you like to show them by the schools, it's important to understand and so you must due it by schools: the Flemish master, the Italian masters, the Dutch masters....

But in an exhibition, this is always much different, there is a theme, there is another story that you want to tell with the art, you see, there is always difference between the autonomous piece of art or the story telling that you are doing with the pieces of art, there are people against that all idea of storytelling. There are people who are absolutely furious against theme exhibitions because in every theme exhibition you use the piece of art in order to tell a story, so consequently the pieces are always number 2 and never number one, so a lot of people think that the piece of art should always be number one. But on the other hand, you can make very good theme exhibitions, where still the art is number one. I can't give an answer straight on that one by subject. You have to have the possibility either to show..... all depends on the collection.... again, what is the collection and the collection is decisive for how you do it, by chronologically, by subject, by theme, by school....

I've heard about an exhibition of Jasper Johns in London, there the curator followed a chronological order for his art works but in the last room he put all the pieces he like most....

Yes, of course, that's the nicer room possible of the whole exhibition.

There is now an exhibition opened last Friday in the Stedelijk Museum, is an old building of the 19th Century and Alvaro Siza made a new plan and they will start the next year to do the new Siza additional. But now they have an exhibition of Vanderheyden... He always hangs his painting himself, he doesn't allow a curator to hang it. He said "I'm going to do an exhibition in your museum but I do the catalogue, and I do the hanging". He also did an exhibition in my museum 15 years ago.... exactly the same. He doesn't even show the year that the work was created, so he shows all the works from the Sixties, and he hangs all with each other, all by typical type of art. He always hangs a new piece of today and piece of 20 years ago together do something new. That's his way of hanging, that's very interesting, it's very adventurous and very good way.... that's what you can do with Jasper Johns exhibition for instance, if you have that idea you hang these things together so you feel they come from certain background of thinking. That's interesting! You can do that not chronologically, so a lot of art historians by the opening of this exhibition said "I get lost" because they want to know the year it was done in order to see the development of the art.

Serra is sure that in a museum, masterpieces take on other meanings: and isn't that the purpose of a museum?

Yes, it's absolute right, as we have already discussed it before especially works like Serra whose typical ideas comes from the minimal art period in the 60s, when he started. These pieces are so simple so strong because the idea of Serra is weight, the heavy weight of the things, they all standing there. As if this is a piece of paper but is metal so thick and heavy and just standing because of the weight. His work especially in one place is completely different than in another place. He always make the pieces especially for a site. But that's a type of art, so that not all artists. There are painters they don't mind where his painting is hanging, doesn't mind because it is just a piece itself. So, there is so much different in opinion between artists and the period they come from.

The ambition of a museum to classify into contexts, to look at, to judge and to qualify every single work of art is diametrically opposed to the right of the same work of art to autonomy. This contradiction become extremely virulent in the contemporary art. How to solve it?

Absolutely. Oh, it's difficult to solve it, you never can solve this, there is always a debate, it's a constant debate in artistic scene. I think we should not look for a fitting answer. Once you fit an answer tomorrow its different, so I think it's a search for an answer you'll never get.

It is constantly changing meaning, and that's the interesting thing of art, there is always a new artist with new ideas that are absolutely opposite of the ideas you are just discovered. So, it's a very difficult thing to answer, to my opinion you just have to leave it.

And you should have to react at the moment you have to react.

Do you think that for an artist a new building is something anonymous?

Not really anonymous, when it's anonymous is nothing. It should have character but in the same time it should be distance. The distance in architecture gives the freedom to the artists to express themselves and not cry over it. You know "I'm an architect". You see sometimes beautiful galleries quite size, good materials, very interesting for art, and they have a ceiling with the light system (this is one a technique), and it is destroying the whole

room because too much is happening on the ceiling too much things: the daylight, the artificial light, the shed opening and closing. Many museums have this system, when the sun comes up the shades close and suddenly the whole atmosphere change in the gallery. Artists made the art in their studios where the light is constantly different, the sun is coming in and then it's a grey day, so most pieces of art like the changing atmosphere so you should not try in a museum gallery to make a kind constant atmosphere. In the 50s they built quite a lot museum building with only artificial light and a deck with artificial light. It was always the same if you come by day or by night. It's awful. Still for paintings top light is the best. I'm a promoter of the top light for painting not for sculpture. Sculpture are awful with top light, should have side light, so if the collection is mainly of sculptures than you should do a different museum then a museum for paintings. And even there if it's modern art or masters very different. You should know the collection. The difficult you have if you have to build a Kunsthalle like in Bregenz is that you have no collection, it should be suitable for everything, then you need more or less simple spaces where you can do a lot you see. And in Bregenz is not so bad, although I prefer the one in Vaduz, smaller but so much better.

Which existing contemporary art museum do you like most? Why?

Well, I'd like the best the Fondation Beyeler in Basel from Piano, as one of the modern ones, he also did the Menil Collection in America with this beautiful roof, beautiful light inside. But this

one, as what I've say, has very interesting and simple layout, the long stretch museum as a visitor you know more or less how it is and how the plan is working and you have ample time to look outside in the beautiful layout in the landscape. And the lighting is perfect, it's such a fantastic building and it's one of my favourite today because is absolutely beautiful for the art, as well for all the masters and the same for the modern art. But for that type of art and for that specific collection it's the most fantastic museum, yes, I'd like that. I'm sure of that!

How can you imagine a museum for the new millennium?

Well, I think the question for the new millennium is really the idea of flexibility, to find a new answer on the idea of flexibility. The flexibility is easy to handle, not the system that is so expensive that museums they don't do it, you see....it is like a bookshelf that you can change... you never change it, once you put in one order than never change anymore. It makes no sense, it's only for the first time.

So, the flexibility should be very workable and should not be visible it should have the idea of well-created permanent museum and still is very flexible. Because in the future we will see even if you don't like the idea, people will go more and more to events. It's the ZAP CULTURE, you always change your video in the evening, even look at 2 things at the same time, you switch over in order to follow 2 stories.

So, I don't know what the question exactly will be but one could be better prepared for developments. So, to my opinion you are students and you have a fantastic future. Yeah! it's a future with much less predestine idea on museums, well in my time we all knew what a museum should be and was all wrong after all, but for the future nothing is sure, it's such an adventure so interesting. You find an answer for uncertainly.

The world is constantly changing all the time quicker and quicker and so you have to be prepared as an architect for such things.

You do not build such something for eternity although architecture still is something for long time. The building itself should have character, so that even than 10 years it should have character. Take the museum in Groningen, by Mendini, is already now out-of-date and 5 years ago is opened. If you have seen it once you'll never come to see it again. It's nice it's joyful, it's like Mendini, it's also boring.

A museum should be more neutral but in the same time it must have character, very interesting good architecture. And give a lot of freedom for the visitors and for the art, it's a very difficult thing.

Sometimes I'm glad I'm not an architect!!!