

## Still a World to be Won: An Outline of Today's Cultural Diplomacy in the Netherlands

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**Theme:** This ARI describes the recent developments in the Netherlands' international cultural relations. To what extent can it be said that the governmental and many non-governmental players practice deliberate, targeted, well-coordinated cultural diplomacy?

**Summary:** The practice of both diplomacy and international cultural relations is being increasingly influenced by the effects on Dutch society of globalisation, immigration and the changing geopolitical situation. So far these two trends have run in parallel, but they both make a tighter arts and heritage policy possible in the form of cultural diplomacy. For the Ministry of Foreign Affairs this trend makes it imperative to justify its conduct in the world, also in terms of domestic policy, and for the arts and heritage sector to justify the financial support it receives from public funds. Thus the actors in both areas are forced –in a positive sense– to work with one another: together they can develop a new way of thinking and policy framework and put it into practice.

### Analysis:

*The Netherlands: The Multicultural Drama and the First Political Assassination since that of William of Orange*

The year 2000 saw the publication of an essay by the influential political commentator Paul Scheffer, entitled 'The Multicultural Drama', in which he noted that although the Netherlands had been an immigration country for decades, new populations, especially from Islamic countries such as Morocco and Turkey, had completely failed to integrate. He called for a halt to the 'politically correct' denial of extremist tendencies in the Islamic community, for people not just to live alongside one another but to work towards solutions in an open, frank dialogue. His essay caused a fierce public debate.

This had scarcely died down when the populist politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered in 2002 –and in the grounds of a public radio station– by an environmental activist. It was the first political assassination in this country since Balthasar Geraedts shot Prince William of Orange on the doorstep of his Delft home in 1587. The Netherlands was in shock.

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The country was shocked yet again in 2004, this time by the murder of the film maker and columnist Theo van Gogh, by a man of Moroccan origin living in Amsterdam. The killing was carried out as a ritual sacrifice. The assassin's motive was directly traceable to a film pamphlet, *Submission 1*, which Van Gogh had made in collaboration with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Dutch MP of Somali origin. The short film, broadcast on national public television, was intended as an indictment of the suppression of women under Islam and at the same time as a deliberately provocative manifesto. The argument was illustrated by texts from the Koran on naked women's bodies. It was far from being a high-quality artistic product. That it would result in angry Letters to the Editor, many of them from Muslim women themselves, or in taking them to court, was only to be expected; but that it should be taken as a motive for murder dumbfounded the whole right-minded Dutch population.

The Netherlands has lost its innocence –that was also the reaction of the stunned foreign press, which over a relatively short space of time had been presented with an X-ray of Dutch society that left nothing to the imagination–. What had happened to the familiar tolerant, harmonious, progressive, dynamic country on the North Sea? We have had a violent awakening. The Netherlands, which liked to see itself as a 'guiding light' in the world, had to reinvent itself. It went into self-analysis, as it were.

The latest event that has won us the doubtful honour of making the world press is the appearance on the Internet of the film *Fitna* in 2008. Our embassies in the Islamic world were placed on high alert as a precaution. *Fitna* is an amateurish piece of hackwork, devoid of talent, by the right-wing populist Dutch MP Geert Wilders. The message is simple and crude: the Koran incites to violence (it goes without saying that his cut-and-paste job does not fail to include the still shocking images of the Twin Towers collapsing). The government immediately repudiated the message of *Fitna*. Meanwhile, the Public Prosecution Service has rejected all charges against Wilders of discrimination against and deliberate insult to Muslims. While his many rabid statements in the House of Representatives and his video clip are hurtful, they do not constitute criminal offences, given 'the context of the public debate', according to the ruling.

As we can see from the foregoing, when politicians use the medium of art to disseminate their opinions there are two losers: politics and art. It is not the purpose of art to proclaim a message. As the Dutch poet Gerrit Komrij aptly put it, 'Art is not a donkey for carrying parcels but a swan'. Bad art is thus, by definition, bad cultural diplomacy as well.

#### *New Parameters for More Intensive Public Diplomacy*

Before the upheaval that marked the start of the new millennium, the thrust of public diplomacy was mainly to explain Dutch policy on ethical questions such as euthanasia and abortion, gay marriage and toleration of soft drugs. This progressive policy was little known or understood in many countries, even in Western Europe. The unjust image of the Netherlands as a cold laboratory of social ethics was and still is in need of correction. Recently, however, fresh issues have been added to the list, the most important ones being our restrictive immigration policy, the difficulty we are experiencing with integrating the Muslim community in particular, our approach to extremism, and freedom of expression versus deliberate attempts to hurt those of other beliefs. These are all social problems that are not confined to the Netherlands, and they can only be solved internationally, starting in Europe. In a nutshell, they call not for diplomacy in the form of detailed explanations of how (and how well) we do things but for close cooperation and exchange with governmental and non-governmental bodies in countries with similar problems and with the countries of origin, eg, Morocco and Turkey. In recent years the

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs has stepped up its public diplomacy campaign, taking these issues on board, and it is developing a more strategic approach to International Cultural Policy in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Art and heritage can thus announce themselves as serious 'tools' in Dutch cultural diplomacy, albeit it is still in its infancy.

#### *An Outline of International Cultural Policy*

Most Western European countries with a major cultural tradition have a dense network of cultural centres in the rest of the world. The Netherlands has only three. The oldest is the Institut Néerlandais in Paris, which dates back to 1957. Then came the Erasmus House in Jakarta, in 1980, which places a contemporary stamp on the strong, but also complex, historical ties with Indonesia from the colonial era. Its aim is to preserve the shared cultural heritage, and it hosts exhibitions, concerts and literary encounters. Along with the local embassy it also organises cultural collaboration and exchange between the two countries (a total of 65 Dutch-based arts and heritage activities in 2007). More than 20 years after the Flemish cultural centre De Brakke Grond was opened in Amsterdam, 2004 saw the opening of the Flemish-Dutch centre deBuren. Flanders and the Netherlands, strongly linked –but also to some extent separated– by language and culture, have thus created a cultural platform in the European capital.

It has never gone any further than these three. The Scientific Council for Government Policy recommended setting up new cultural institutions in Cologne, London and New York in the mid-1980s, but nothing has come of it. Nor is the commemoration in 2009 of the foundation of New York (New Amsterdam) by 'our' Henry Hudson expected to bring the revamped plan for a Holland House in the city any closer to realisation: the cost is thought to be simply too high and out of proportion to the anticipated effect on cultural presence and exchange. The government prefers to use its ever scarce resources more flexibly. How does that look like? This question has still not received a satisfactory answer.

#### *Better Policy Coordination for the Past 10 Years*

It was only in the mid-1990s that the Netherlands developed a more coordinate international cultural relations policy, beginning with a reorganisation of foreign policy itself. The Fall of the Wall demanded a radical rethink of our relationship with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in particular. A major reorganisation of our diplomatic presence in the world took place. The Netherlands focused on strengthening its position in the European integration process, a striking feature of the operation being the aim of allowing culture to play a more important role in foreign policy. The seriousness of this intention was shown by the fact that this time, for the first time in history, a substantial additional budget was set aside for it. The money, referred to as the Netherlands Culture Fund (part of HGIS, the Homogeneous Budget for International Cooperation) was released as a result of the reorganisation operation.

It was decided, moreover, to settle the dispute between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science as to which of them has competence for International Cultural Policy. The two Ministries have fought for supremacy in this field for decades. The Foreign Affairs Ministry regarded culture as part of foreign policy. The Education Ministry considered it to be an extension of national cultural policy, thus falling within its area of operation and expertise. These 'instrumental' and 'intrinsically artistic' views respectively seemed to be mutually exclusive. It was therefore decided in 1997 that

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the two Ministries should spend the additional funds in proper consultation on two main objectives:

- (1) Strengthening the international profile of Dutch arts and culture
- (2) Promoting good mutual relations with certain countries

This reflected a sincere intention to combine intrinsically cultural and foreign policy elements: in other words, culture should be a fully-fledged third key element in foreign policy, alongside politics and economics. The Foreign Affairs Ministry used this financial boost to strengthen its Culture Department in 13 priority areas. The Education Ministry delegated the funds to the national Cultural Funds and Sector Institutes, in line with the arm's-length principle which was applied throughout the sector at the beginning of the 1990s. An official committee of the two Ministries made recommendations directly to the respective Ministers on large-scale events. And the two Ministries set up an exchange scheme for civil servants to improve one another's expertise in this joint area of activity.

#### *International Cultural Policy: Some Key Figures*

For a small country it is fair to say that the Netherlands is particularly active in the arts. The number of recorded foreign activities by artists and arts institutions went up by 20% in 2007 compared with 2006, 4,572 as against 3,673. This multiplicity of activities covers all the arts and cultural heritage, taking place in over 50 countries throughout the world. Music is by far the most active sector abroad, accounting for some 35% of activities; visual arts and cinema account for about 15% each; theatre, dance and literature for about 35% together; the remaining 15% of activities are in the fields of architecture, design, multimedia, photography and heritage.

As regards geographical distribution, our neighbour Germany is well in the lead with 790 activities, followed by the US (468), Belgium (316), France (302), Italy (267), Austria (191), the UK (176), Japan (143), Spain (138) and Poland (118).

A strong climber in the league table is China, in 11th place with 99 activities (as against 66 in 2006, 40 in 2005 and 21 in 2004). (Source of key figures: [www.sica.nl](http://www.sica.nl).) The explanation for China's rise, now under Dutch International Cultural Policy, is very simple, namely the Netherlands China Arts Foundation, which was recently set up by the two Ministries involved and aims to intensify cultural relations between the two countries. They have given the Foundation a start-up grant to mobilise the arts field to begin cooperating or develop existing contacts with Chinese artists and arts organisations. This deliberate focus on a particular country for foreign policy and economic reasons is a new and very recent feature of International Cultural Policy.

#### *Two Major Turning Points on the Path to Cultural Diplomacy Policy*

The shocking socio-political events of recent years have had a lasting influence on ideas about the importance of culture in diplomacy. There are also two projects that have given a strong impetus to the new practice of cultural diplomacy and thinking on that subject.

The Netherlands held the Presidency of the EU in the first half of 2004. An innovation in International Cultural Policy, and a major turning point on the path to cultural diplomacy, was the project 'Thinking Forward', under which programmatic heading a comprehensive contemporary arts programme was held in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe joining the EU, and by those countries in the Netherlands. How did this innovation come about? It was an initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with clear and distinct foreign

policy objectives. In consultation with the Education Ministry the Ministry asked the *Fonds voor de Podiumkunsten* (Performing Arts Fund) to arrange an arts programme with the Mondriaan Foundation. There was no interference whatsoever on matters of content: they were given *carte blanche*. A budget of around €2 million was provided. The result was over 90 theatre and dance events, concerts, exhibitions, debates and lectures in all the new Member States and the Netherlands. In a very short space of time the Director and his artistic team managed to more than double the budget from sponsorship and grants from the arts bodies themselves. This was a turning point, especially as it showed that it was perfectly possible to reconcile foreign policy interests and intrinsically artistic processes with one another, to their mutual benefit. The evaluation of this large-scale project produced a remarkable conclusion from the arts sector, that more could have been achieved in diplomatic terms, had it not been for reticence on the part of the politicians.

Another turning point, of a reflective nature, was the publication in 2005 of a collection of essays, 'All that Dutch', an initiative of the Service Centre for International Cultural Activities (SICA), in which art professionals, academics, politicians and policy-makers gave their undiluted and strikingly unanimous opinion on the state of Dutch International Cultural Policy. What it boiled down to was this: the Netherlands has turned in on itself, partly as a result of recent political developments; it is not taking sufficient account of globalisation and the changing geopolitical situation in the world; the arts are not sufficiently engaging with present-day social reality, which is a local reflection of global change; as a result they are in danger of losing their position in the international vanguard; a whole lot of activities are taking place in a whole lot of foreign countries, but it is a mere volley, not very effective and lacking a long-term strategic plan. And it was from the unimpeachable quarter of the art professionals that the most remarkable observation came:

'Dare to make choices, you people in government! Be more explicit when setting priorities in your policy, and it's OK to base them on purely foreign policy considerations. The art world and politics have had their backs to one another for too long. It's high time for the former to pay more attention to the real world and the latter to develop more genuine interest in what the muses can do.'

A direct result of the publication was the 2006 policy statement by the two Ministries, *Koers Kiezen* ('Setting a Course'). For the first time International Cultural Policy gained a strategic component, and the development of cultural diplomacy thus began.

#### *The Main Players in the Field of Cultural Diplomacy*

In addition to the two Ministries, the Council for Culture plays a role in the development of broad policy as an advisory body to the government. In turn it bases its analyses and recommendations partly on those of the Funds and Sector Institutes, which operate close to the grass roots, as grant-giving bodies and specialist service and research centres for artists and arts institutions in all fields. By far the largest Funds are those for the performing arts, visual arts and cinema, but those for literature and architecture, although their budgets are modest, are just as influential in their fields. The main Sector Institutes are those for theatre and dance (Theater Instituut Nederland), all genres of music (het Nederlands Muziekcentrum) and architecture (the Netherlands Architecture Institute). The function of Sector Institute for the visual arts is fulfilled, where necessary, by the two Funds, the Mondriaan Foundation for museums and art galleries and the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture for individual artists. Most of these Funds and Institutes took on their present form in the past two decades. They play a vital

role in artistic life in the Netherlands and the presentation of Dutch art abroad. They are the organisations that document and actively maintain the extensive national and international networks in the various arts.

A relative newcomer to the field of cultural diplomacy is the Dutch Centre for International Cultural Activities (SICA). Founded at the end of the 1990s, this small, flexible organisation has rapidly developed into an indispensable connecting link between the two Ministries involved, and their sources of funding, and the arts field. To begin with, SICA is the service and documentation centre for all arts institutions wishing to have an international presence. It also advises the government on strategic international cultural policy, however, and implements this policy in close collaboration with the Funds, Sector Institutes and embassies. SICA is the 'nerve centre' and the liaison officer between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its cultural attachés at the missions and the arts sector.

#### *Agenda for the Period Ahead*

We are now awaiting a new policy statement from the Ministries. SICA, speaking for the arts sector among others, has already fired a substantial shot across their bows: in a letter to the two Ministers it calls, among other things, for them to create more scope in their policy for 'a pioneering spirit, based on concern for the world, curiosity about the new geopolitical situation, engagement, and realisation that the Dutch public debate will remain infertile without an illuminating encounter and exchange with other cultures and their values'. It stresses the importance of reciprocity, ie, more scope for international presentations in the Netherlands as well as presenting our splendid arts abroad. It calls for the integration of current development assistance policy with international cultural policy to create effective, sustainable cultural diplomacy. It wants Dutch policy to tie in better with the European cultural agenda by continuing to invest in bilateral and multilateral programmes and developing activities with European countries and regions. It asks for a multi-annual programme to be developed with the Mediterranean and Arab world so as to strengthen cultural contacts and improve the image of the Netherlands, which has come under pressure from recent political and social developments. As regards the tools to be used, the arts sector urges the deployment of a 'cultural assistance pool' from among its own ranks to strengthen the embassies and enable them to operate jointly and even more flexibly in those places in the world where this is necessary.

**Conclusion:** In the foregoing I have described how the far-reaching social and political events in the Netherlands have deeply affected both the world of diplomacy and that of the arts. Both of them are now displaying much more social concern. In response they have also become more involved with one another. The old dividing line between intrinsically cultural processes and foreign policy interests has been largely swept away as a result of specific shared experiences, and strategic International Cultural Policy is developing into a form of cultural diplomacy, albeit still in its infancy. The many players in this complex field now face the task of developing these experiences and embedding them in a sustainable policy for the years ahead. The first hurdle that needs to be tackled is the difference in culture between the two Ministries. The strict hierarchy of the Foreign Affairs Ministry is diametrically opposed to the open-minded network organisation of the arts ruled over by the Education Ministry. But taking that hurdle requires something of those concerned that is a prerequisite for cultural diplomacy anyway, intercultural competence.

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