

Appendix 3a: Translation KUNSTENISRAËL Magazine 2013, p. 12-13

“Not a cent to spend on art, and still there was art”

Interview with museum director Edwin Jacobs about KUNSTENISRAËL's trips for Dutch museum curators

“Everybody is an artist” is the motto of Utrecht’s Centraal Museum, after the famous saying by artist Joseph Beuys. It became even more meaningful when the museum’s director Edwin Jacobs took an art tour through Israel. “I experienced the trip as a lesson in life.”



“A wonderful experience” is Centraal Museum director Edwin Jacobs's immediate reaction as he reflects on the seven-day trip exploring Israel's arts scene that he took in March 2012, at the invitation of KUNSTENISRAËL. “Very intensive, and a fantastic program. The enormous diversity especially made a lasting impression on me,” he tells me in his workroom in the Utrecht museum.

The trip was a pilot project, organized by curator Ronit Eden who remembered Jacobs from a joint art project in the town of Oss in the province of Brabant. “The fund wanted to introduce curators and museum directors to all of what’s going on in the arts in Israel,” he says. “We seized the opportunity.”

For Jacobs, Israel had always been for him primarily a historical concept, “still imbued with political and religious symbolism.” Once he was there wandering around, conversing, and observing, he discovered two things: “That in Israel it’s about something totally different from the clichés we get here on TV: it’s about people” and that those people embraced the arts and culture “with tremendous power and energy”. Jacobs: “Even if some of the places we visited didn’t have a cent to spend on art, there was still art. I almost felt it was a lesson in life.”

Jacobs had a full schedule during the trip. As part of a group that included Yvonne Ploum, director of the Armando Museum, he visited the most prominent museums in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, speaking with their directors and curators. They also established contacts with small-scale initiatives in Arab villages. “We also went to one of the most beautiful and authentic kibbutzim in the north, Ein Harod”, Jacobs adds, “and visited lots of artists in their studios.”

Residential neighborhood

One of his most inspiring encounters, says Jacobs, was being introduced to Gallery Barbur in Jerusalem. “They’re in a space maybe twice as big as this room, in the middle of a residential area. Their motto is making the white cube dirty. Museums tend to be self-absorbed and somewhat sterile. At Barbur, he discovered, all the doors were open and people brought the outside world inside as much as they could.

“Anybody who was interested in drawing could take a workshop,” Jacobs explains. “The instruction books that students could take with them landed back in their library. Parents would also come in towards the end of the afternoon to look around before picking up their kids from the kindergarten nearby.” This generated the lively atmosphere and the many contacts that help keep the gallery alive. “Very inspiring,” says Jacobs.

Another example was a “fantastic dance performance” that he saw in Tel Aviv. “You could recognize the typical – highly physical – tradition in Israeli choreography. The way a method actor totally steep himself in his character, that’s what they do with dance there. I think that Israel demands it somehow as a country. The dance, the music, the visual arts all have a vitality I’ve never seen before, and are continually geared to communicating with their audiences. Art and culture are emphatically seen as the means of getting dialogue going between various groups in society.”

No censorship

The great thing about a KUNSTENISRAËL art tour, says Jacobs, is that there is no censorship at all. “You can look at everything. And we did. Even when we were in an Arab village and visited Gallery Um el Fahem, a gallery and archive of Arab art.”

This still-new initiative aims to show a new facet of the historical Arabic identity in the next few years, and presents artists with dual Israeli-Palestinian backgrounds. Jacobs: “It didn’t matter to the director who we spoke with whether his initiative was completed tomorrow or in ten years, or even after he’d died – as long as it happened. Religion was hardly a factor in his decision making. It revolved around bringing together people from different cultures or identities.”

Since he took this trip, these incomparable experiences have helped Jacobs to look at the world differently, especially regarding the significance of art and culture in it. “I’m now looking into whether we can apply the working principle of Barbur – working with the surrounding neighborhood – here in Utrecht. In the meantime, Barbur has been able to organize a ‘Barbur Bazaar’ weekend at the Tate Modern in London. All the cultural and ethnic groups from the area around the museum brought in a symbol that expressed their identity. These objects were sawed in half and then glued back together during several workshops to make new symbols, which were sold there. It’s so simple and yet so effective –that’s what I think is interesting.”

The art tour will certainly lead to an exchange program between his museum and partners in Israel (see box). But, says Jacobs, his ambition goes further than that. “What does a trip like that do to you as a museum director? Try to write that down in your evaluation. And how can you incorporate what you’ve experienced into your own working methods? These are questions that just naturally come up.”

It is his hope that museums in the Netherlands will be inspired by the commitment to the arts that he encountered in Israel. Jacobs: “I almost think this trip should be a requirement for anybody who’s seriously involved in the art and culture sector here.”

Centraal Museum working with Israel

In his evaluation of the art tour, Jacobs sums up a few possible cultural exchanges.

- An exhibit on the *Caravaggists* can be set up with the Tel Aviv Museum.
- The Centraal Museum can assist in setting up a museum for Palestinian art.
- Tel Aviv is a “Bauhaus city”, which links nicely with the Centraal Museum’s Rietveld Collection. A joint program with this theme is feasible.
- A project can be set up with the Ein Harod kibbutz around a particular theme or artist.
- The concept of Gallery Barbur can be taken “one-on-one” to the Netherlands and fleshed out through exchange programs.