

**#OpenCurating**

**“FROM ONE HISTORY TO  
A PLURALITY OF HISTORIES”:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH  
STEVEN TEN THIJE**

*Research Curator, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven*

**BY LATITUDES**



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Steven ten Thije



01 Steven ten Thije at the *Autonomy Project Symposium*, October 2011  
Photo: Emilio Moreno

AS RESEARCH CURATOR AT THE VAN ABBEMUSEUM, in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, Steven ten Thije is part of the team of one of the first public museums for contemporary art to be established in Europe. Under the directorship of Charles Esche since 2004, the museum has defined itself through “an experimental approach towards art’s role in society”, where “openness, hospitality and knowledge exchange are important”. Ten Thije is also a lecturer and researcher at the University of Hildesheim, Germany, where he is studying for a doctorate in the genealogical analysis of the exhibition curator. He was co-curator of the *Spirits of Internationalism. 6 European Collections, 1956–1986* (Van Abbemuseum, 21 January – 29 April 2012), and alongside Esche, with curators Christiane Berndes, Annie Fletcher, and Diana Franssen, he was guest curator of *Play Van Abbe* (28 November 2009 – 26 June 2011). Subtitled *The museum in the 21st Century*, this was a four-part multifaceted programme of exhibitions, research and events in which the Van Abbemuseum reflected on the meaning and role of the art museum. Using its collection to articulate questions about the public’s reaction to art and its contexts, the Van Abbemuseum probed its own history and purpose alongside how cultural production has reflected the social and political dynamics of the last twenty years.

**Latitudes:** In a text accompanying *Museum Modules*, a part of *Play Van Abbe Part 2: Time Machines*, you outline three interconnecting points of inflection in the formation of the idea of the modern art museum: “One is a transformation in the understanding of the role of the relation between medium and idea – sign and signified. Two is a change in the understanding of history. Three is a repositioning of the body within the museum space”.<sup>\*</sup> Each transformation, change or repositioning has been a consequence forged through a perceived exhaustion of a previous model. Should we therefore assume that the future art institution will be wildly different from the past?

**Steven ten Thije:** Yes and no. In appearance the museum will most likely remain quite similar, especially where the physical building is concerned. This is something that I guess the Van Abbemuseum learned from *Play Van Abbe*. In this experimental exhibition program we wanted to try

\* Steven ten Thije

“Climate Controlled?”

*The Copyist*, ed. Diana Franssen, Annie Fletcher, et. al., (Van Abbemuseum, 2010) p 27. [PDF]

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and rethink the museum in public using the “technology” of exhibitions. Our initial idea was that people needed to be activated much more while visiting the museum. However, during the program it became clear that what we felt would have been “inspiring” for our public often felt forced. We wanted to break open all the conventions and propose a radically different way to use the museum,



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02 *Play Van Abbe*  
Part 2: Museum Modules  
10 April–12 Sept. 2010  
Curators: Steven ten Thije  
and Diana Franssen.  
*Raum der Gegenwart*  
(1930), Alexander Dörner  
& László Moholy-Nagy,  
realised by Kai-Uwe  
Hemken & Jakob Gebert.  
This and following photos  
by Peter Cox. Courtesy Van  
Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

both mentally and physically, but this just didn’t land so well. I think what was difficult was that it foregrounded the institution itself all the time, and that perhaps made it overly self-reflexive. Even so, I don’t think it was ineffective. After *Play Van Abbe*, I was involved in making an exhibition within the context of a European collaboration called *L’Internationale* which revisited the art history of the period 1956–1986 as its topic. The exhibition in the Van Abbemuseum was realised together with M HKA (Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst) in Antwerp, Belgium, and was in many ways a much more classical collection exhibition than was made during *Play Van Abbe*. On the surface

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it might have seemed that we were letting go of our more radical experimental approach, but underneath my sense was that we were drawing a lot on our experience from *Play* precisely around those points you mentioned. One result was that we showed less isolated artworks and more often a mixture of context and work, approaching the exhibition (and also the collection) not as a series of isolated events that reflect an art historical narrative, but more a collection communicating “nodes” which bring in their own context and require this context to be legible. Even so, the traditional material, experience-based exchange of bringing objects together remained and played a prominent role, perhaps even a starting point.

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“If you start to see works themselves as contexts, then each work starts to be not just a story of itself, but to offer a perspective on the world.”

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It was precisely this confrontation of materiality and context, which reflects this change in the relation between media and idea in museum displays, something that also affects the type of history that is told. This shift can be described as a shift from one history to a plurality of histories. In classical museum displays the context is the homogeneous background of a universal and singular art history which determines the order of things – the way you position the works. If you start to see works themselves as contexts, then each work starts to be not just a story of itself, but to offer a perspective on the world – a different background against which things can be ordered. And this finally changes the relation between the embodied visitor and the exhibition, because this person is now also addressed as having his or her own context and history, which is the result of a constant material or physical encounter between that history and those of others one encounters. I understand that this may sound very theoretical, but the way in which the exhibition *Spirits of Internationalism* was discussed – and also some of the comments I overheard walking through the exhibition – confirmed this shift. In the last week for instance, a woman from eastern Europe approached me and thanked me as one of the organisers for showing the art of her cultural tradition. And what I really appreciated is that she didn’t experience it as something exotic or inferior, or any of the stereotypes that are often used in the “former West” to display “Eastern art”, but it felt like a dialogue of histories and that was very good to see and experience. So, to come back to your

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question. It is not that I believe the museum will radically change in form, maybe even for visitors the experience will seem quite similar. However, there will be a decisive difference in the way in which it will channel a sense of history and this in time, I believe, will mean a fundamental restructuring of what the function of a museum is within a community.

**L:** *Play Van Abbe Part 2* was contextualised as a kind of museum of ideas about museums. In this context, how do you understand the contemporary museum in terms of narrative versus information?

**StT:** That is difficult for me to answer, because I only have an intuitive understanding of the difference between narrative versus information. My thought would be that information better represents a potentiality that is still open, whereas a narrative is an interpretation and is information “put to use”, so to speak. Within a museum display there is always a tension between the two due to the logic of the “infinity” of the artwork. By which I mean that the information of an artwork is never exhausted; there is always the possibility to make a new reading, to arrive at a different understanding of it. It is defined by a kind of epistemological surplus, if you will. This is a quite classical understanding of art, but I guess it is still the one that I use.

If you take this perhaps somewhat sketchy understand-

03 *Spirits of  
Internationalism:  
6 European Collections,  
1956–1986*  
21 January–29 April 2012  
Curators: Charles Esche  
and Steven ten Thije.  
Installation view

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04 *Play Van Abbe*  
Part 2: *Museum Modules.*  
*Sites of Modernity,*  
Interpretation of the  
Museum of Modern Art  
New York, 1929  
by the Museum of  
American Art, Berlin

ing of the division between narrative and information as a starting point, then several thoughts become possible. One is that contextual material shares in this epistemological surplus, something that the idea of the ready-made suggests quite strongly. What I mean is that within contemporary artistic practice it is always possible to transform something that is not art into art by simply putting it on display – what was at first only an archival document can be read as an “artwork” just by placing it in the museum. In this light then, a display is a constellation in which a tension exists between information and narrative, which is negotiated by the artists or curator responsible for the installation. A side effect of this would be a very strong overlap between the art of curating and the art of art making, but this is perhaps something for another discussion. What is more important here is to note that there is not so much of an opposition between narrative and information that one could decide for one of the other. I think I would even argue that creating an environment where both of these “interpretations” and “open experiences” are possible is one of the primary goals when making an



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exhibition display. In *Play Van Abbe Part 2* one could say that we tried to make this explicit by showing how artists, curators and architects have always had a sensitivity towards this ambiguity and have found different ways to resolve it.

Another thought would be more directed at the “machinery” of the museum and how it is currently expanded by the possibility to mine data with web technology. A database, especially if one can only retrieve things from the datapool by searching, is more-or-less nothing else but information. There is only a very minimal level of display, which in this case means that there is almost no narrative. This will always make it so difficult to think about the interface for a collection search engine, because somewhere one senses that this will involve a moment of display, but as a curator or an artist you have almost no control of this. Or maybe in this case it is better to say that there just seems to be a lack of experience and a general difficulty in understanding how the tension between information and narrative translates into a computer interface. The computer is perhaps itself an information processing machine, but does it also produce narratives? My own sense is that we have much more agency since we are constantly constructing narratives – organising information in a meaningful way – but that these narratives we construct function in a different way to the traditional narratives told in museums. Perhaps it is strange to say, but the inflexible nature of a museum display opens up a moment of concentration and identification which appears absent in the computer experience. And it is this stability and common ground that marks the “publicness” of a museum narrative. So, perhaps with the computer and the internet we are experiencing a restructuring of how to deal with public space and this will affect the whole network of art in ways that are difficult to oversee.

**L:** In “Embedding Democracy” in *The Exorcist*, the second of the journals published as part of *Play Van Abbe*, Simon Marschall discusses some of the implications of the internet for political systems – particularly assumptions about, and the overstating of, relationships between social media and democracy.\* In terms of what it means to be modern, can you reflect on whether the fact that,

\* Simon Marschall  
“Embedding Democracy:  
political and social  
engagement under the  
Web 2.0 paradigm”  
*The Exorcist*  
ed. Annie Fletcher, Chris-  
tiane Berndes, et. al.,  
(Van Abbemuseum, 2011)  
pp 12–15. [PDF]

The screenshot shows the Van Abbemuseum website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links: 'home', 'online collectie en tentoonstellingen', 'leren en beleven', 'netwerk en discussie', and 'over ons'. Below this is a search bar with the text 'Zoeken' and a 'Zoeken' button. The main content area features a word cloud with names of artists such as 'schonhoven', 'beuys', 'picasso', 'gilbert', 'george', 'rene', 'daniël', 'armando', 'marcel', 'godthaers', 'donald', 'jake', 'sol lewitt', 'tamel', 'buren', 'jean dubuffet', 'piet moedjens', 'dre', 'ang', 'zittero', 'ag', 'dekkers', 'indiosky', 'karel', 'anpelt', 'and', 'suzuki', 'mariens', 'groot', 'marcel', 'godthaers', 'donald', 'jake', 'armando', 'rene', 'daniël', 'picasso', 'gilbert', 'george', 'rene', 'daniël', 'picasso'. Below the word cloud, there are three columns of content. The first column is titled 'Tentoonstellingen' and shows a painting by Carel Fabritius with the caption 'Op dit doek beeldt de Nederlandse schilder Carel'. The second column is titled 'De nieuwste aanwinst' and shows a photograph of people on a beach with the caption 'The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection'. The third column is titled 'Werk op pad' and shows a painting by Guppy with the caption 'Guppy 13 vs Ocean Wave; a Bas Jan Ader Experience, 2010'. On the right side, there is an 'Agenda' section with a list of exhibitions: 'Het Oog' (28/01/2009 - doorlopend), 'John Baldessari' (videowerken 1970-1977, 18/02/2012 - 28/04/2013), 'Guppy 13 vs Ocean Wave; a Bas Jan Ader Experience, 2010' (Alkane Ogié, 24/08/2012 - 31/03/2013), 'Piero Gilardi - samen werken' (solotentoonstelling, 08/09/2012 - 06/01/2013), 'David Maljkovic - Sources in the Air' (Solotentoonstelling, 06/10/2012 - 02/02/2013), and 'Sarah van'.

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for example, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, has over 1 million followers on Twitter, might make it a more democratic institution or a better “broadcaster”?

**ST:** This is a very difficult question, because it introduces the notion of democracy. The relation between museums and democracy is complicated and far from straightforward. Even if I would say that museums have accompanied democratic society throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and as such are closely linked to democracy. The complex nature of this relation is that in the museum the two contradicting forces that are the engine of democratic process – private experience and common judgement – are brought into an exchange. This is something that can also be translated into the terms of information and narrative, and linked to the epistemological surplus. Within the democratic political process there is a constant discussion about which private experiences are of common interest and need to be considered, not as random “information” – let’s continue with this word – but as part of a common narrative that forms a common context in which we live together. The economy of the art encounter – especially within the museum – is thereby marked



by negotiating private experience and public judgement. The surplus of the work is mined for common experiences that are connected in a narrative. This is something that requires a very distinct mindset which the gallery space makes possible. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière has described this mindset very well and has shown how it was already outlined by J. C. Friedrich Von Schiller in his *Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794).

However, this exchange between private experience and public judgement is also immanent to each medium used to communicate; using the metaphor of your previous question, one could say that each medium allows information to be formed into a meaningful narrative in a distinct manner. Art in this light can perhaps be seen as a particular reflection on this communicative faculty. As a result each time a new medium becomes dominant one has to question the way in which the old forms of making and presenting art still function, and if it still plays a role in facilitating the democratic process. I think I would even put this in a quite Kantian way by saying that the question is if art and the institutions dedicated to its display still create the “conditions of possibility” for democratic process. (And, just to elaborate on this point, I believe that Walter Benjamin was one of the first to realise that when new media are born the public function of art changes. So when film became dominant he wondered if the old practice of how to make and display art was still in line with this new form of communication. A question he answered in the negative.)

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The question concerning MoMA’s degrees of democracy as a result of its amount of Twitter followers therefore depends more on how a medium transforms the democratic process itself and with Twitter I would say that this is not yet completely clear. Here I think Marschall’s text made interesting points, demonstrating that the democratic potential of these new web 2.0 technologies is complicated and should be considered carefully. It is always a bit disappointing if one has to answer that things are complicated and require more research, but I think here modesty is necessary. What web 2.0 does to democracy is substantial and I think should not be considered either only positively or only negatively, but instead should be studied

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06 *Play Van Abbe Part 3: The Politics of Collecting, The Collecting of Politics*  
25 Sept. 2010–30 Jan. 2011  
Curators: Christiane Berndes, Galit Eilat and Diana Franssen.  
Installation view with work by Akram Zaatari

more carefully through analysis and experiment. So, formulated positively, the amount of followers offers MoMA an interesting starting position to explore the potential of the medium: in the end value lies in use.

**L:** Should every museum become more technologically engaged?

**StT:** I imagine so. However, this engagement should not be limited to doing what you already do with new means, but also wondering if the function of key concepts of the museum are not transformed because of new technological possibilities.

**L:** *Play Van Abbe Part 3* proposed a notion that artists such as [Akram Zaatari](#) are not making works *per se*, but rather systems that can organize; it is a persuasive idea in terms of the relationship between practice and a producing context's collecting institutions (or lack of them).



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Thinking again in terms of past models of museums and what today's museum could or perhaps should become, do you see a difference between a collection and an archive?

**StT:** I think the difference becomes smaller because the work is no longer the work on the basis of it being a discrete artwork, but it is itself a complex in which context and content – narrative and information – are brought into a moment of exchange through the display. Also archive material is imbued with the same kind of epistemological surplus, perhaps even more than books in a library, because they are original documents with legislative value. So in this sense I see quite a strong similarity between even the artwork itself and a sort of collection or archive.

There is however one sense in which the archive maybe enjoys a greater or clearer legitimacy today than an art collection: that it is often built up with the clear purpose of bearing testimony to a particular history or series of events. The art collection in its ideal form bears testimony to the development of art as though it is an autonomous, historical category. But in a sense art today is not so much a category as it is a particular form of experience that is linked to the moment of display. This is also a consequence of the logic of the ready-made, which makes not the thing itself, but the moment of selecting and putting on display decisive. The challenge for art museums therewith is that in a some sense their key concept – art – has changed, because art is now produced through installing things and is strictly speaking not a quality of the thing itself. Of course this doesn't mean that the artworks collected become meaningless, but in some way we go through a kind of reverse process in which one has to redefine what is the real subject of a work. Dramatically put, a painting by Hans Holbein that before the age of autonomous art was more valued because it was portrait of Henry the VIII, and only later became primarily a "Holbein", now becomes more a portrait of Henry the VIII again, an archival document reflecting the history of monarchical rule. This of course changes the content of a collection and this is something that one should try to think through.

**L:** *Play Van Abbe Part 4: The Pilgrim, the Flâneur, the Tourist (and the Worker)* noted how different general models of art space over the last three-hundred years or more have

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07 Play Van Abbe  
Part 4: The Pilgrim, the  
Tourist, the Flâneur  
(and the Worker)  
26 Feb.–20 Aug. 2011  
Curator: Charles Esche.  
James Lee Byars,  
Hear TH FI TO IN PH  
Around This Chair, 1978



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been accompanied by implicit statements about the expected visitor. Or more precisely, art space has anticipated the manner in which the visitor is expected to encounter what is presented, whether in the context of wonder, contemplation or good taste, for example. This was addressed quite directly by *Play Van Abbe Part 4* by the “unmasking” of these various roles of the title as possible self-reflexive approaches to the exhibition.

You’ve linked the act of browsing the web with the figure of the *flâneur*.<sup>\*</sup> (And indeed many of today’s mega-exhibitions seem allied to a kind of information grazing and drifting.) Yet as the crux of the internet as a social field becomes less and less unidirectional and increasingly concerned with co-production and sharing, the *flâneur* analogy might give way to a role more akin to what Bruce Sterling has coined the “wrangler” – someone actively

\* “An inside conversation about role-playing in the museum: Annie Fletcher interviews Charles Esche, Steven ten Thije and Hadas Zemer about *Play Van Abbe 4*” *The Exorcist*, op. cit. pp 19–21. [PDF]

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engaged in the development of objects, their interfaces and relationships.

Do you think this kind of visitor role is something imaginable, or desirable, by the future-contemporary museum? Or, to put it another way, can you speculate what kind of art space would make choosing or playing such a role possible?

**StT:** Yes, I think that is not a bad suggestion. In our latest policy paper for the museum we also spoke about “co-production” and “co-creation”. Still, it cannot be thought as a simple replacing of one role with another, because parts of the former behavior specific to say the *flâneur* will need to migrate into the “wrangler” for the potential of the art experience to develop. My sense would be that the most important thing to keep in mind is how these transformations of behaviour affect the public function of the museum. As I tried to point out earlier, I believe that internet technology and the continuous and haphazard construction of small narratives out of a seemingly endless supply of information might signify a transformation in how public narratives operate in general. The biggest challenge facing the museum today is figuring out how it can use its resources and expertise within this new situation. Perhaps here museums need to experiment much more and perhaps we would need to collaborate more intensely with people who are more familiar with creating different kind of experiences on the basis of this form of use, perhaps the gaming industry. But I have to add, this really is pure speculation. I wouldn’t be able to give you any examples.

**L:** Are we right in thinking that the *Plug-In* initiative of the Van Abbemuseum included a number of instances in which the public were asked which works from the collection they would like to see? Could you describe these projects and how they came together?

**StT:** Yes, you are referring to what was called the “Viewing Depot”. This was one room in the museum where one could find two folders containing printouts of the collection catalogue, showing each work with an image, its dimensions, media, and so on. As a visitor to the museum you could fill in a form asking for one work to be put on display. The visitor was also asked to write a small motiva-

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“As a visitor to the museum you could fill in a form asking for one work to be put on display.”

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tion as to why he or she wanted to see this particular work. Then after a few weeks the visitor would get a notification and, depending on the medium, the work would then be hung on a typical art storage rack, or placed in a vitrine, screened on a monitor, or otherwise installed in the space. Viewing conditions were not optimal, but still one could see the work.

This project was quite successful. Many people took up the offer and we showed several hundred works in a period of a few years. Here perhaps the museum started to work really more as an archive, doing nothing more than displaying works on request without offering any narrative, just presenting the information. But perhaps this also shows the limit of the project. A next step would be to develop a model in which one could enter into a discussion that builds towards a common narrative on some specific issues.

**L:** We appreciate the fact that the Van Abbemuseum has made “backstage” tours of its storage areas, archive, etc. A simple but powerful gesture. What statement about openness do you consider the museum wanted to make in this respect?

**StT:** The tours offer the visitor a better insight into the “making of”. The most important aspect of this is, in my understanding, showing the diversity of voices that contribute to making exhibitions and running the museum – something that is often overlooked. To give an example, when exhibitions are reviewed they are sometimes presented as though our director Charles Esche was the curator who took all the decisive authorial decisions, even if an exhibition was curated by someone else. This doesn’t happen too often, but it shows the public perception is that there are only two “authors” involved in an exhibition – the artist and the curator/director. The reality of making an exhibition is, of course, very different. From the library, to the production coordinator, to the marketing, communication and mediation departments, and the technical staff, and so on, everybody works together and takes responsibility for a part of the exhibition and as a result also has a voice. Some roles are perhaps difficult to discern from the outside, but just as a brilliant architect is nothing without an equally creative construction engineer, the same goes

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08 *Living Archive: Stars and Stripes forever*  
4 October – 5 April 2009  
Curator: Diana Franssen

with making exhibitions. Of course, there is a hierarchy in decision making and within that logic it is understandable that the director is more named than anybody else, since he or she is in the end responsible for the totality. But the tours help remind people that the museum is a totality and that is very nice.

**L:** *The Living Archive* strand of programming displayed documents relating to exhibitions and collections. Are all of the museum's archives and correspondence publically available for researchers? Is correspondence about recent



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acquisitions available, for example? Where do you see the limits of openness and transparency within this frame?

**StT:** Of course the library and archive department would be better equipped to answer this question, but what I understand is that the archive of past exhibitions is available to researchers who come to the museum.\* It is, however, not completely available on the internet. One thing that I sometimes think about, but to which I don't know the answer, is the fact that with email communication a lot of

\* See "On the Van Abbemuseum Archives. A conversation between Charles Esche, Diana Franssen and Nick Aikens, Van Abbemuseum" *Field Notes*, Issue 2, 2012



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things are now almost lost in the endless streams of emails that come in. I believe we do backups of hard drives and archive these backups, but my sense is that the future generation will experience this moment as suffering from collective amnesia. Also in communication by email the boundary between the formal and informal is often very vague – it has a status of a written voicemail message, almost a telephone call. I imagine that this will also affect decisions about how to make it public. Regarding the limits of transparency, I don't have a very clear answer, but our principle is that our archive is public and should be available. If one wants to refrain from making something public our rule is that one has to argue why and not the other way around.

**L:** The crowd funding drive for Richard Long's *Wood Circle* (1977) was one of the most prominent examples of this kind of campaign in the visual arts museum realm. A big success with, it seems, profound resonance not just in the context of government funding cuts, but for what it means for a museum to own objects? Do you see a future in this model or “co-ownership”?

**StT:** In the case of Richard Long one has to be specific about what “co-ownership” means. The museum is the legal owner, which means that the museum is also responsible for the work and can make decisions on where and how to show it. The “co-owners” in this case are more the

09 *Out of here:*  
*For Eindhoven –*  
*The City as Muse*  
3 Sept. 2011–8 Jan. 2012  
Curator: Annie Fletcher.  
Richard Long  
*Wood Circle, 1977*



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sponsors of the work and are registered as co-owners as a token of gratitude and respect. With co-ownership it is important to be explicit about this. It has to be clear what are the rights and obligations that come with it. Therefore it seems that co-ownership is at the moment easiest with works that can be produced in editions, as video or photographic works. In these situations one can really share both the rights and obligations that come with ownership. Concerning the question if the museum will still own objects in the future, I think that this will still be the case, but there will be a different reason to do it. As said before, artworks today are less discrete objects with clear borders, and are more often a type of portal that offers a certain perspective. The work offers a context through which something can become visible and is not so much an identity in itself. To create this visibility the museum will still need to rely on its expertise and knowledge about how to recreate an experience through conservation and re-installation, but it is no longer about showing something that is complete in itself. This also affects the identity of the museum. Previously the museum was the stable context that could display different and specific artworks. Today artworks themselves are often a collection of things, which is not necessarily closed. The Van Abbemuseum has for instance acquired *FCA – (Flight Case Archive)* (2010) by Hannah Hurtzig, which is both an object that also includes the database of the *Mobile Academy*. I don't believe we are "owners" of that database, but I do think we have some responsibility for it and it definitely is an intricate part of the work. I believe this is where we started this conversation and maybe in the moment when the circle is complete you realise you're reaching the current limit of your thinking. That's not a bad thing and the only way forward is to repeat the circle, because in repetition new things and thoughts start to present themselves in often unexpected ways. But perhaps we can talk about those in few years. #

“From one history to a plurality  
of histories”: An interview  
with Steven ten Thije  
by Latitudes (Max Andrews  
& Mariana Cánepa Luna)

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