

‘We do not have bad intentions’

Recently, an artist colleague from Turkey, living in the Netherlands, was having a conversation with a Dutch curator about Dutch funding and residencies. She told him that she had visited a residency abroad, showed interest in their program and told them she might apply through a Dutch fund. The main curator, who has worked at that residency program for almost ten years, told her that she has very little chances of being accepted. When she asked why, the curator told her that the Dutch fund mainly sends 'Dutch artists' to that program. It is a prestigious program and the selection is made by the fund. The Dutch curator she talked to about this, blocked the conversation and refused to even consider that the majority of artists that have been accepted to that program for the last ten years were Dutch, with one or two exception. One of his arguments was that this cannot be written, or spoken about anywhere within the organization of this fund, whether as a written guideline or in the selection committee meetings. I guess it can be categorized as an unspoken or unwritten rule.

This obviously does not make it a non-existing thing; the thing in this case being the idea of a Dutch fund sending primarily Dutch artists to prestigious residencies. When I say ‘Dutch artists’, I mean someone who was born and raised in the Netherlands, and (preferably) someone with a Dutch name. These are all contested areas. Although I believe the definition of Dutch must be a larger one, I use it here since it is unfortunately common sense to think of a Dutch person this way. This definition also excludes the generations of Turkish, Kurdish, Surinamese, and Moroccan people born and raised in the Netherlands, with some exceptions. The main exceptions are the ones who have some sort of cultural capital, and this cultural capital is only reachable by some, depending on the way one looks, talks, on their outspokenness, or their degree of acceptance of tokenness.

My artist colleague told me that the reaction of the Dutch curator was one of saying that the Dutch fund does not look at nationality. The Dutch curator also said that the Dutch fund defines ‘Dutch’ as all the people living in the Netherlands. He did not show any interest however to even look at the concern at hand, nor talk about it, but straightforwardly blocked the argument. This will be familiar to some of you, especially when you open up a discussion about certain taboos in this country, and this doesn't only happen in the art field. Taboos are accepted, agreed on, but not questioned. The problem is not even the fact that this Dutch fund is doing what the curator of that residency claimed that they are doing. The problem lies in the reaction to this claim, because it is actually a very serious claim that cannot simply be ignored. It might be easier to ignore something when it comes from someone who might potentially be affected by it, instead of yourself who might not be affected by it.

In these instances I cannot stop but wonder what defines conservatism, progressiveness and solidarity. Putting this one Dutch curator in the spotlight would be unfair. The point is that this is something we come across way too often to ignore; it is not an isolated or individual case. Nationalism is inevitably very much connected to racism and ethnicity. These categories cannot exist or be defined and talked about in isolation. White innocence, white nationalism.

How does one talk about a taboo, or mention something she heard from someone else as a plausible scenario?

This protectiveness is, first of all, genuine and definitely well-meant, and this is exactly the issue. Once something is internalized, it is extremely difficult to question. It can be very similar to questioning someone's childhood friend, or a childhood festivity that they fondly remember. The shaking of this memory is like shaking a whole person and their whole life, and cognitive dissonance is exactly what happens here. It is the refusal to accept the questions, blocking them, finding plausible narratives to counter the questions, and leaving the trouble behind, instead of staying with it and allowing oneself to be shaken by it.

Is this not exactly what Gloria Wekker says in her book? She writes: ' ‘We are a small nation, innocent; we are inherently anti-racist; we do not have bad intentions’, is a shorthand to summarize this white sense of self’, and she adds that ‘questioning this most dearly held core of the Dutch sense of self means putting oneself above us; it also runs deeply counter to another strand in the Dutch sense of self, egalitarianism.’

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