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DOI
10.1007/978-3-031-39900-8_8

Publication date
2024

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Cultural Change in Post-Migrant Societies

License
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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Delhaye, C. (2024). What About Words? Activism and Cultural Change in the Amsterdam Museum. In W. Sievers (Ed.), *Cultural Change in Post-Migrant Societies: Re-Imagining Communities Through Arts and Cultural Activities* (pp. 137-153). (IMISCOE Research Series). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39900-8_8

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Chapter 8
What About Words? Activism and Cultural Change in the Amsterdam Museum

Christine Delhaye

8.1 Introduction

On 12 September 2019, the Amsterdam Museum announced that it would change the title of its (semi-)permanent exhibition Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age to Portrait Gallery of the seventeenth Century. The Amsterdam Museum is a city museum that chronicles the history, examines the present and imagines the future of the city. The museum has decided to dispose of the term Golden Age (in Dutch: *Gouden Eeuw*) because it frames Dutch history from a celebratory nationalist perspective. It also invokes a history seen from the standpoint of the rich and powerful and erases abuses such as forced labour, poverty, war and the slave trade (Van der Molen, 2019).

The term Golden Age has several dimensions to it which are all intrinsically intertwined. It refers to a historical period ('the long seventeenth century') within which the Dutch Republique became extremely wealthy and geopolitically powerful. It also refers to an art historical period and style; some of the painters who were part of this Golden Age, such as Rembrandt van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer and Frans Hals, are considered among the greatest artists of all times – not to forget the outstanding achievements of writers, philosophers and scientists. This dominant socio-economic and cultural position was the result of the success of the Dutch in world trade, which also involved the economic, political and military occupation of foreign territories. According to Tom van der Molen, curator at Amsterdam Museum, the glorification of art and science was – and still is – used to reframe the image of an aggressively mercantile nation state into an affluent one that produced great achievements. In reality, art and science were part and parcel of that mercantile

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W. Sievers (ed.), *Cultural Change in Post-Migrant Societies*, IMISCOE Research Series, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39900-8_8

world, all its colonial implications included (van der Molen, 2021, p. 185). The decision to no longer use the term Golden Age was based on the stated aim of the museum to become an inclusive and multivocal museum where all citizens of Amsterdam can identify with the stories told (Amsterdam Museum, 2019).

This decision of the Amsterdam Museum was not a one-time event. It was the follow-up of a longer process of enacting change in the hegemonic 'regimes of representation' (Hall, 1997a) which has been going on already for some years in the Amsterdam Museum but also in the wider Dutch museum world. In the run-up to its reopening in 2013, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam started an investigation into the terms used in the labels and descriptions of the artefacts and began to remove the offensive ones. The museum had received complaints from visitors who experienced some texts as hurtful. Thanks to a critical intervention, in 2017, by the collective Decolonize the Museum, the National Museum for World Cultures (a merger of four ethnographic museums, one of which is the Amsterdam Tropenmuseum) also thoroughly scrutinised the language used in its institutions. The process resulted in the publication in 2018 of *Words matter*: *An unfinished guide to word choices in the cultural sector* (Modest & Lelijveld, 2018). With this publication, the museum aimed to contribute to the ongoing dialogue in the museological field, as well as in society at large, about the use of offensive and controversial words. In 2017, a group of artists, writers, activists and scientists campaigned for changing the name of the Rotterdam arts centre Witte de With because the eponymous person was involved in colonial exploitation. In April 2019, the Maurits House in The Hague opened an exhibition in which the museum approached, through various perspectives, the role which their eponym, Johan Maurits, Count of Nassau-Siegen, played in the transatlantic slave trade.

This process of change in the regime(s) of representation in some museums in the Netherlands did and does not occur in isolation. Also, the use of words in the realm of journalism and in everyday life has become subject to discussion (Nzume, 2017). The annual feast of *Sinterklaas* with Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*) has been a controversial event for many years already. The debates that surround the event have become increasingly grim. Since 2020, as people across the globe were rallying against racial inequality, discrimination and police brutality after the murder of Georg Floyd, debates about removing statues as well as changing street names flared up again in the Netherlands. It also looked as though cultural institutions had finally understood the urgency of making their organisations more inclusive and critically questioning the authority and legitimacy of their expertise. These transformations do not only take place in the Netherlands but have become globally connected thanks to the easy and rapid spread of images, discourses and knowledge through the media (van Huis, 2019, p. 242). Western nation states share similar struggles in that they have been part of colonial history. However, they differ in the ways in which their respective colonial endeavours unfolded and have impacted on their past and current societies (van Huis, 2019, p. 220).

It may come as no surprise that these critical interventions provoked heated debate within the Dutch public sphere. In recent years, almost all political parties, including one on the left, contributed to the construction of an explicit nativist

discourse by introducing a division between the 'real Dutch people' and those who will not be able to reach this position (Duyvendak & Kesic, 2017; van Huis, 2019). Interventions such as that against Black Pete and, for that matter, against the label Golden Age, according to the producers of this ethno-national discourse, led to an ever further erosion of Dutch culture and identity. The overwhelming Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020 in the Netherlands have resulted in a dialogue between the prime minister and an anti-racist delegation to discuss the issue of racism in the Netherlands. Coincidentally, soon afterwards, the Dutch government fell. After a long formation period, a new government was installed on 10 January 2022. Up to now, not many efforts have been made to create an anti-racist policy, although there is a lot of work to do (Wekker, 2016). The UN human rights rapporteur Tendayi Achiume, who visited the Netherlands in 2019, calls, in her report of July 2020, "for swift action to address persisting structures of racial discrimination" (United Nations General Assembly, 2020, p. 1).

In this chapter, I analyse the process that led to the Amsterdam Museum abandoning the term Golden Age. The event that led to the change was an intervention of cultural activism enacted by an activist with a migration background. I seek to understand how the strategy of the activist was able to mobilise the museum into taking action in such a way that it began to openly contest a deeply ingrained representation of Dutch history and culture.

8.2 Approach: An Eclectic Theoretical Toolkit

The concept of culture in this analysis is conceived in its broadest use, namely as 'shared meaning'. In the process of producing, distributing and sharing meaning, language is, without any doubt, the privileged instrument (Hall, 1997b, p. 1). More specifically, I focus on the use of language in the de/construction of – what once was – a crucial element of the Dutch hegemonic 'regime of representation' (Hall, 1997a, p. 232), namely the term Golden Age.

The processes of cultural change will be studied with the help of an eclectic theoretical 'toolkit'. In order to analyse how this activist intervention impacted on the Amsterdam Museum in its functioning, I draw on recent theory within organisation theory – and more specifically on 'institutional work' (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011; Lawrence et al., 2009). The theory of cultural change by the sociologist Ann Swidler is a helpful addition as it focuses on the tools and resources through which culture is produced and reproduced. Social actors (individuals and groups) are approached as mobilisers who use tools and resources to execute their chosen strategies of action (Swidler, 1986, 2008). I integrate work on cultural activism as it allows me to understand the meanings and effects of the activistic tool that has been mobilised.

Museums are not just organisations. They are endowed with special authority and the power to imagine and represent both the respective national culture and the cultures of those regarded as others. They are authoritative actors in (re)producing,

sustaining or challenging hegemonic regimes of representation. The theory of Bourdieu on the symbolic power of language is important, too, as it centres around games played between actors who 'speak with different degrees of authority' (Thompson, 1991/2000, p. 1). Since Bourdieu's early theory of colonialism has not entered the Western canon of sociology, his work has often been wrongly accused of ignoring the subject. Yet his fieldwork in Algeria resulted in a systematic theory of colonialism that analysed the effects and logics of a racialised system of domination within the colonised society during colonisation and the ensuing decolonial struggles (Go, 2013). Contemporary decolonial theory instead highlights the imperial distribution of power and authority at a transnational or global scale. It also focuses on the way in which imperial power dynamics impact on societies even today (Pratt, 1991; Quijano, 2000; Vázquez, 2010, 2011). Therefore, contemporary decolonial theory is also a crucial component of my toolkit.

Before starting my analysis, I bring the global power dynamics into the discussion via Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone and its re-articulations. In her article 'Arts of the contact zone' (1991), she analyses an early-seventeenth-century "letter" entitled *The first new chronicle and good government*. This 800-page document, written by an Andean author named Guaman Poma, was addressed to the Spanish King some 40 years after the decisive Spanish conquest of the Inca empire. With the help of this specific case, Pratt develops her thoughts on writing and literacy in *contact zones* (Pratt, 1991, p. 34; italics Pratt's). Pratt's contact zone refers to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in a context of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). The concept, as well as the further elaborations on it in Pratt's book *Emperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation* (1992) have been applied by James Clifford in the seventh chapter of his book *Routes* (1997/2007). In this chapter, "Museums as contact zones", Clifford rearticulates the concept with regard to museums in a descriptive as well as a normative sense (1997/2007, p. 213). He paints a picture of museums as contact zones in which the crossing of objects, makers, narratives, etc. occurs in a context of historically structured dominance. "Such crossings are never 'free' and indeed routinely blocked by budgets and curatorial control, by restrictive definitions of art and culture, by community hostility and miscomprehension" (Clifford, 1997/2007, p. 204). Yet he also accounts for museums as contact zones in a utopian sense. Utopian museums are "public spaces of collaboration, shared control, complex translation, and honest disagreement" (Clifford, 1997/2007, p. 208). In order to become such public spaces, museums should pursue a radically democratic politics that challenges the hierarchical conditions of crossing and should thoroughly rethink museum practices in a decentred way (Clifford, 1997/2007, p. 124).

In the wake of Clifford's utopian imagining of museums, the concept has, according to Robin Boast, unjustly been appropriated by museum scholars in an overly optimistic way, redefining the contact zone as "a space of collaboration, discussion, and conflict resolution" (Boast, 2011, p. 60). Yet, according to him, no matter the efforts which museums put into collaborating with communities, encouraging

participation and dialogue, no matter the sincere intentions of museum staff, museums remain neo-colonial institutions, inherently asymmetric, keeping control over objects, displays and narratives. They do so because the museum as a contact zone is still "a site in and for the center" (Boast, 2011, p. 67). I appreciate Boast's cautiousness in looking critically behind the surface of window-dressing practices and good intentions. What worries me about his analysis, however, is that Boast talks about "the museums" as if they were a large monolithic field of similar institutions that are also internally homogeneous environments. Moreover, museums are seen as institutions which, no matter what they do, are in no way able to de-centre their practices. Instead of choosing sides between "overly optimists" or "pessimists", I focus on the particular actions taken by a specific museum, the Amsterdam Museum. Considering seriously the highly visible interruptive actions as well as the mundane practices, day-to-day transformations and compromises as performers of institutional change, I more specifically look at the actions taken in the Amsterdam Museum in their capacity to contribute to a long and complex process of de-centring.

In order to be able to conduct the analysis, I interviewed two curators of the Amsterdam Museum: Tom van de Molen – who was the curator of the exhibition Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age – and I.L., who wished to be identified only by initials and who has developed some important decolonising projects in the museum. In addition, I had some written communication with the two of them. I also read quite a good amount of published material on the topic written by the curators. I have been in contact with the person widely believed to be "the activist" several times. Although he seemed prepared to discuss the event, in the end it never came to a meeting. I have attended online lectures (as there were pandemic-related restrictions in place at the time) given by him where he spoke – in general terms – about the act of activism. Finally, I have read several interviews with him.

8.3 De-colonising Museums

Many public museums in the Western world were established in the mid-nineteenth century (Bennett, 1988; Hooper-Greenhill, 1989). This was equally so in the Netherlands and in Amsterdam more specifically. The City of Amsterdam had experienced an explosive growth in the seventeenth century, *inter alia* because of its involvement in various colonial projects (Ariese, 2020; Hondius et al., 2018). Nineteenth-century industrialisation gave the city another boost, which led to wealthy citizens as well as governments founding new cultural institutions or investing in existing ones. The Rijksmuseum (national museum) was founded in 1800 in The Hague and moved to its current building in Amsterdam in 1885; the Stedelijk Museum (municipal museum) opened its doors in 1874; the Koloniaal Museum (ethnographic museum) was founded in 1826 and was renamed the Tropenmuseum in 1950. The Amsterdam Historic Museum (city museum), the history of which goes back to the sixteenth century, became an independent museum in 1926. It was

renamed in 2010 as Amsterdam Museum (Ariese, 2020). It may come as no surprise that various early-modern museums in Amsterdam and their collections were connected in one way or another to the colonial project (Ariese, 2020, p. 120).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, museums were deeply involved in the project of nation building, a process that went hand in hand with imperialism (Bennett, 1988; Gorman, 2011; Kratz & Karp, 2006). Although public museums may have been quite diverse, they did share the main tasks of collecting, exhibiting and preserving. Curatorial practice consisted mainly of selecting and linking (art) works in order to construct an art/cultural historical narrative and transmit it to the visitors (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Serota, 1996). These practices established a reality in which the world of some was presented as real and the world of others became erased (Vázquez, 2010, p. 3). According to Bennett, the upcoming discipline of anthropology has had a specific involvement in this process of erasure:

> For it played the crucial role of connecting the histories of Western nations and civilizations to those of other peoples, but only by separating the two in providing for an interrupted continuity in the order of peoples and race – one in which "primitive peoples" dropped out of history altogether in order to occupy a twilight zone between nature and culture. (1988, p. 90)

In its capacity of naming and erasing, the term Golden Age contributed to the construction of such a bifurcated world. As museums were granted the authority to speak, the worlds they invoked were at once designated as the 'legitimate' worlds. As such, these authorised institutions were simultaneously a reflection of and a contributor to 'the modern/colonial regime of representation' (Vázquez, 2010, p. 3) which, in its turn, legitimised and naturalised the modern/colonial order (Vázquez, 2010, 2011).

The 1960s saw the end of the modern museum as a repository of objects that were steeped in knowledge produced by museum professionals and presented to (passive) audiences. In the decades that followed, museums were confronted with a number of social and economic developments that could not be ignored, such as the increasing impact of transnational mass culture, consumerism and mass tourism, the rise of democratisation movements, identity politics and multiculturalism as well as the overall penetration of neo-liberal governance (Stallabras, 2014, p. 159). These developments came in tandem with the theoretical perspectives and the practices of the 'new museology' (Ross, 2004). As a result, museums engaged in a process of re-inventing themselves and tried to open up to various issues addressed in society. It seems that city museums and historical museums have reacted differently to these changed social surroundings – and the policies that tried to capture them – than did (contemporary) art museums. While the latter remained fairly inward-looking for a long time, the former, in contrast, engendered a sensibility to the needs of the outside world relatively early on (Delhaye & Bergvelt, 2012).

Following some years of *ad hoc* arrangements, a comprehensive diversity cultural policy was put in place for the first time in the Netherlands in 1999. This policy and subsequent diversity schemes were met with anger and distrust, as they were perceived as a kind of political intrusion in a field that is 'neutral' and 'autonomous' in nature (Delhaye, 2008; Koren & Delhaye, 2019).

Simultaneously, in the course of the 1990s, grassroots movements organised by postcolonial immigrants in the Netherlands were fighting for visibility and recognition. More specifically, they were demanding the acknowledgment of slavery and the slave trade as an inherent part of Dutch history. The commemoration and remembrance of slavery in the public domain was another aspect of their efforts (Jones, 2012, p. 59). In 2002, a slavery monument was unveiled as the result of the successful interventions of a group of Afro-Surinamese Dutch activists. In the same year, the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (NiNsee) was founded. Ever since various artists and groups, who strove for emancipation for citizens with a migrant background, remained active in the public domain and were keeping the discussion alive by means of various interventions. In 2013, the Foundation to Commemorate Slavery was established and, in the same year, the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles was celebrated. Several museums, including the Amsterdam Museum, were involved in this celebration. In 2014, the first edition of the Amsterdam Slavery Heritage Guide was published. Many other events followed suit (for a more comprehensive overview of decolonising activities in Amsterdam over the last decade, see Ariese, 2020).[1] Museums, too, were explicitly addressed to confront their colonial legacy. Consequently, they began to critically scrutinise their own stories, collections and even their names. As mentioned before, in 2015, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam changed any nameplates that contained hurtful and offensive words. The National Museum of World Cultures published, in 2018, a list of alternative words to those that were felt to be offensive. Also, within the Amsterdam Museum, projects were going on that aimed to de-colonise it. Education programmes, such as Mapping Slavery (2014) and the research project New Narratives (2017–2022) in particular, were projects that were set up to make the museum a multi-vocal space (Schavemaker, 2020). Several museums have explored practices of participation and consultation of diverse audiences along the process of becoming multi-vocal. Yet the key question is whether they have been able to fundamentally "invert power relations and share the voice of authority" (Kreps, 2011, p. 75). In her analysis of the impact of postcolonial critique on museums, the anthropologist Kreps rightly remarked:

> It is also important to keep in mind that what, to some, is a progressive development, to others is old wine in a new bottle. Collaboration and "partnering" for some source communities are just alternative words for cultural appropriation and forms of neo-colonialism. As in all 'contact zone' situations, we have to consider what the terms of collaboration and partnership are and who is setting, defining and managing them. (2011, p. 81)

[1] Ever since, many more decolonising events have taken place in Amsterdam. Maybe the most visible one took place on 1 July 2021, when the Amsterdam Mayor, Femke Halsema, on behalf of the city council, apologised for the involvement of the city in slavery. In her overview of de-colonising projects in Amsterdam in the decade 2010–2020, Ariese (2020) rightfully remarks that these decolonising activities have mainly focused on slavery in the Americas and on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. There has been comparatively less involvement with other aspects of colonialism, such as slavery and forced labour in Asia, as well as the "independence wars" in Indonesia and other places colonised by the Dutch (Ariese, 2020, pp. 123, 125, 130). I would like to add that there is also a relative silence about the history of labour migration and the contribution of the labour migrants and their offspring, at the economic, social and cultural levels, to Dutch society.

8.4 The Act of Adbusting as the Motivator for Change

On 7 May 2019, the Amsterdam Museum discovered on the Twitter account of Mitchell Esajas that one of its posters of the exhibition Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age had been defaced. A tweet also appeared on the Twitter account of the New Urban Collective (2019). The tweet showed the two images in Fig. 8.1: on the right is the original poster of the Amsterdam Museum hanging at the entrance to the Black Archives and, on the left, the poster as 'vandalised' by the activist. In this picture, we can see how the heads of the figures were covered over with white paint and the word BLOODY was applied in some of the white areas. Then the title Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age was replaced by Portrait of the STOLEN Age. The pictures were accompanied by the following text:

> Someone has "modified" the "Hollanders of the #GoldenAge" poster from @AmsterdamMuseum that hung on #TheBlackArchives. Shout out to this anonymous artist (translation C.D.). #WhitewashingHistory No #GoldenAge but #StolenAge.

A more elaborate version of this message drawn in Dutch and in English could be read on the Facebook page of the Black Archives (2019).

The semi-permanent exhibition Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age opened its doors in the Amsterdam Wing of the Hermitage Amsterdam in November 2014. This exhibition comprised 30 large seventeenth-century group portraits featuring rich members of the Dutch bourgeoisie governing cities and the country, trading, taking on the city's defence, etc. These large portraits belong to the collections of the Amsterdam Museum and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. The first week of May 2019, before the start of the tourist season, fresh posters announcing the exhibition

Fig. 8.1 Pictures used to denounce the term "Golden Age" by an anonymous activist. Shared on Twitter by the New Urban Collective on 7 May 2019

were disseminated all over the city. According to the curator of the exhibition, the poster was drawn up in English because it was specifically aimed at international tourists (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). One of these posters hung near to the entrance of the Black Archives. The Black Archives is a recently founded (2015) historical archive that consists of various collections of books which mainly "focus on racism and race issues, slavery and (the) colonization, […]". The archive, located in Amsterdam in a building of the Surinamese Association, is managed by the New Urban Collective, an association of students and young professionals aiming to empower young people with ethnic-minority backgrounds (The Black Archives, n.d.). Mitchell Esajas, born in the Netherlands to Surinamese parents who went there in the 1970s, is one of the co-founders of the Black Archives/ New Urban Collective. He has also been actively involved in the Kick Out Zwarte Piet action group and has, meanwhile, become an important spokesperson in the public domain on issues related to racism in the Netherlands. He is also very much involved in the Dutch cultural field. Although the intervention has not been officially claimed, he is also believed to be the activist behind the adbusting under scrutiny in this article.[2] Pictures of this 'act of adbusting' (altering advertisements in order to criticise the targeted companies or institutions), were shared on Twitter and Facebook.

The Amsterdam Museum, as an institute, felt the need to respond to this intervention and the dissemination of the images via Twitter. The museum wanted to explain that the exhibition had been composed in a complex and multi-layered way (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 1 July 2021). The exhibition, focusing as it did on seventeenth-century urban culture, displayed a series of large group portraits featuring self-glorifying images of regents, regentessess and merchants. The exhibition also tried, however, to counterbalance these exalted representations by devoting attention, on the first floor of the exhibition, to the topics of poverty, disease, crime and slavery (van der Molen, 2016). The marketing department asked van der Molen, curator of the exhibition, to release a statement. The curator was rather reluctant to do so, as he, in fact, agreed with the message of the intervention (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). Apparently, over the course of a short interval of time, the Amsterdam Museum had shifted from a focus on damage control to considering the subject and decided to no longer use the phrase. This decision was the culmination of a long process of development and dialogue with various communities in the city (T. van der Molen, 1 July 2021). On 12 September, the museum issued a press release and the directors and three curators posted an opinion article on the website of the museum and in one of the Dutch quality newspapers.

[2] It is widely believed that the activist was Mitchell Esajas himself. He has repeatedly spoken about it in his lectures, without, however, naming himself as the activist.

8.5 The Term Golden Age: Creating and Decentring a Dutch National Narrative

The term Golden Age seemed an obvious title for the exhibition as it aimed at attracting international tourists. The concept of the Golden Age, referring to the exquisite Dutch heritage of the seventeenth century, has reached global resonance. The publication of Simon Schama's book *The embarrassment of riches* (1987) has contributed to the term's international fame (Van der Molen, 2019). Within the Netherlands itself, the term figured prominently in the narratives about Dutch identity and national culture. In the nineteenth century, in the process of nation building, the phrase was coined by academic historians – endowed with the authority to do so – to "nationalise" history and create social and cultural unity out of the historically and culturally diverse regions. It was meant to evoke a sense of pride in the periods of great prosperity, wealth and the outstanding accomplishments of artists, scientists and managers. The Golden Age became a key metaphor for "cultivated Dutchness" (van der Molen, 2019). Having played a pivotal role in the construction of the nation state, Dutch museums incorporated this metaphor as a key element of their museum narratives.

Pierre Bourdieu has incessantly pointed out that speaking and naming is not a neutral and pure linguistic act. Relations of communication are linguistic exchanges but they are also relations of "symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are mobilized" (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 38). This means that the words which individuals, groups or institutions speak or utter are loaded with unequal weight depending on the degree of authority with which they are endowed (Thompson, 1991/2000, p. 1). Representations, constructed by naming and speaking, have, according to Bourdieu, a specific symbolic efficacy in the construction of social reality: "By structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of the world, and does so all the more significantly the more widely it is recognised, i.e. authorised" (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 105). Yet, as words play a key part in constructing the social world, they then are also objects of struggle between the authorized users and the various groups, which are constituted by the classifications these words install (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 105).

The social operation of naming the Golden Age as a metaphor for a complex historical period of the Netherlands has not only constructed, through various "rites of institution" (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 117) a potent representation of Dutch national culture and identity. In the process of imagining a glorified and homogenised community, these two words have also constructed a social reality in which groups and people were ranked according to the extent to which they could claim – or were denied access to – this very identity and culture. Some groups were made visible; others were rendered invisible, unnamed.

More than a century after its introduction in Dutch nationalist narratives, the term was still used in an obvious way by many politicians, historians, art historians and other academics as well as by Dutch citizens. However, several groups of

citizens had gradually grown critical of the words "Golden Age" and the world they bring into being. Many postcolonial migrants in the Netherlands and their children are the offspring of those who did not profit from the gathered wealth but were exploited and repressed in order to create this wealth for the Dutch. So, the way in which the perception of the social world was steered by this classification was very much inconsistent with theirs.

According to curator I.L., the concept of the Golden Age was no longer used in the educational narratives, yet as a global recognised "brand" attracting international visitors, the concept was retained in 2014 (I.L., personal communication, 20 May 2021). Curator van der Molen confirmed that he had also stopped using the term (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). In 2019, discussions were ongoing about whether the design of the poster was still in line with the mission which the Amsterdam Museum wanted to communicate. The museum realised that, over the last 5 years, society had changed quite considerably. Even before the Black Lives Matter movement spread throughout Europe in 2020, discussions were already going on about removing statues honouring contentious figures from public spaces, changing controversial street names, repatriating contested heritage and decolonising museums (I.L., personal communication, 20 May 2021). This all added up to the annually recurring but increasingly harsh discussions about Black Pete festivities in the Netherlands. Within this social context, staff members of the Amsterdam Museum were discussing whether the representations which the poster features were still adequately structuring the perception of the social world which the museum envisaged. The discussion, curiously, mainly concerned the visual representation, not the words (I.L., personal communication, 20 May 2021). The act of adbusting provided a final incentive to change the images and words altogether (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). From then onwards, the exhibition was titled Portrait Gallery of the Seventeenth Century. The exhibition itself was also re-conceptualised. From October 2019 onwards, a new exhibition, Dutch Masters Revisited, curated by Jörgen Tjong a Fon, was added to the original one. This new exhibition encompassed a series of photographic portraits of famous Dutch people of colour dressed and positioned in the style of the Old Masters and representing people of colour who also lived in the city in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Tjong a Fon, in Schavemaker, 2020, pp. 17–22). Merging the two exhibitions together had as its aim, according to Schavemaker – the artistic director of the museum, "to promote inclusion and social equity" (Schavemaker, in Siegal, 2019).

8.6 Claiming and Sharing Authority

Many descendants of migrants, born and raised in the Netherlands, still do not feel included in contemporary cultural institutes (Prins, 2019). As a result, they have gradually come to establish their own institutions and cultural spaces, create their own artistic projects and/or keep resorting to the tool of cultural activism in order to

temporarily shake up the status quo. Over the last decade, various overlapping groups of activists, artists, curators, writers and actors have been asserting the right to be heard and claiming authority for themselves to speak and name on their own terms. By setting up exhibitions, creating artworks and podcasts and writing books, these young professionals with ethnic-minority backgrounds are taking the floor instead of being the object under discussion (Nzume et al., 2020, p. 12). Provided with cultural capital and relevant social networks in and outside the Netherlands and with practical knowledge about how to play the game, these young professionals gradually succeed in changing and amplifying public culture.

The Black Archives activist, who is highly educated, well versed in postcolonial theory, competent in using new media tools and familiar with contemporary practices in the cultural field, was able to mobilise all the necessary resources and tools to execute his strategy in such a way as to effectively shake up the Amsterdam Museum. The following fragment from an interview which Mitchell Esajas gave on 6 September 2021 on the subject of diversity in the cultural sector, reveals the cultural repertoire from which he constructs strategies of action. Esajas was asked what role activism has played in the stories about colonialism now being told in the cultural sector and how activism differs from the way it functioned before. He replied as follows:

> I think various things are different from before. Firstly, the mechanisms of social inequality in society and the sector [the cultural sector, C.D.] have been criticised for some time but, 20 years ago, we didn't have social media, for example. I think that has enabled our generation to be much more visible and to mobilise people. Take the protests [Black Lives Matter, 01 June 2020, C.D.] on the Dam Square, for example: that was set up within a day. More than 10,000 people showed up at the square. Another point – and which is extremely relevant for the sector: social media ensures that institutions or individuals are more easily called to account. It is nice that [...] the term the Golden Age has been adjusted. I think that's partly because of activists who have sent Tweets criticising old-fashioned terminology. And yes, institutions are certainly sensitive to such criticism and their image. (D. Comijs, interview with Mitchell Esajas, 2021, translation C.D.)

In order to understand more thoroughly the significance of and the impact generated by the act of 'adjusting' the poster of the Amsterdam Museum, the work of Emrah Irzik (2010) on cultural activism is illuminating. Although his work mainly concerns anti-corporate activism, it is certainly useful in the context of the cultural field, not least because cultural institutions have begun to act in a more "business-like" way (Stallabras, 2014 p. 149). Cultural activism, according to Emrah Irzik, "is a struggle to convey dissident viewpoints, truth claims, and alternative significations to the public by making use of the means to which activists are able to gain access" (Irzik, 2010, p. 137). The tool used by the Black Archives activist can be defined as "culture jamming" or, more specifically, as a technique of "adbusting". Culture jamming, according to Irzik, is a "tactic of political subversion and cultural protest" that tries to "capitalize on the ubiquity of corporate messages, ads and media by finding a way to use them against themselves […]" (Irzik, 2010, p. 138). To this end, culture jammers focus on activities such as altering billboards, parodying advertisements and spoofing websites. The specific technique of adbusting used by the Black

Archives activist "involves modifying a commercial advertisement or creating a fake one that mimics the look and feel of the original to proclaim a message that criticizes or mocks the targeted company" (Irzik, 2010, p. 138). By effacing the faces of the characters and changing the words of the poster, the activist appropriates ("hijacks") the meaning disseminated by the Amsterdam Museum and turns it into a dissident (subversive) message. The message materialised through this technique of adbusting made the world, as experienced by the activist and the broader community whose history was silenced, visible. This message was certainly not an act of mockery but, rather, an expression of criticism of the museums' act of erasure for which the activist called the museum to account. However, there is more to it than that. While Irzik focuses primarily on how adbusting affects the content of the messages, a Bourdieusian perspective also directs attention to the struggle about the distribution between social groups of the authority to speak and name (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 113). The act of adbusting by the Black Archives activist was a struggle about words and classifications that simultaneously made visible and invisible. At the same time, this act can be read as a struggle to claim the authority to speak for oneself.

A cultural intervention is, according to Irzik (2010, p. 146), all the more effective as it is grounded in an actual and focused struggle that is taking place and which also offers some perspective on change. One of the pitfalls of cultural activism is that activists see their "tool" as a social struggle in itself and fail to establish a dialogue with concrete unfolding struggles for equality (Irzik, 2010, p. 138). As mentioned before, movements striving for the visibility of colonial history, as for combating discrimination in the Netherlands, have evolved since the 1990s. Various museums and, more specifically, the Amsterdam Museum, have also carried out decolonising projects that resonated well with the act of adbusting.

Yet, in order to compete in the global marketplace of cultural consumption, museums try to connect with their target groups by selecting eye-catching and easily recognisable slogans. In the case of the Amsterdam Museum, the phrase Golden Age seemed an obvious option as it was an internationally recognised term. Simultaneously, multi-vocality has also become a key aspect of the brand 'Amsterdam Museum'. These tensions testify to the fact that museums are not monolithic institutes, as the various departments and staff members may have different focuses.

Curators in the Amsterdam Museum have been engaged in making it a more inclusive and multi-vocal institute for quite some time. Curator I.L., in particular, has been a driving force in not only critically challenging the museum's words and classifications but also in sharing the authority to represent. I.L, with a background in contemporary art, museology and cultural analysis and born and raised in the Netherlands to Surinamese parents, entered the Amsterdam Museum as a guest curator in 2016 during the first Black Achievement Month. This latter is an annual festival which takes place in the month of October. The festival aims to put the spotlight on talented people with African roots. After the festival ended, I.L. stayed on at the museum and very soon launched a research project entitled New Narratives (2017–2022). She sees herself as, at once, an activist and a staff member who

represents an "authoritative" institute (I.L, personal communication, 20 May 2021). She invited other activists/academics to comment on the representations which the museum constructed. She also collaborated in projects of the Black Archives and did so on their terms – even when she had to break with some of the rules and practices of the Amsterdam Museum (I.L., personal communication, 20 May 2021). In addition, she has the authority to bridge; as a professional curator she has the authority to speak within and for the museum as well as between museums. Curator van der Molen agreed that he has learned a lot from her, not least to listen sincerely to others (van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). Sincerely listening to others is, indeed, an essential attitude in the process of sharing the voice of authority. Yet because of I.L.'s migrant and activist background, her authority is also acknowledged by various activists and communities who do not feel sufficiently included in mainstream museums.

The protests and changes unfolding within and outside the museum intersected in such a way as to form a breeding ground for the intervention of the activist to achieve an effect. The museum decided to no longer use the term in their narratives. Not surprisingly, the decision of the museum touched off a wave of criticism, not least by the Dutch Prime Minister, who called this decision 'nonsense' (Jager, 2019). It may well be the case that, in the short term, this heated debate amplified the already harshly polarised attitudes towards migrants in Dutch society. In the long run, however, the decision of the museum will contribute to a wider questioning of the term Golden Age as an important element of the (once) hegemonic representation of Dutch identity and culture.

8.7 Conclusion

The Black Archives activist, being highly educated, well versed in postcolonial theory, competent in using new media tools and familiar with contemporary practices in the museum world, was able to mobilise all the necessary resources and tools to execute his strategy in such a way as to effectively shake up the Amsterdam Museum. His cultural intervention delivered the final blow to the use of a representation that has contributed to the construction of a bifurcated world. This intervention was effective because it coincided with de-colonising practices that had been going on in the Dutch cultural field and, more specifically, in the Amsterdam Museum, for quite some time. Yet, the contemporary complex balancing act of fulfilling multiple roles, meeting different requirements of stakeholders, funders and government officials, reaching out to various audiences and incorporating the local and the global makes the institution prone to 'museum frictions' (Kratz & Karp, 2006, p. 22). The museum no longer used the term Golden Age in its educational narratives and curators had also stopped using the term. Simultaneously, the museum was reaching out to international tourists with the help of that same term – which it seemed obvious to use because of its wide recognition. In the end, the adbusting intervention made the museum fully aware of the meaning of these words in all occasions.

According to Boast: "[…] the contact zone [is always] an asymmetric space where the periphery comes to win some small, momentary, and strategic advantage, but where the center ultimately gains" (2011, p. 66). In my opinion, however, every small and strategic gain has the capacity to alter the centre in its ongoing and complex process of de-centring. Yet, certainly, activists will still be needed to urge museums to accelerate and strengthen this process of de-centring.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank the curators for their willingness to talk with me. Special thanks go to my colleague, Tamara van Kessel, for her critical reading of a former draft and her valuable comments.

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