

De Andere Helft. Expertmeeting #7: Women Museum Professionals

January 19th, 2024 – 10:00-12:30

Program

10:00 – 10:15	Welcome and opening remarks by Jenny Reynaerts (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, chair of the project Women of the Rijksmuseum)
10:15 – 10:35	Rachel Esner (University of Amsterdam). <i>Ida Peelen – Beyond the Biography</i>
10:35 – 10:45	Q&A
10:45 – 11:05	Laia Anguix Vilches (Radboud University, Nijmegen). <i>Women Managing Museums (1890s-1950s): A Trans-European History</i>
11:05 – 11:15	Q&A
11:15 – 11:25	Break
11:25 – 11:45	Juno Schuijt (RKD – Netherlands Institute of Art History, The Hague). <i>The Recently Acquired Archives of Jo Zwartendijk, Assistant at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and Art Critic for NRC</i>
11:45 – 11:55	Q&A
11:55 – 12:25	General discussion, moderated by Jenny Reynaerts
12:25 – 12:30	Concluding remarks and future events

10:15-10:35 Dr. Rachel Esner (University of Amsterdam)**Women of the Rijksmuseum. Giving Voice**

Rachel Esner's lecture *Ida Peelen. Beyond the biography* focuses on placing the (working) life of the art historian Ida Peelen in a broader intellectual context, exploring how her early experiences as a *volontair* at the Rijksmuseum influenced her later curatorial practices. Esner's lecture addresses methodological issues, particularly how to make women's work in museums visible, expanding on the concept of labor to include often invisible or undervalued work.

In 1987, sociologist Arlene Kaplan Daniels published an article entitled "Invisible Work," describing how our understanding of "work" focuses on activities that are generally thought to be paid. Women's work, she argued, is devalued, as it is often under- or unpaid, whether on the job or in the home. This idea of work thus leads to all kinds of work disappearing. For example, work involved in the social construction of daily life and – crucially for the context of this lecture – *the maintenance and development of institutions*. Daniels proposes an expansion of the concept of "labor" to include many activities not previously considered, positing that a keener awareness of the work involved in *social maintenance* and *supportive functions* serves to engender respect for the people who do them.

Esner's research within the project *Women of the Rijksmuseum* aims to bring the hitherto invisible contribution of female workers of the Rijksmuseum in the period before 1960 to light. Aside from the practical problems I've encountered – for example, that many women worked as "volontaires" and have therefore left no administrative records – there are conceptual issues as well. Two that appear fundamental are 1) how we define "curating"; and 2) the role art history has played in how museums are organized and, consequently, the value they place on various types of objects.

Since the establishment of the discipline and its institutionalization in the 19th century, art history has put painting at the top of its list of objects of study. Other kinds of artefacts were relegated to lower rungs on the institutional ladder. These domains – which encompass among others the decorative arts, textiles, fashion and costume – have often fallen under the purview of female laborers, considered "good enough" to care for these "minor" collections. Because these departments have been considered of lesser significance, they offered women greater opportunity. But this has also meant that they have not gotten the credit they deserve for their contributions.

As for the definition of "curating", since the mid-20th century, "curating" has been associated with exhibition making, and many of the curator's common tasks have been delegated to other professionals. Traditionally, however, the curator's job was to *care* for the collection and included work such as documentation, cataloguing, research, and writing for a field of specialization. These tasks, too, were often delegated to women – without, however, honoring them with the proper job title. To make women's labor in the museum visible, and to better understand its nature, we need to return to the original definition of curating as a form of *care* and refocus on aspects of museum work that have become undervalued.

As elsewhere in Europe in this period, Dutch museums were in a process of transformation, moving away from a documentary approach to collecting and display and towards a more aesthetic and art-historically informed concept of the museum. It was into this convergence of museum reform and the establishment of the discipline along formalist lines that the Peelen began her career, taking up her post in the Rijksmuseum as the first female *volontaire*. As a *volontaire* and furthermore without a doctoral degree, Peelen was not "authorized" to carry out scholarly work.

Peelen's time in the Rijksmuseum was the first step in a pioneering career, in which these discussions around art history, museums, and aesthetic education would bear fruit in her further practice. In 1912 she was hired as "under-director" of the Municipal Museum in The Hague; then, in 1918, as director of Huis Lambert van Meerten in Delft. She was thus the first woman to become the director of a national – i.e., *rijks* – museum.

The move to Delft provided Peelen the opportunity to further develop her ideas regarding the relationship between the museum and the public, as well as museum research and presentation.

Peelen published two articles on the book and its application in museum work in 1918 and 1919, respectively, proposing this method be adopted by Dutch museums in order to teach visitors “to see”. As she wrote: “The essence of this teaching method is that the work of art is not superficially viewed as an illustration of a lecture on art history, but that the work of art ‘an sich’ is exclusively discussed.” For Peelen, the aim of art education in the museum was to enable the visitor to experience works of art aesthetically: “A work of art should not only be considered and judged, but first and foremost experienced (‘erlebt’, as the Germans say), if one wants to feel its great influence.”

As for the presentation of the collection, the museum had originally been designed to recreate the atmosphere of a 17th-century patrician home, with period rooms made up of authentic pieces, copies, and 19th-century neo-style objects and furniture. This seems to have remained largely intact, although there is some evidence of a “clean up”. The museum guide, however, provided the necessary lessons in taste and appreciation. As noted by Elisabeth Neurdenburg, a friend of Peelen’s and fellow scholar of ceramics, in a review published in 1923, the guide carefully and consistently pointed out which objects were authentic and directed the visitor’s attention to those pieces especially worthy of study.

In her lecture, Esner returns to the role of a curator and the specific contributions of women in museums, focusing on Ida Peelen. Throughout her career, Peelen was often interviewed, and a recurring question was how her work as a museum director and curator related to her gender. In the museum, she performed both roles, handling tasks that ranged from study and research to educating the public and conserving collections. These activities were predominantly categorized as “care,” which is crucial to a museum’s social role.

Journalists and Peelen herself often highlighted the connection between her gender and her work. Kate de Ridder, in a 1928 interview, emphasized that women bring heart and intuition to their work, qualities seen as distinguishing them from men. Peelen echoed this sentiment, asserting that intuition is vital for understanding art, making museum work particularly suited for women. She also stressed the dedication, hard work, and satisfaction her job provided, linking personal development with societal contribution.

Peelen viewed museum work as ideally suited for women, offering fulfillment and the opportunity to make art accessible to the public. This perspective, while emphasizing feminine qualities, also masked the reality of the hard, often underpaid work involved. Additionally, Peelen’s significant contributions to ceramics studies were downplayed to fit societal expectations. Her understanding of her work as a form of care sheds light on the broader role of women in museums, beyond traditional domains like painting and sculpture. Peelen’s commitment to museum reform and the formal, aesthetic appreciation of art objects reflects the early art historians’ ideals, which she actively implemented. Her contributions are thus essential to understanding the history and evolution of Dutch museums.

10:35-10:45 Q&A

Jenny Reynaerts (JR) Could you elaborate a little bit more on the project Gender and work and the verb oriented method. Why do you think it is a good methodology?

Rachel Esner (RE) I would like to ask Marielle who is employing that method very strongly in her dissertation.

Marielle Ekkelenkamp (ME) This method quantifies very clearly actions that people do. It is a very useful method when you don’t have many sources of information. In many cases, as in Rachel’s research, you don’t want to look only at people who have a job title as “curator” but you want to look at what they are actually doing. This method gives you a systematic and quantifiable way to distil this from sources.

RE The question of what is a curator, or what is a museum director even, really needs to be thought about not only in job titles because women are doing curatorial work especially in the early twentieth century without having that job title and curatorial work that is defined as a form of caring. It has more to do with maintenance, collecting, persevering but also with the social role and the idea of social role of a caring profession. Bringing art to the public.

ME I like how you distilled an overarching theme in these activities that you found and I think there is also good if you could densely do this with male curators or actions done by men and if you could compare these whether there are differences.

JR These tasks in museums are gradually divided because with bringing art to the public in a certain moment becomes a department of education who are mostly ran by women. That is something which is also interesting to look into. How these developments have progressed through a museum's history.

Sanne de Rooij (SdR) In the questionnaire that has been sent out a lot of people were interested in how these gender related notions of being a curator can be applied or seen in present day light. If there are any differences between female and male curators nowadays that were also visible almost a hundred years ago.

RE As I have been running a curatorial program for the last fifteen years, I have seen that most of our students are female. I think it does have something to do with the value that is placed on the curatorial profession, conceived now that women feel very attracted to this job.

JR I think it is an interesting turn because in the past it used to be mostly men being curators. Men were mostly professional anyway, of course until 1956 in the Netherlands Law of Incompetence. I would like to see a nowadays overview of how many women work in the museum sector and in which positions. In the studies it's mostly female studies but in the sector it's mostly men becoming director of head of departments. Sanne has made a list of museum directors and curators in the past.

SdR I made a list of female museum directors and curators who have been active between 1780 and 1980 in the Netherlands, though the list is not that long but the very first women who were active in the museum sector started in the early twentieth century. Many women worked voluntarily so they don't show up in the archives and administration yet, so you're not sure whether you have the right numbers. It is also important to look relatively at the male numbers.

10:45 – 11:05 Laia Anguix Vilches (Radboud University, Nijmegen)

[report omitted as the speaker is preparing a publication on the subject]

11:05-11:15 Q&A (Women Managing Museums (1890s-1950s): A Trans-European History)

Question: Have you found any laws similar to those that were prevailing in the Netherlands – such as the Law of Incompetence – regarding women's (un)equal rights outside of the Netherlands as well?

Answer: Such marriage bars were present in several European countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, and in the UK, prevented women from pursuing jobs after they married or forced them to leave their jobs. In Italy, Spain, and Portugal, for instance the Law of Incompetence did not exist. However, women were nonetheless expected to resign from their careers, and similar laws remained for a long time. In Spain, women were not allowed to sign their own work contracts or own bank accounts until the late 1970s.

Question: Were the efforts of these women as museum directors and professionals in reshaping the museum (i.e. the educational approach) continued after their resignation or pension by men?

Answer: I have noticed that these women really cared for their legacy to be continued so they put special care to who was going to be appointed after them – in many cases women appointing other women. This is a phenomenon I am very interested in. They tried to make sure their views were continued by their successors. But I have also found many cases in which these approaches made by women were not continued.

Question: I noticed you mostly looked into the (art historical) training of museum professionals. Many museum professionals working at the Rijksmuseum were trained as artists at the art academies. Did you look into that kind of education as well?

Answer: In the case of the countries I have focused on so far – in Spain and Italy – art history was the only academic qualification that granted access to museum professions.

11:25-11:45 Juno Schuijt (Former Intern at RKD)

The Recently Acquired Archives of Jo Zwartendijk. Assistant at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and Art Critic for NRC

Alida Jozina Zwartendijk, better known as Jo, was born and raised in Rotterdam. After attending the girls' high school, she moved to Paris where she followed the three-year course on the history of painting at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris. In November 1913, she passed her exams and became an assistant at Museum Boijmans in Rotterdam. She was succeeded by Dirk Hannema in 1920. One of her duties at the museum was to give guided tours, an educational task that was still in its infancy at the time. From 1920 until her death in 1938, she had a permanent job as an art assistant in the art section of the NRC. She reviewed exhibitions and art historical publications. Zwartendijk was seen as a 'difficult' but 'true-hearted critic' who played a role in popularizing visual art for a wide audience. She died at the age of 48 because of complications after a surgery but had already been in ill health for several years.

The archive of Jo Zwartendijk is divided between two institutions. The part that concerns her literary work is held by the Literatuurmuseum in The Hague. The part covering her art historical activities came to the RKD in 2022. The RKD acquired the archive of Jo Zwartendijk in 2022, courtesy of her niece B.J. Zwartendijk, her son Joost Govers and the City Archive of Rotterdam. The archive is half a meter in size and includes honors, photographs, travel journals, manuscripts of published and unpublished texts, albums of her published articles, working relationships at Museum Boijmans, notebooks and notes made during her training at the École du Louvre, and inventories of the Louvre's collections.

Zwartendijk's diary, which is part of her archive at the Literatuurmuseum, shows that her interest in art and art criticism was present well before she moved to Paris to study at the Ecole du Louvre. In November 1908, she writes that every other week she was taking private lessons in literary and art history by Maria Viola. After finishing girls-school in Rotterdam, she left to Paris and attended a three-year course on the history of painting at the École du Louvre from 1911 to 1913. This is remarkable for women of her generation, studying abroad was a rarity. A part of her archive at the RKD consists notebooks with lecture notes from her time in Paris. These notebooks give good insight into the subjects she took there, such as the subject 'French painting of the seventeenth century'. And even after her time in Paris, she continued to teach herself as is evident from this notebook titled 'Art History of Jo Zwartendijk'. She taught herself the basics of art history and studied the collections of museums like the Louvre.

In 1916, she started her job as an assistant to Frederik Schmidt-Degener (1881-1941), director at the Museum Boijmans in Rotterdam. He often stayed abroad for longer periods for studies, and personal trips. So to continue his work during his absence, a museum assistant was hired. The first was G. Knuttel in 1914, who was thus succeeded by Zwartendijk in 1916. Correspondence shows that she had a good relationship with Schmidt-Degener. They call each other, for instance, 'Cher Ami' and discuss each other's private lives at length in their letters to each other.

Not much is known about her work at the museum. We do know that she was engaged in giving tours of the museum. In the early 20th century, art education was just starting to be a thing. The fact that Zwartendijk was engaged in this can be seen as very progressive. In the 1919 annual report of the museum can be read that there was little enthusiasm for these Saturday tours, nevertheless Zwartendijk kept insisting that they continue. After four years, she resigned as an assistant and started working at the NRC as a permanent critic for the art section of the Rotterdam newspaper.

Although Zwartendijk worked at the Museum Boijmans for only four years, she does leave behind a large legacy. She donated three works to the museum. In 1935, she was closely involved in a fundraiser among residents of Rotterdam for the new Boijmans building. In 1936, she gifted a painting by Kees van Dongen, called *La Commode*. And, as stated in her will, she leaves a sum of money to the museum with the instruction to use it to purchase a work of art for the collection. The museum used the money to buy the bronze sculpture *De puddeler* by the Belgian artist Constantin Meunier.

From 1920 until her death in 1938, Zwartendijk was a regular critic of the Rotterdam newspaper NRC. She wrote exhibition reviews and book reviews for the Arts and Letters section, which was edited by writer-critic Johan de Meester, her mentor. Zwartendijk covered the Rotterdam region. She often wrote anonymously, but occasionally sent reports of exhibitions from Paris, under her own name. From the start, Zwartendijk wrote about both ancient and modern art; not only in the NRC, but also in other papers and magazines. A large part of Zwartendijk's archive consists of manuscripts and notes of articles written by her, as well as several albums filled with newspaper clippings of her articles. Thus, the archive gives a great insight in both Zwartendijk's work as her personal life.

11:45 – 11:55 Q&A

Question: I was wondering about Knuttel – who was Zwartendijk's predecessor at the Museum Boijmans – as he was also an art critic. Is there any way he could have been instrumental to her later career as an art critic and writer?

Answer: I think it was a very small network of art critics – they all knew each other. I believe it was a matter of connections.

Question: As a member of the board of the Rotterdamse Kunstkring, do you know how Zwartendijk's work as a critic related to her position as a member of the board. Have you come across anything relevant when you looked into the archive?

Answer: No, I don't know yet.

Addition from the audience: Just to add quickly to the theme of female critics using gender-neutral abbreviations of their names or just signing their articles using their initials. This was also done by Hermine Grada Hermina Marius. She signed her exhibition review using 'G', at least in 1899 and 1901, as far as I know.

Question: Do you know whether Zwartendijk had any ambitions becoming a museum director herself? Knuttel became the director of the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, and Hannema was appointed director of the Museum Boymans.

Answer: I thought about this but my answer can only be speculative. I have not found any proof, but she was a very ambitious woman who devoted her life to the arts. I think she would have loved to become a director but I am not sure.

Question: Do you know how she came to possess the Kees van Dongen painting [which is now a part of the Museum Boymans' collection]?

Answer: In literature, Zwartendijk is never mentioned as an art collector though she did donate several paintings. I think some provenance research on the Van Dongen would reveal this.

Report by Sanne de Rooij, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen