

FOCUS: the Netherlands

FOCUS: the Netherlands comprises of 14 galleries from the Netherlands, who are all involved in the presentation of so-called cutting edge contemporary art. The FOCUS-selection aims to reflect the most urgent developments in the Dutch contemporary art gallery landscape: it is a combination of veteran galleries who rose to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, and a younger group who started out around 2004 and after. All of them present an international program, which can often be traced back to the high quality postgraduate and residency programs in the Netherlands, like the Rijksakademie, De Ateliers, Piet Zwart Institute, and the Jan van Eyck Academie. These educational programs, which draw a high percentage of international artists, are feeding into the multi-tiered institutional structure of museums, presentation spaces for contemporary art, and non-profit and artist-run spaces. This dynamic environment is partly supported by the traditionally generous government funding possibilities for both individual artists and institutions – a widely acclaimed cultural support system that is currently suffering from severe financial cutbacks and restructuring, and that will see some grave changes inflicted upon itself over the following years.

The galleries who are participating in FOCUS: the Netherlands are geographically concentrated in the capital of Amsterdam, the historical nexus of the Dutch art world, but the program includes participants from Rotterdam and The Hague as well. The galleries represent, each in their individual ways, a variety of models for presentation, production, publishing and collaboration that have emphatically evolved out of their inbedding in the international art scene. The dominance of the art fair model, which over the past decade has become the most important market platform for presentation and dissemination of contemporary art, has however not caused any substantial changes in the art gallery machinations in the Netherlands: exceptions aside, the international character of their programs is generally still very much rooted locally, focusing on the Netherlands (and Amsterdam in particular) as an international hub, drawing mainly from the presence of artists from abroad (and their networks) who settle themselves, temporarily or permanently, in the Netherlands.

Put into a more historical perspective, it can be said that over recent years, contemporary art galleries in the Netherlands have reclaimed some of the terrain they conceded in the 1970s to the then-burgeoning contemporary art-focus of the major Dutch art museums and institutions. While most established museums and institutions have in the past decennium shifted their focus slowly but surely towards exhibiting more established art on the one hand, and towards programs with a more discursive and academic character on the other, the galleries have found themselves again at that dynamic threshold between the artist's (post-)studio and the institutional sphere. Their role as signalling agencies for the youngest developments has found new momentum at this particular point in time, when the expansion of traditional studio practices into the manifold new manifestations of the post-'discursive turn'-landscape demand different, more flexible approaches to the production, presentation, and contextualisation of contemporary art.