

DE GROENE AMSTERDAMER

Kunst Een koopmanshuis voor de kunst Een typisch Nederlands moment

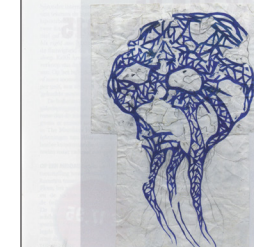
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door Roos van der Lint

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A GALLERY AS A MONUMENT: MARSHA PLOTNITSKY RUNS A MERCHANT HOUSE FOR ART A TYPICALLY DUTCH MOMENT

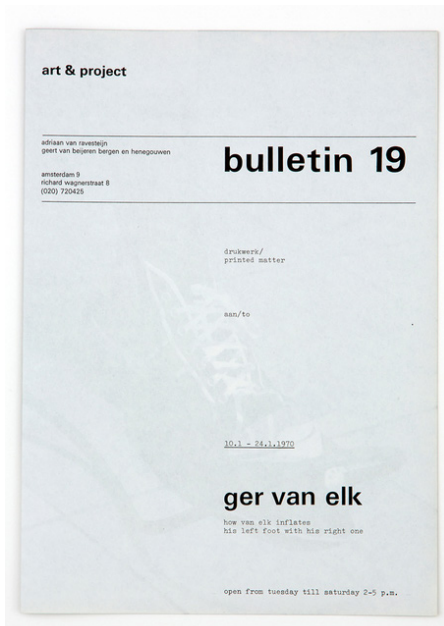
By Roos van der Lint

A former Wall Street banker, Marsha Plotnitsky looks at the art world with different eyes. In her gallery she currently brings together the legendary bulletins of Art & Project and new drawings of Hilarius Hofstede.

Marsha Plotnitsky stood up from among the audience, thanked Tomoko for the music and asked her guests—especially if they had enjoyed the concert—to make a contribution to the Tomoko Mukaiyama Foundation. Musicians, after all, have nothing that they can sell, she said, no artworks like the ones hanging on the walls. On the walls were paintings of Kees Visser, photographs and video work of Carolee Schneemann, drawings of André de Jong, and digital prints of Chuck Close—all artists presented in the gallery over the past two years, and offered for sale. "I'm trying to be self-sufficient here," laughed Plotnitsky when the time came to talk about art and business.

She calls The Merchant House a "microcosm," an independently financed space for post-crisis art in Amsterdam. The art spreads itself from the bel étage on the canal up the steps into the intimate

The piano concert came to an end as Tomoko Mukaiyama took her high boot off the piano pedal and let her head drop. She had played Philip Glass under an opulent 17th-century ceiling fresco in the backroom of a deep and narrow canal house on Amsterdam's Herengracht. Through the high windows behind the grand piano came the noise of the neighbors' barbecue, but the fully packed room inside was all silence and admiration.



room at the back, with its grand piano and marble mantle. A beautiful Flora looks down from the fresco on the ceiling; enveloped in a red and blue cloth, she is reclining among the clouds, her breasts bare and weighed down with the portrayed gravity.

In 2001, after almost twenty years of working on Wall Street, principally as a managing director of the firm Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette, Plotnitsky transferred her knowledge of business from banking to art. She had been active in the art world early on, establishing important contacts through her not-for-profit foundation ICAR (Institute for the Cooperation of Art and Research) and working on projects with Dennis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci, and John Coplans to name but a few. Plotnitsky had no ambition to function as a white-cube gallery owner, as someone who needs to see a stable of artists brought to the top collections or international exhibitions. And she did not want to become a dealer who would spend days glued to the phone to generate sales. As a banker she thought of the possibility of a different form of art business, a commercial business enriched with social dimensions. She deepened her knowledge of the model of a merchant, a thoughtful tradesperson who offers what she or he possesses as merchandise.

In the economic models of the financial sector, says Plotnitsky, profit maximization, with all its consequences, remains central even after the crisis, but the Dutch merchants did things differently. Naturally, they also accumulated wealth for themselves—and to the full extent possible—but in the process they produced social good. They invested in their city, and in art.

Plotnitsky moved to the Netherlands for love, first to Friesland and then to Amsterdam. In 2012, she brought the canal house on the Herengracht back to its original function as a merchant's house—for art. Unusual exhibitions have followed one another ever since, leaping through art history without the customary hunger for the newest or the youngest. During my visits, I often heard Plotnitsky say

that everything is a matter of “total coincidence,” from her being acquainted with major artists to her collection of Jan Schoonhoven's drawings, which belonged to Henk Peeters and which she got the chance to acquire.

Two shows in particular were noteworthy for their museum quality. First, Carolee Schneemann, who since the sixties has been a cause célèbre with her raw body-art performances, including her series *Infinity Kisses*. In the photographs, we see the artist in her home setting—with floral wallpaper and lampshades—kissing with her cat. “Morning kisses,” as they were announced in the accompanying text. In the darkened backroom, there was also a presentation of this ritual as a video—under Flora, the goddess of fertility. And second, this past summer, American tourists strolling by were particularly impressed to spot the name of Chuck Close, a superstar in the United States but last seen in the Netherlands in the Rotterdam Kunsthall in 2012. There at The Merchant House were his monumental portraits built up from numerous, tiny “digital” color pixels. In addition, a towering, woven self-portrait was meant to connect Close to the North-European tradition of tapestry-making and to place him at his rightful place in Amsterdam. To quote from the press release: “Amsterdam's Baroque facades, with their predetermined but varied structure, are a great backdrop to explore the theme of a human face, especially magnified to this scale.”

Unusual exhibitions have followed one another ever since, leaping through art history

The newest exhibition goes beyond famous names with a story on a meta-level: 156 paper bulletins retell the history of a legendary gallery and bring dozens of major artists along with it. Plotnitsky actually started The Merchant House under the name Art & Concept, an allusion to the former



Amsterdam gallery Art & Project. She admired the progressive gallery concept of Geert van Beijeren and Adriaan van Ravensteijn, the way they did not just aim for new directions in art but also introduced—with the bulletins—a new pathway for art communications. A bulletin, a double-folded A3 sheet of paper, was sent out by mail as an exhibition invitation to some four hundred art lovers. The artists were given carte blanche to create the content, and the bulletins ran off with the passage of time—with the flow of mail art and conceptual art, in which a work's concept takes precedence over its execution. This was an art form that could find a perfect expression on paper, and the bulletins, numbered from 1 to 156 and published between 1968 and 1989, were immediately received as artworks in themselves and mushroomed into an art historical archive. To quote from the letter in bulletin #4: "I am very interested in your ideas and would love to participate, but you undoubtedly hear this all the time."

When Plotnitsky explained the concept of her gallery space to Jan Frank, the American artist of Dutch descent who was the subject of the inaugural exhibition (his first solo show in the Netherlands in twenty years), she referred to the history of the Dutch merchants. Frank asked her why she didn't just call herself a merchant. Because it seemed arrogant to her as a foreigner on the canals to run a business steeped in local commerce. Not at all, said Frank, and a month later the space was called The Merchant House. Every exhibition is accompanied by a numbered publication, which is a



cross between a catalogue and an artist's book.

In the space where previously one could see the digital prints of Chuck Close, now hang the two sets of the "analogue" bulletins of Art & Project. One complete set came from the possessions of Plotnitsky and one—post-marked—was borrowed from Marja Bloom, who used to be on the mailing list of

Art & Project. A unique situation, because the bulletins have seen the light internationally not more than a couple of times, and, according to Plotnitsky, never as comprehensively—with the front and back spread out next to each other.

The fixed format of the bulletins—a letter form, a full-page layout, and black lettering—serves to divide the walls of the bel étage in long horizontal time lines. The white of the paper dominates: for conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth ("Art as Idea as Idea") the words alone were enough. Jan Dibbets and Ger van Elk chose to experiment with the conventions of photography, while Richard Long filled the pages of several bulletins with his "land art." His photographic spreads of a forest path in Nepal, of a river in Tennessee, of the snows in the Andes range and rock formations in the stretches of Scotland jump to view as posters in the collection.

One can question whether the bulletins were ever meant to be displayed side by side. The "reading direction" feels artificial and the top row was altogether unreadable to me. Also, in terms of content, the chronological principle works against the many references that crisscross the walls. Jan Dibbets and Sol LeWitt, for example, both played with the full-page format and the golden section. Lawrence Weiner leaves bulletin #10 empty except for a few words, while Richard Long fills the same paper with his realization of bulletin #35. And the only gap on the wall comes from Daniel Buren, who decided that for his bulletin #24 no bulletin should be published at all. Buren did however appear in four other bulletins: one time anonymously and one time with a photograph of his installation at the Guggenheim Museum before the installation was censored.

Thus the bulletins as an archive can be read in many different ways. With only four women in the collection, the art of the time strikes one as a masculine endeavor but with an extraordinary international scope. The bulletins underscore the humor of conceptual art, like, for example, bulletin #9 with two photographs of Ger van Elk's sneakers and a pump that carries his title: *How Van Elk inflates his left foot with his right one*. But they are also a witness to the frivolity that crept into the art of that time. Keith Arnatt announced in bulletin #23 the sale of the running

time of his exhibition. In the bulletin, people could subscribe to one or more seconds of the exhibition for \$1 per unit, a purchase that was to be settled with a photograph of the “purchase moment.”

The bulletins, one might say, round off Plotnitsky’s gallery program. But in addition to centering the internal history of the gallery, they provide a context for the exhibition in the back of The Merchant House, where now hang the new drawings of Hilarius Hofstede, a Dutch artist who grew up with conceptual art and yet took a radically different path.

One afternoon during the installation, Plotnitsky pointed out to me the similarities between the white frame of the ceiling fresco of Flora, the paper of the Art & Project bulletins and the many-cornered white *passe-partouts* of the collages of Hilarius Hofstede. The artist built brightly-colored jellyfish, fish, turtles, and salamanders from many layers of torn and glued paper and there they were laid out on the wooden floor. Each drawing carries the stamp *Paleo Psycho Pop*. Hofstede’s work has to do with the search for a natural impulse, he said, with the animals that might have already existed during the Paleolithic era. “The animal kingdom is our deepest surrealism. If you go to Artis Zoo—in the very first instant your eye falls on an animal like a dromedary camel, precisely in that first second—it’s completely bizarre. That one instant,” Hofstede snaps his fingers, “is virtuality for me.”

Like the lines of cave drawings with their origin in the rocks’ crevices, the creatures of Hofstede spring from the lines of his paper. This feels positively exotic next to the bulletins with their conceptual signature, art that seemed devoid of nature. Yes, in bulletin #33 we see Ger van Elk at a dinner table eating a fish (*Paul Klee—Um den Fisch (1926)*), but that dealt primarily with an extension of the expressionism of Paul Klee. And even the landscapes in the works of Richard Long and Jan Dibbets were actually about our perception of nature. About looking at the line of the horizon or a forest path, but only as an idea.

In his art Hofstede attempts to glean the virtual in the flat Dutch landscape. “I have always been in search of an imaginary dimension, and in our landscape it is actually absent. When I travel by train and watch the passing fields, I see Felliniesque parades, circuses or voodoo priests dragged along. Everything that we don’t see.”

For these very reasons it was interesting for Plotnitsky to set his work in dialogue with the bulletins. Look at the creatures of Hofstede, she explained. You think you are seeing animals but look again—here they are more schematic than realistic. She cited Virginia Woolf who said that art is attached to reality but barely—with four corners.

The combination certainly passes muster. The layering of the paper, the white framing of the “surrealistic” animals that do make one think of the sharp cuts in the Dutch landscape. Hofstede spoke about the tensions between the “volcanic, manic, and mad” that Van Gogh had enacted in his work and that Mondrian aimed to erase. “Art is, in that regard, perhaps less about politics than about defining your position in the cultural world.”

This double presentation speaks not only about art but also about the place. While most galleries aim for an international feel, so much so inside as outside that you cannot tell if you are looking at art in Brussels or Tokyo, The Merchant House—again and again—asks for a reflection on the Dutch character of this city, of this canal house, of the art history in this gallery.

In the introduction to the catalogue for Hofstede’s drawings (published in the LP format) Plotnitsky pondered a possible connection between Hofstede’s use of paper and that of the tablecloths in the 17th-century still-lives of Willem Heda. In the same text she asks herself about the conceptual art in the bulletins: “Why did Amsterdam, the city of the Dutch still-life resplendent with objects, become the center of these nonobjective practices?”

As long as The Merchant House continues to follow its founding principles, Plotnitsky remains in the position to write her own art history. The upcoming show derives again from a specific moment in the bulletins, from the rise of the Italian painting that signaled the bulletins’ demise. A break with conceptual art is already visible in the publication form of bulletin #107, from 1978, by the painter Francesco Clemente, who used orange paper. Together with the art the purpose of the bulletins changed, and they eventually petered out into regular invitations with installation shots.

The Merchant House asks for a reflection on the Dutch character of this city, of this canal house

Italian artists, according to Plotnitsky, operated in a totally different context and yet arrived at an abstract form. In the next exhibition, she intends to show Pino Pinelli in combination with Kees Visser and André de Jong, both previously exhibited in The Merchant House. If I don’t immediately see how these Europeans influenced each other—three “representatives of post-minimal abstraction,” a southern Pinelli versus Visser and De Jong with their Dutch roots and the inspiration they have found in Iceland—it’s another typically Dutch moment to look forward to.

A modern take on the Amsterdam tradition of a merchant
A playful mix of life and commerce
A radical shift in showcasing contemporary art
Art space founded by Marsha Plotnitsky in 2012

The Merchant House
Herengracht 254
1016 BV Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Open:
Every Friday from
12:00–19:30 and
by appointment