

Art, museums and society

An interview with Jan van der Marck, former chief curator at the Detroit Institute of Arts

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Jan van der Marck has had a long and distinguished career in museum work. Born in The Netherlands, and in the US permanently since the early 1960s, van der Marck has held positions at numerous institutions, including the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Dartmouth Museum, the Center for Fine Arts in Miami and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. He helped found the latter museum in 1967 and served as its first director. He has also taught at the university level in the US, managed art projects and authored monographs. Van der Marck came to the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) in 1986 as head of the twentieth century art department and subsequently was named chief curator of the museum. He was dismissed, absurdly, in 1995 for failing to fulfill the residency requirement for city employees.

I first met Jan van der Marck at a forum in Pontiac, Michigan in March organized to discuss the issue of censorship and the arts. The meeting was most specifically a response to the closure of Jef Bourgeau's show, "Art Until Now," in November by officials at the DIA. At the Pontiac meeting van der Marck spoke eloquently about the pressures that exist on museums to present "noncontroversial, politically correct, child-centered art." He warned of the impact of increased corporate control over the arts. "There is a willing surrender of control to amorphous corporate and publicist interests.... Can the day be far when the corporate world takes over and controls venerable museums?" He also pointed to the recent AOL/Time-Warner merger as a dangerous symptom.

In an initial conversation in May van der Marck, in response to my questions, outlined his career and essential concerns. It seems to me that he has things to say and experiences to relate that will be valuable for an international audience. The following is an edited version of a lengthy discussion we held at his home in suburban Detroit in mid-June.

David Walsh: What medium or what sort of art do you feel most attuned to, or love the most?

Jan van der Marck: It's hard to limit oneself to just one medium, but in my professional life I've been most involved with the media of painting and sculpture. Today I fancy the medium of illustrated books, bindings, and in between I've always been very interested in those attempts at crisscrossing media which began quite a long time ago and which in my experience took the form of "happenings," of concerts of one kind or another. I was a great admirer of John Cage and I was witness to the first stirrings of Fluxus. So all these artists had the ambition to not limit themselves to one medium, but to link all the various media into one grander scheme.

DW: It would seem that one of the things you value then is a certain spontaneity.

JvdM: Absolutely yes.

DW: On the surface, that would seem to run counter to the image of a certain kind of European, scholarly tradition.

JvdM: I don't think that "scholarly" really enters into it. In a way, yes, I

was brought up in the discipline of art history. I had to make a decision at some point whether to become an art historian and maybe a teacher, or to start working in museums. I also had to make a decision whether I was going to go into a classical museum or whether I was going to embrace a new type of museum that is more responsive to the public, a museum that is more concerned with education and caters more to young people. And it so happened that a man who introduced me into museum work and whom I admired a great deal was a radical of museum exhibitions and museum management, and so I never looked upon my museum career as a scholarly pursuit, but always as that of an impresario.

DW: This was the individual you mentioned in our previous conversation?

JvdM: Yes, Willem Sandberg. He came from a Dutch aristocratic family, but he had been a Resistance fighter during the German occupation and that had also, as with so many intellectuals right after World War II, given him the taste of Communism and a new social responsibility, so he expressed himself in very radical ways, quite shocking to the Dutch bourgeois. This was the 1940s.

DW: What were some of his theories about museums?

JvdM: I don't think he went by theories, because he wasn't much of an intellectual as I remember him, but he was an animator, a Diaghilev, let's say.

DW: Did you see the path that you eventually chose as somewhat oppositional?

JvdM: Yes, I think it probably had to do with the fact that I already felt within my family a bit of a rebel. So, yes, I was oppositional by mind-set. And I have sometimes thought that I could have made my life easier had I apprenticed myself in a museum of great standing, like the Rijksmuseum [in Amsterdam], and slowly moved up in the ranks, and got a department to head. It would have been a more linear life, but I chose the other way.

DW: It does seem, because I had the opportunity to listen to a brief accounting of your life and career, that you've come into conflict, in one way or another, with boards of directors and trustees almost everywhere you went, which is to your credit as far as I'm concerned.

JvdM: Because in a way I've always tested the limits, trying to see where they were, basically change the formula, or stretch the concept.

DW: If you looked at yourself from the outside what would you say has been a thread that connects all those.... There's the form of wanting to stretch the limits, but what is the content?

JvdM: Maybe questioning the authority, not just of people, but as well of theories and concepts, trying to promote the new, the idea that in the new there had to be by necessity a greater value, greater imagination; and so I simply never went by any kind of party line, or any kind of rote system. That wasn't the smartest thing to do because sometimes it's better to conform in smaller ways to achieve a greater strategic goal. I may have lost out on long-term gains by sometimes opting for short-term success or

impact. But again as I said I have really no great regrets about it, that's probably the only way I could have operated.

I've had offers to become an art dealer. I knew I wouldn't be very good at selling art, so I didn't think that was for me, but I would make more money. I've always favored the museum or the nonprofit sector over commercial involvements with art, whether it be auction houses or art galleries.

DW: What should an art museum be in your opinion?

JvdM: Probably at the time I started out I had great notions, I've climbed back from certainties that I thought I had at the time. I had and I guess I still have grand ambitions for art museums. Obviously they should give access to the maximum number of people. They should be innovative, they should link all the arts together, they should be welcoming to artists, they should be catalysts in society. One can concentrate on any one of these aspects and develop a vision of what an art museum should be, I have sometimes reread things I wrote and marveled at how much of all of that has come to pass in museums.

DW: You mentioned the progress. Has there been retrogression in any aspects?

JvdM: Well, retrogression, perhaps not too much, but I think that there has been increased commercialization in the museum field, there have been pressures added that didn't exist in the earlier years. I think working in a museum today probably offers fewer noble satisfactions than working in a museum offered 20, 30, 40 years ago. On the other hand, one gets better paid, so that is an advantage. I think professionalization has had a number of positive results. It brought smarter people into the field, there's much more research being done. There is a greater respect for the intellectual labors in museums. So all that is for the better.

On the other hand, I think there's also more performance pressure, mostly imposed on museums by boards of trustees who have to raise the money. I understand how it works, I'm not blaming them too much, but that pressure, very strongly felt, can lead to a skewing of the priorities in a museum.

DW: What does that commercial pressure feel like?

JvdM: Take for instance the so-called blockbuster exhibition syndrome. What it does is recruit everyone's efforts in a museum, from the curator to the fundraiser to the publicist to the bookstore manager and to all of the various hands helping with the moving of art, the hanging of art, and it will monopolize them in the cause of just one thing, to make that one exhibition, on which everything is staked, a success, a public success, and pack as many people into that exhibition as you can possible pack in.

For two reasons. One, a bigger gate means greater admissions and therefore a greater return on the money. For another, a bigger gate means greater praise in the community. The competition for attendance records is becoming like a horse race. Museum directors will brag publicly and to one another about how many people they were able to attract with Monet, with Cézanne, with Van Gogh and Picasso, mostly those very well-known names. And that's not what the thing is all about. Because what happens then is that curators who should become careful and reflective scholars and specialists in their field will sometimes for weeks and months on end do nothing but put their efforts in the service of short-term goals, like first negotiating the loans and then boosting the attendance of such exhibitions.

DW: Did you feel those pressures when you were at work?

JvdM: Oh, yes, most definitely. At the Detroit Institute of Arts I did.

DW: In particular, or...

JvdM: My experience, as anyone's, is particular. In all of my previous positions I was almost singularly focused on modern and contemporary art, and also I was the person in charge, so I could avoid certain things or circumvent some of this, and I could set my own pace and set my own priorities, which then in turn could also lead very well to being dismissed.

But here in Detroit, which is a big museum and fancies itself one of the great museums of the country, there has been a very deliberate attempt at

populism ever since I came here and increasingly so today. Populism and political correctness and trying to overcome the handicap of a city without tourism.

In itself there is nothing wrong with that. But I think maybe museums should relax and say, "We have a responsibility to our profession, we have a responsibility to the culture of our community, to the history of that community, to the historic record of that community, and whether we push people through the gates or not this museum is proud of what it owns, even if nobody comes to visit for a whole afternoon." The fear of failure in so many areas in our world today, including that of human intimacy—take Viagra—is greater than simple good sense. It should be acceptable that museums are only for those who truly appreciate them. Plus some who come there out of curiosity or to seek enlightenment. Plus people who come because other people tell them, "You must go."

There would be just a bit more space, a bit more of an ability to converse with people who have the same interests. What is the absolute necessity for everyone in the community to go to a museum?

DW: I agree that the populism, or the so-called populism, is phony and it's an adaptation to backwardness and other difficulties, I also agree that museums should be visited by those who have some purpose. The more difficult question is how you change the current cultural level of the population so that a greater percentage of the population is in a position to have such a purpose. Now that's obviously not simply the job of the museum.

JvdM: I think it's the job primarily of education, school education. We all know that because of teacher shortages, budget problems, there's almost no art education, no music education in the schools. There is a lot of peer pressure that you should play sports, that you should be athletic, that you should do this, that or the other thing that kids do. But there is no peer pressure that you should read, play an instrument or that you should go to exhibitions. A very simple thing.

DW: For the last 20 years you've had the religion of the stock market, of making money, of greed, of individualism. It has its consequences.

JvdM: Yeah, and when art figures in there, it figures as investment, it figures as a status symbol, it figures as an element that invites manipulation and control. Many people gravitate to museums who know very little about art, but who realize that there is an attractive combination of art, money and power. It happens particularly in those museums where being on the board will give you an opportunity to associate with the right people and be introduced to circles to which normally you would not have access.

DW: At the meeting in March you mentioned the corporate control of art in connection with the AOL/Time-Warner merger.

JvdM: Corporate control over the arts is a very tricky thing, take for instance Philip Morris and its very consistent support for the arts for the last 30 years. Now, with cigarettes being a dirty commodity, they had to rethink their position and they are probably already out of the art support business. You have to find corporations that are environmentally clean. There are so many corporations, so many products that would raise eyebrows with environmentalists, with Green Party members, with moralists of one kind or another, whether it's the auto industry and its lack of environmental concern, or the lumber industry, the oil industry, so almost any kind of corporate support that you can think of, or wherever there's big money to be given away, some people will say, "Yeah, but that money is really dirty."

DW: You realize what you're saying, without perhaps being aware of it, that big money *is* dirty money in this country, but in any case...

JvdM: The arts have never hesitated to accept money even from companies that might not have been fully acceptable. So there's an ethical question. But where do museums get their money from? I grew up in a society in Holland where most of the money would come from the state, whether on the federal or the provincial level. It was a normal expectation

that the arts were a public good and people working in the arts routinely received civil service status and salaries to match. Here I learned that government should not be in the business of supporting culture, because then government would dictate what's being done. Well, usually the money that the American government through its endowments has given to the arts came with very few strings attached, but the supplementary money you had to raise from companies came with gradually more strings attached.

At one time many companies gave through their philanthropic foundations. Today it comes from the marketing end. The marketing people, once they give a substantial amount of money, which is never as much as they would spend on television, radio, newspaper and billboard advertising, want an awful lot of control for the money they donate.

DW: Were you at the DIA when the big cuts were made by the Michigan state government in the early 1990s?

JvdM: Yes, unfortunately.

DW: How much did they cut?

JvdM: Well, when I arrived at the museum in 1986, the state contributed somewhere in the vicinity of 16.7 million dollars per year toward the budget. The total budget at that time was 22 or 23 million. Today it may not be that much higher. But more than 120 people had to be laid off, a whole division—the performing arts division—was basically done away with. Museum hours were curtailed. There was an enormous retrenchment. The budget of some 22, 23 million came down to 18 million dollars as the state contributed no more than 13 million. Today, I believe, the state is good for something like 9.6 million.

That subsidy was referred to as “pass through” because the state would pass the money to the city of Detroit for its administrative oversight and to defray the costs of perimeter security and utilities.

DW: Just to raise unpleasant possibilities, we've had sports stadiums named after companies, why not the DaimlerChrysler DIA or the Esso Cleveland Museum of Art? Do you think that's a possibility?

JvdM: I think that things are already going in that direction, and there are plenty of museums nowadays that carry the name of their founder-owner on the facade. In the case of the DIA with a very distinguished history of some 115 years, I think it would be rather shocking to have a company name on the museum. On the other hand, I don't think it's shocking at all for DaimlerChrysler or Ford Motor to give the museum a whole lot more support than they have done in the past.

DW: I'll finish with this point. But imagine a museum, particularly a museum of contemporary art, at the moment when the era of the ever-rising stock market comes to an end, and you have a social crisis, and yet the company has an increasing influence on what should be said and done in a museum, it seems to me one can imagine a big conflict at that point.

JvdM: Certainly in a new recession the same people who now boost the operation will run away from it, that's one of the first things they will run away from. The unfortunate thing is in a country that reveres sports and a country that has consistently been governed by people who have no interest in the arts, from the president down, it's hard to imagine that the arts would ever rank as high as sports or entertainment. Even though we think of the arts in this country as a form of entertainment, and even though the arts are made into a form of entertainment more and more in order to level that somewhat elite playing field, I think the whole culture of the country would have to change, to upgrade itself, for there to be a totally accepted, normal, everyday, unquestioned support for the arts, wherever it would be coming from.

DW: I agree, I think that change is necessary. It's something to be striven for.

JvdM: But where do you start? President after president.... As a European, I hoped that some day we would get an administration, let's say, of the broad interest of a Chirac or a Mitterrand—would that not put a stamp on so much of the country's enterprise, if the president would show

himself as an avid sympathizer and advocate of the arts?

DW: I don't think it's going to happen that way.

JvdM: I've long believed that it could happen, but I'm less sanguine now.

DW: I think it can only come from outside that entire political establishment. I think that's an entirely corrupt, philistine, cowardly environment.

JvdM: Who are people following? They're following celebrities, whoever they are, people of high accomplishments in sports, fashion, in the entertainment industry and in big business, and of course the politicians. In the absence of role models with genuine interest in the arts, how are normal people supposed to pick up that interest?

DW: Was it ever primarily a question of role models? I don't think the European situation is ideal either, incidentally. I would say a broad raising of the cultural and educational level took place in the late nineteenth century, parts of the twentieth century, also related to great political and social movements, great causes, great ideas. In this country there have been workers movements attached to culture and education and so forth.

JvdM: The WPA period [in the 1930s] and the political ferment of that era, an idealistic socialist movement, was probably the last era in this country in which there was a real hope for changing society through the arts.

DW: Can I get back to your personal history for a moment? I'm curious, because it's a name that means something to me, can you speak about the experience of studying with [art historian] Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University in the late 1950s?

JvdM: For one thing, he was so enormously brilliant in my recollection that I always felt struck dumb in his presence. I felt intimidated. There was of course the language barrier, because even though I knew how to speak English, I came as a Dutchman to New York, you were in a new and big city, you spoke another language. But he was a tremendously enthusiastic and kind person, who, realizing that I might feel a little isolated in New York, very quickly found ways to make me feel at ease and introduced me to other students.

Schapiro was a very gentle and down-to-earth person, I later visited him in Vermont when I was director of the Dartmouth College museum and he was spending his summers in Vermont. By then obviously I was less tongue-tied and it was easier to converse with him. There was a great brilliance, that was particularly impressive in lectures he gave. They were total improvisations, he spoke from no notes. He was like an actor and he did it with an elegance and an eloquence that I remember as having something to do with the stage.

I also remember discussing that same experience with other people who witnessed Meyer Schapiro. Early on I knew a German art historian, Erica Tietze-Conrat, who was the widow of Hans Tietze, the former director of the Vienna museum. Oskar Kokoschka painted them [in 1909]. Erica Tietze-Conrat taught in New York in the 1950s and died at the end of that decade. I remember talking to her shortly before she died. She told me that in her opinion the eloquence of Schapiro, his total command of facts and his ability to communicate his knowledge, as well as his enthusiasm to students, reminded her of the great art historians in Vienna around the turn of the century. She compared him with Alois Riegl and the scholars who were really the builders of the discipline of art history. It was extraordinary the way he impressed his students.

DW: Did you get a sense of his political or social views at the time?

JvdM: Yes, he was very interested in psychoanalysis. He very often referred to Freud's studies in art. He wrote some articles on Freud and Leonardo, for instance. Psychoanalysis would come up a great deal. I think he was the one who suggested that I read [Arnold] Hauser's book [*The Social History of Art*], a Marxist view of art. I think that Schapiro through the people he associated with in the 1930s and 40s had definitely a Marxist point of view. Politics never came up when I was studying with him.

What I also admired in Schapiro, and it may have given me another nudge in the direction in which I went, was that even though he was a scholar of the Romanesque and of nineteenth century French painting, he also spoke of people like Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, and he would make interesting comparisons from time to time. He would never simply stop at Cézanne, he would always bring his work forward to the present. I liked that. I said to myself, "If I go into contemporary art, I'd still have the respect of people who teach earlier periods of history."

DW: I wondered if you could speak a bit about founding the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago?

JvdM: I told you the story of how I got involved in it. It came about because there seemed to be a need. A need was perceived by a segment of the community in Chicago who were actively involved with contemporary art, who were friendly and supportive of the art that was done in the city of Chicago by Chicago artists, but who were also collecting mostly European art, more so than New York art, because there's always been in Chicago that sort of diffidence about New York. If they collected they wanted to buy Surrealist work from Europe. And they had beautiful collections of that. The same people, most of them Jewish, felt that this was their particular interest and they felt a lack of concern for what they were interested in by the Art Institute of Chicago and there was only a very remote opportunity for them to become players in the Art Institute and be invited to sit on their boards and committees. They felt they wanted to have their own scene.

DW: You said those were heady times. What did you mean?

JvdM: They were heady for me because here I was a foreigner and doubly so because I was not yet an American citizen, so I was a Dutch citizen in one of the big cities in the United States, Chicago, being entrusted with setting up something new. Obviously people had great expectations and there was a lot riding on what I was going to do. I felt flattered by that, I was elated. I was well aware of the fact that people were watching and some people maybe were hoping I might trip up, so it was an acrobatic act for the most part. Fortunately, it went all right.

There was the convergence of a number of processes. Chicago had an active cultural scene. There were renovations of the beautiful orchestra hall. The city became aware of its rich architectural history. Mies van der Rohe was still alive and around in Chicago. I met him there. There were big thinkers at the University of Chicago, Hannah Arendt, I met her, Harold Rosenberg, whom I met a great deal, Saul Bellow. It seemed like a wonderful and stimulating environment, big and robust. Then you added the political unrest and finally the tragedies of the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, then the Democratic convention in Chicago in 1968. You had always the feeling that you were at the eye of the storm. I had my own little storm, and then there was the big storm.

After a fairly intense three and a half years doing that, when I negotiated conditions to continue, they simply said, "Oh, well, apparently you want out," and without much ado allowed me out. At that point I thought, "My God, my life is over." It was such an enormous tumble in terms of the high expectations I had had. But, by the same token, the 70s brought an enormous reversal of values in terms of the art scene, in terms of the political scene, in terms of society. The heyday was over, so my heyday was over, and everyone else's was over too. So I had the ominous feeling that "from now on we're going to cross a big desert."

DW: You eventually took the position at the DIA in 1986. What do you think of its permanent collection, by the way?

JvdM: I think it's a very fine collection. It continues to receive fine additions, not on the scale of Los Angeles or New York or some of the museums with which Detroit compares itself. I would say generally speaking the additions have been modest. No great gifts have accrued to the museum in this generation. The last one came in while I was there, in 1988, but I can't take any credit for it.

DW: There's obviously big competition for that sort of thing. What form

does it take?

JvdM: It takes courting, constant flattery, constant attention. It's amazing, it's revolting sometimes to think how much museums have to do and how they have to grovel in order to get sometimes an old man or an old lady to change their will or make sure they don't change their will. Either way there's always pressure on old people, by family, by other competing entities. Wooing of great donors has always been the business of museums.

The most successful museums are most successful because they get bequests and they attract gifts and they make promises and they build wings and they expand to give room to what might come in the form of great works of art. Detroit has not been very good at that game.

DW: What are the highlights of the DIA for you?

JvdM: A highlight to me is the [Diego] Rivera Court, it's certainly one of the finest rooms anywhere in the world. I think the nineteenth century American collection is tops. The European painting collection is very good. The modern collection is good, but it could stand additions and improvements. There are pockets of great strength in the graphic arts department, in the Islamic department, in the Asian art department. There are great surprises in the museum, always when you take someone through the museum and you don't quite know what that person's particular interest is, you are pleasantly surprised when they say, "Oh, my God, you have this!" or "You have all that." Yes, it's a museum full of good surprises.

DW: What did you think of the Van Gogh exhibition?

JvdM: I saw it, it left me perfectly cold. I have seen a lot of Van Goghs over and over. This was a fine exhibition, but with a lot of explanations on the wall that seemed to interfere with the paintings. The cold chills that maybe at some point in life I've felt looking at Van Gogh were not running down my spine. Being pushed around by crowds is of course not a particular pleasure in itself. So that comes with surrendering to the sport of the blockbuster. Everything in the museum was put on hold so that this drama could unfold.

DW: When you spoke before you made a brief reference to contemporary art. You suggested that perhaps it was a generational issue. Leaving that aside, what is your opinion of the art that you see?

JvdM: Compared to what I thought or what I think I thought 10 or 20 years ago, I'm less thrilled by what I see in the galleries. I'm certainly less thrilled by the latest art in the galleries. In contrast, I'm pleasantly surprised by how constant the pleasures of museum-going turn out to be.

When it comes to very contemporary art, let's say, to the Turner Prize winners in England, to what you can see in Chelsea [in New York], much of it I find rather shallow, much of it I find *forcé*, being done for the sake of sensation. I can't quite empathize with the mind of the man or the woman who made it. I find—and this is maybe why I said it was generational—let's say, I have a gutsy understanding, a visceral identification with art that I saw in New York in the 60s and again in the 70s. I befriended the artists, I bought their work, I was a player on the scene. I was anxious to make other people understand it—that sort of thing, the desire to get involved, this kind of being sucked into it. I feel cold and distant and an observer when I go see the new art that is being exhibited in contemporary museums in Europe. There are many artists that I've never heard of, yet they're all working in a language that's become the lingua franca of avant-garde art, so it's not alien to me, but it's difficult to figure out and often very tiresome.

DW: What is art?

JvdM: For one thing it's something that artists must do because there's nothing else they want to do more or can do better. Then it becomes a very personal thing, a very subjective thing, but to me art is something that is an essential ingredient of life. I could not imagine living in an environment without art, as I couldn't imagine living without music. Art is an essential ingredient. Yet I'm sometimes amazed at the thought of

people, the vast majority even in a civilized society like America today, living entirely without art. It's impossible to me. Art is an accompaniment to life that I cannot be without, and that I have tried to define through practice and observation, through living with it, through talking with the makers of art, reading about it, writing about it. It's a pursuit that has taken at least a majority of my waking hours, yet continues to baffle.

DW: What about the issue of censorship and arts?

JvdM: There's an unhealthy trend today to put sexual material in your face. It's not necessary always to be sexually explicit, or dwell on the subjects of violence. There is a bit of warping. I don't have any personal quarrel with it, I'm not a parent. It's strictly a matter of how it affects reasonable adults. I've rarely been shocked. I'm more shocked by someone who plays on human deformities like [Joel-Peter] Witkin than by the overtly sexual [Robert] Mapplethorpe, whom I always admired. So when that controversy arose in 1989 it was as much a surprise to me as it was to much of the country. One feeds on the other. The tendency of the political authorities to rein in the artist produces the opposite, the artist says, "We'll stick it to you." As a result of the censorship they have gone more overboard than they would have normally done. It's like a game of tag, who will dare the most. Some of this is pretty boring.

DW: The other side of it is that those censoring have a political agenda, which has nothing to do with a sincere concern for children or anyone else. That's a pretext. It's an attempt to create an hysteria over moral issues for definite purposes.

JvdM: I can see that. To make a whole group of the population suspect, or to make a whole realm of endeavor tainted. I think the religious right is calculating that by certain acts of protest they can take away the power from the people they are censoring. It's a power play, more than a concern for minors, it's an attempt to dominate a whole category of people who are interested in art. By making art look suspect, they can disenfranchise a category in society that they fear and that they don't want to deal with. I can see the forces underneath, which you see better because of your own optics. The controversy superficially deals with sex and so forth, but there's a great deal more to it. It involves the question of who has the power to speak and voice opinions and communicate those opinions to others.



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