

Deconstructing – reconstructing Public-Private Partnerships of Contemporary Art Organisations

On the occasion of artbrussels 2010, BAM – the Flemish institute for visual, audiovisual and media art (www.bamart.be) organised three debates in collaboration with other partners, such as the University of Antwerp Arts & Society Research Programme – TheArtsFaculty (www.ua.ac.be/theartsfaculty).

The first debate concerned Public-Private or Private-Public – depending on the initiator – Partnerships (PPP) regarding storage of contemporary art.

The starting point for the debate was the urgent need, in particular for public collections, of high quality art “depots”, which nonetheless have to fulfil a broader range of functions relating to conservation and management than only storage in good conditions. Such need was recognised by the Flemish legislator, when preparing the Arts Decree. Since then, the Flemish authorities are dawdling a bit, both over taking an initiative themselves as over supporting private initiatives that came into being during the last months.

During the debate, two public and two private partners crossed swords with each other. Prof. Frederik Swennen (University of Antwerp) moderated the debate.

The public organisations were represented by Antonia Maria Perello, head of collection and chief curator of the MACBA in Barcelona (www.macba.es), and Jonieke van Es, head of the collection and research sector of the Rotterdam-based Boijmans van Beuningen (www.boijmans.nl). Both organisations have a long-standing tradition of partnerships with private persons and organisations.

The MACBA functions under a consortium, divided in a “hardware” pillar (building, personnel, ...) for which the ministry of culture, the region and the city are responsible, and a “software” pillar (acquisition and maintaining the collection) for which a private foundation is responsible. The MACBA seeks more traditional forms of PPP. Firstly, there are the private (individual or corporate) members of the foundation, acting as sponsors. These sponsors may also add own works to the collection (loans). Secondly, the MACBA has long-term agreements with other foundations, such with the Onnasch collection or the Fahlström Foundation. Servicing private collections is limited to the collections on loan in the museum.

The Boijmans owes a large proportion of its collection to two private individuals in particular, Boijmans (1847) and van Beuningen (1958). Since then, private collecting is (a) booming (business) in the Netherlands – as witnessed by the creation of a C(ollectors)-Club under the Art Amsterdam organisation (www.artamsterdam.nl/clubc.htm). The Boijmans’ need for a new depot for its own collections recently was the occasion to seek new ways of pursuing the collaboration with private collectors. It proposed a Collections Building that could lever the Boijmans collections by offering facilitation for private collections in the same building. Such services could cover the whole life cycle of a collection, but could also be limited to renting a storage or even exhibition space. The win-win lies in a professional support for the private collection in the fields of management, conservation, research ... on the one hand and a strengthening of the position of the Boijmans on the other. Housing private collections over a longer period of time would enable the museum to develop expertise, exhibit and take part to the international lending market on a broader basis. Thereto, a ‘client acceptance’ procedure – dependent on the quality of the collection – would be applied. The Collections Building would be partly open to the public.

Such enterprise by a public museum as the Boijmans remarkably resembles to the services that Momart Ltd. offers on a commercial basis. Momart in London (www.momart.co.uk) and the Parisian La Maison Rouge (www.lamaisonrouge.org) were the two private organisations participating to the debate.

Momart is a fine art and antiquities handler that offers a broad range of services in the field of management and conservation of both private and public collections, both in-house and on location (handling of exhibitions). It thus axes on one of the four museological functions (see hereafter). Momart only acts as intermediary as concerns the other functions.

La Maison Rouge is established as a private foundation, with recognized public utility, by Antoine de Galbert. Antoine de Galbert is a renowned private collector; his collection however plays no pivotal role in the foundation. La Maison Rouge aims at promoting contemporary art by organising temporary exhibitions curated by independent curators and drawn from major international private collections. Its approach tries to be caleidoscopic.

It is clear from the brief description above that public and private organisations behave complimentary in the different fields of activity attributed to museum by ICOM:

- acquisition
- conservation and management (which is the core activity of Momart)
- research (considered particularly important by MACBA, with the artist archives)
- display/exhibition (which is the primary concern of La Maison Rouge),

to which is added by recent thought on museological functions the community based approach (also referred to by the Boijmans' Collections Building). Such approach was debated on by the Comité van Roosendaal's conference on institutional attitudes

(www.comitevanroosendaal.eu/files/ia-brochure.pdf).

We set up as hypothesis for successful PPP a separate approach of each of the abovementioned five functions museums traditionally fulfil, rather than considering them *a priori* as a whole.

Presupposing that all organisations ought to fulfil all functions would be inconvenient for both public and private organisations.

- Public museums have to fulfil four additional functions instead of their traditional function of conservation and management alone, and this with a stable, if not diminishing, public funding. This creates a difficult situation particularly for public museums of contemporary art. Moreover, public museums have no great artistic and managerial flexibility.
- Private organisations seem to have the substantial financial resources and managerial flexibility that public organisations often lack. But they are not as well equipped in terms of expertise regarding conservation and management and in permanence or endurance of a dynamic collection. Private collections are indeed too often a one-generation creation, of which the public commitment is organised with little endurance – Dirk Scheringa's collection is a recent example thereof.

A possible win-win could therefore lie in PPP based on complementarity between public and private organisations. This applies for all forms of PPP. Some examples of PPP in this field already exist, such as the Schaulager (www.schaulager.org), the Museum Weserburg (www.weserburg.de) or the activities of the Libéma Exploitatie corporation, that exploits some museums in the Netherlands on a PPP-basis (www.libema.nl). PPP may however not be on itself a legitimisation of projects. It must create a win-win, where the different interests of public and private private should at least be acknowledged.

For each of the five functions could then be determined, on the basis of a benchmarking, what providers can best offer which services to what service recipients (supply/demand/need). One may e.g. ask oneself whether public museums need necessarily provide storage for themselves; or whether it is feasible for private organisations to research their collection. Particularly in contemporary art, one may ask if a public museum shouldn't rather concentrate on presenting and researching avant-garde works (as a 'kunsthalle') rather than acquiring them in property in its own collection. Maybe a public collection should be built from a conservative point of view – with a delay, which seems to be the meaning of heritage: what remains. In this regard Antoine de Galbert confirmed that where a private collection *presents* the *collector's taste*, a public collection should *represent public taste*.

Subsequently, we can assess to what extent, if any, (some of) the five functions can be reconstructed in a public-private museum.

Unsurprisingly, no clear-cut conclusions can be drawn from the debate. Four thoughts can be withheld.

First, the representatives of the public museums – both in the panel and in the audience – considered it important that they would fulfil all five functions and that at least part of their own collection would be “physically” present in their buildings. There was less consonance on the question whether or not the “sleeping” part of the collections should be nearby the building or can be stored elsewhere, in pooling with other organisations.

Second, although everyone present appreciated the high standard of conservation and management by Momart, there was great reluctance on supporting a comparable Flemish private initiative. “Public-minded” collectors seemed to hesitate over the privatisation of a public “good”. Such reluctance and hesitation were however not crystallised into specific objections. They seem to arise from the particular Flemish culture, where no such privatisation already exists.

Third, and surprisingly, there were much less comments on public organisations “going private”, as the Boijmans plans to do. Again, such initiative is without precedent in Flanders. Public museums in Flanders are only somewhat on the track of profitable activities via museum shops, bars/restaurants, ... In the Netherlands, there seems to be no hesitation on the Boijmans offering services in the field of the abovementioned five museological activities on a profitable basis. The Boijmans’ approach anyhow seems sounder towards private collections than bartering free conservation and management against (long-term) loans with little protection.

The MACBA however prefers offering the museological functions to private collections for free, but only on the strict conditions that the pieces should be of museological importance and that a long-term loan with a right of pre-emption (option to buy first) must be accorded.

The combination of both foregoing approaches might even produce an interesting effect. Pieces of no museological importance and for which owners are not prepared to pay services to a public museum, could find their way to other public organisations such as hospitals and universities, where they can lead a “public life” while being cared for in good, though not museological, circumstances.

During the debate, the audience preferred the Boijmans’ approach to a Momart-model. From the side of public organisations, offering museological services, even on a profitable basis, was considered as a public responsibility to care for heritage (even that of no museological importance). On the other side, “public-minded” private collectors preferred such public care for their collection.

Two remarks may be made in this regard. On the one hand, private collectors evidently have a material interest in public concern over their collections (‘free’ of cheap conservation and management, building provenance, ...). Not all private collectors are philanthropists. One should therefore seek ways of spending public money only to collections of museological importance. On the other hand, one may ask oneself whether profitable activities of public museums are consistent with European competition law.

Fourth, by not acting, Flemish authorities have *in fact* chosen for the development of a private Momart-model. One private collector in the audience indeed announced to have started the development of such model for Flanders. Given the lack of public high quality art depots, this private initiative will build expertise to which public organisations will have to fall back on later. We can only hope that PPP may still create in win-win in that stage.

Frederik Swennen