

Work in Progress:

Presenting the Collection as a Generator of Change in Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden

Meta Knol, Director of Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden

Abstract

In 2010 Museum De Lakenhal in Leiden took what was designated as a “sabbatical.” Instead of focusing on the production and presentation of exhibitions, it spent the entire year in a process of self-reflection on its existence and remit as a museum. Acquisitions were suspended and all exhibitions cancelled. For a full twelve months, the management and staff of Museum De Lakenhal would take a prolonged look at the collection. We called this project “Work in Progress.”

The exhibition hall was turned into a public workspace. A 65-meter conveyer belt was installed, with four workstations at which staff examined each item of the inventory under the public’s watchful gaze. The entire storage facility was emptied, one shelf at a time. In the space of the year, over 13,000 objects passed down the conveyer belt: each one was cleaned, subjected to essential conservation, photographed, and added to a digital database. This gave the public a unique view of what lay hidden away in the bowels of storage. Eventually, the museum’s entire collection of over 23,000 objects was examined and published online in a completely revamped website (www.lakenhal.nl).

In the meantime, the management, curators and other staff held talks, which were also attended by external guests, on the collection’s significance to the museum’s development and its identity. This in-depth review culminated in a new mission and vision. The comprehensive renewal of Museum De Lakenhal will conclude in the spring of 2019 with a festive reopening, following the restoration of the museum’s 17th-century premises and its expansion with a new exhibition wing. With these changes, Museum De Lakenhal will be presenting itself as a strong collection-based museum. The project “Work in Progress” laid the foundations for this new vision.

About Meta Knol

Meta Knol is the director of Museum De Lakenhal in Leiden, the Netherlands. She gained her master’s degree in art history from Utrecht University, specializing in modern and contemporary art. She then spent several years devising exhibitions, publishing on the visual arts, and working with others on a range of cultural initiatives. From 1997 to 2009 she was attached to the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, as a researcher, deputy head of exhibitions, and curator. In 2007 Meta Knol joined with Edwin Jacobs and Stijn Huijts to produce the “Manifesto for an Enfranchised Museum,” a plea for renewal in the museum world, which was published in the daily newspaper NRC-Handelsblad. She has been putting into practice the principles articulated in this piece since 2009 as director of Museum De Lakenhal.