

## Letter in support of the red window

Amsterdam, 12 November 2018

Dear Executive Committee of the Amsterdam Centre District,

In 2016 the Oude Kerk, located in the red light district known as the Amsterdamse wallen, officially became a museum.<sup>1</sup> Uniting contemporary art and heritage, the Oude Kerk adds new pages to the (art) history of the Netherlands. On the basis of this heritage—a church building consecrated in 1306 in which art and reflection have been important ever since—the Oude Kerk organization uses identity and collective memory as the starting points of its programmes. The programmes intend to encourage reflection and discussion in our rapidly changing society. After an extensive restoration that lasted from 1955 to 2013, the Oude Kerk now presents itself at the interface of historical monument and contemporary art. In addition, the Oude Kerk is an active place of worship.

The past months have been troubled due to the installation of a work of art: a red glass window, a work by Giorgio Andreotta Calò (Venice, 1979), that replaces a non-historical window from 1959 in the Holy Sepulchre Chapel. The red window commemorates the origins of this 1515 Roman Catholic chapel and those of a group of statues representing the burial of Christ that adorns it, as well as the destruction of the original statues at the time of the Iconoclastic Fury of 1566. Due to its slanted frame, the window allows the evening sun to rest on the statues. In photographic darkrooms, red light protects images against overexposure and therefore from disappearing. In this sense, the red light couples the Iconoclastic Fury of the past to iconoclastic sentiments of our time.

Despite a three-year preliminary trajectory in which heritage associations, residents and churchgoers were heard, interviewed and informed, the red window was met with unexpectedly strong opposition. The work of art is part of the collection presentation 'More Oude Kerk,' where seven side rooms that jointly tell the story of the oldest building in Amsterdam are opened to the public.

The idea to combine the monumental Oude Kerk with contemporary art was met with opposition from the very beginning (2012). Some people perceive contemporary art as something that contrasts with heritage. The Oude Kerk knows many of the people who have objections, talks with them regularly and is closely involved in discussions about the neighbourhood, the church and the city. The church regularly initiates and encourages social debate, which often arises in response to protests against exhibitions or artistic expressions or (as in this case) the alteration of a window from 1959 by means of a work of art. As anyone who reads up on the history of the Oude Kerk will realize, this is a thing of all times. In 2012 Felix Rottenberg mediated in a fiery discussion about the future of the Oude Kerk as a museum. Some former opponents subsequently joined the organization to become members of the Supervisory Board or experts in advisory councils, or became involved in one of the programmes. But not everyone wanted to participate: some people continued to oppose the combination of contemporary art and ecclesiastical heritage.

Together, we have to ensure that museums remain sanctuaries in which boundaries are pushed. This is especially important in the case of museums that, by virtue of their original identity, play a part that transcends artistic preferences. Such museums transform original historical locations into refuges that are open to debate and that advocate freedom of thought. These kinds of places make all the difference. They uncover the spirit of the times and make room for its discussion. Museums expose sensitivities that are alive today and ensure that all opinions can be voiced freely in the public debate.

In this context, the ongoing opposition to the red window has hit a nerve. During the discussion, the Oude Kerk has always been open and engaged in order to prevent polarization. However, politicians appear to be sensitive to a lobby conducted via De Telegraaf and Twitter and it is as if the supporters do not exist or have no voice. That is why we, the museum sector, are now making ourselves heard. In a city like Amsterdam it is important that art can be freely presented.

Contemporary art is the heritage of tomorrow. Art may challenge and initiate social debate, but art cannot be vetoed by social pressure. This is precisely why art is important and has social impact. This is what we, as museums, stand for. By this letter we express our support for the red window as a symbol of the freedom of art and culture.

Signed, Amsterdam, 12 November 2018

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