INTRODUCTION

The Sonsbeek procession through Arnhem on Sunday, 8 June, 2008, offers the perfect opportunity for the MMKA to take a closer look at the phenomenon of the procession. Anyone who examines art history will see explosions of processions in the years 1910 – ’20, 1960 – ’70 and 1990 – 2000. Carried Away investigates why and how artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have used the procession in their work.

There is no single answer to the question of why artists have adopted the procession. There are as many motives as there are artists. Different elements of a procession may be of interest to the artist: the binding force, the creation of an experience in a public space, the execution of an idea, and the movement. Not all these elements must be present to make a procession, however. Artists play with these aspects, abandoning some and emphasising others. Because the artist is interpreting the procession in a new way, the old-fashioned procession is once again made meaningful for a large group of people. A number of works of art balance on the edge of what constitutes a procession. Perhaps this means that it is time to broaden our idea of what a procession is!

Carried Away features both artists who have organized processions themselves and artists who have been inspired by marches, carnival parades, funeral processions, demonstrations, and other kinds of processions, and have depicted these in paintings, films, or sculptures.

En route!

Guest curator: Nanda Janssen

COLLECTIVITY

One of the most characteristic features of a procession is that many people are involved in it. By participating in a procession, and thus taking part in the same experience, individuals are connected with one another. This experience is more than the sum of its parts and often cannot be explained to non-participants. Sometimes processions surpass themselves. In the 1960s, in particular, artists used processions to bring people together and connect them (James Lee Byars). Now, too, artists like Lucy Orta make use of the force of solidarity that processions bring forth. Still, there are always lone wolves: Günter Brus prefers one-person processions. Today, after two decades in which individualism dominated, a need for collectivity has returned, and the procession was once again brought forth.
A collective does not necessarily have to be an already existing group, but can also be made up of a collection of short-term alliances between individuals. A number of contemporary artists use this idea and develop cobbled-together processions in which participants temporarily form a cooperative group, disband, and make room for new participants (Yvonne Dröge Wendel).

INTERACTIVITY

By definition, an artist organizing a procession is creating an interactive work, simply because others are needed. Some artists are no longer interested in creating a 'ready-to-use' artwork and forcing it on the viewer. Instead, they try to create work with others so that the art gains added meaning. This kind of art is not always tangible, but can also take the form of an experience.

An interactive work of art demands the contribution of others. The degree of cooperation or the amount of collaboration varies. The artist is the 'author' of the work since he or she is the one who conceptualizes the original idea. The 'others' can play different roles: as co-authors when they contribute meaning to the work, as co-producers when they take on the organization of the work, as performers when they follow the artist's instructions, and as witnesses or bystanders when they watch the procession pass by. In each work, the roles change.

MOVEMENT

Artists play with the fact that processions unite a starting and ending point. In this way, processions connect not only people, but also places. Carried Away offers two examples in which the distance being bridged in part forms the reason for the procession itself. Francis Alÿs's procession started at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Manhattan) and ended at the museum's temporary premises in Queens. Similarly, Jean Tinguely departed from his studio in Paris and ended up at his gallery a bit further on.

Often a procession can last up to three hours. Thus participation requires endurance. It is, in part, the intensity of the experience that creates a feeling of involvement among the participants. Processions that last only a quarter hour or so take on a completely different feel.

Processions are, in a sense, 'rites of passage'. They started as funeral rituals. From ancient times, the funeral procession was a symbolic journey from the realm of the living to that of the dead. The procession has always acted as a perfect ritual of transition from one state to another. The procession can be seen as a journey in which the participant is purified or enriched. Still, the degree of purification can vary significantly!

CARRYING OUT

The expressive power of a procession allows artists to adopt this medium in order to get their ideas across. In traditional processions, religious icons or relics are usually carried. Artists replace these icons with other objects. For James Lee Byars, Lucy Orta and Günter Brus, the 'carried item' is actually the participants' clothing. Whether the people in the parade bear replicas of art works, colourful wigs, a black felt ball, machine-like sculptures, gigantic plush-toy pigs, copper rods, an artist, or nothing at all, the primary objective is the associations that the objects evoke and, therefore, the idea the procession is meant to convey.

Some art processions offer homage, others express protest, criticism, or questioning. A procession can take on all kinds of issues and can focus on life, society, politics, a specific event, or simply the act of watching the procession. In a number of processions, the art and the artist are the focal point.

RELIGION

It is striking that in the last few decades in particular artists have been turning again to old symbols and rituals. These rituals, once dusted off and adapted, are endowed with new meanings. The procession is itself a ritual of sorts. Relics, banners, processional vestments, parade horses and baldachins have found their way into works of art (Fransje Killaars, Gijs Assmann). A number of artists flirt with the religious origin of the procession. This is unmistakeable in the work of the Spanish artist Begoña Muñoz who was raised on the rituals of Holy Week (Semana Santa). A few artists are directly 'commissioned' by church and society, such as Patrick van Caeckenbergh who adapts the existing procession to present times and gives it new form.

PROJECTION

No one view is neutral; every view is tinted. Looking is interpretation. A number of artists use the procession, in which looking plays an important role, in order to shed light on preconceived notions. In his critical work, Daniel Buren not only reveals the biases of the viewer, but also the ‘rules of looking’ and ‘street codes’ that hold sway. At the other end of the spectrum is Roger Raveel, who actively invites the viewer to contribute to the completion of his painting by providing an empty canvas for the viewer to fill in with his or her gaze.

POLITICS

Processions are not only inspired by religion; they can also be appropriated by politics. Tyrants, political leaders, political parties, and societal organizations or groups have spread their ideas through parades, marches, and demonstrations. Adolf Hitler knew like no other how to manipulate people in the processions that he organized in Munich year after year. Artists were brought in to give shape to the dictator's vision. Conversely, artists have independently expressed the social or political visions of the people in works of art and had their art paraded in processions (Vladimir Tatlin). Now that artists have achieved greater distance from political parties and movements, this phenomenon does not happen to the same degree. Artists are, however, inspired by political demonstrations or politically tinged funeral processions (Hirschhorn).