

INTRODUCTION



In this book, which is compiled from interviews taken more than 30 years ago, Sandberg looks back on his life, particularly on the period from around 1945 until 1970, during which he was active as a typographic designer and as director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

The question arises whether 30 years later a reprint is justified. Sandberg had distinct ideas about art, how to deal with artists, about working as a typographic designer and managing a reputable Museum of modern and contemporary art. A younger generation may perhaps know the name of Sandberg, but is less acquainted with his ideas, his work, and his life. This book offers a first-hand insight into questions that are still relevant today: what does the job of museum director entail; how does art criticism function; what is the role of art or artist; what does the ideal museum architecture look like? Many of Sandberg's ideas about such issues are still fresh today and very challenging and can give new impulses to discussions about them and especially place them in an historic perspective.

After the Second World War, Willem Sandberg (1897–1984), with great creativity and passion and often in close cooperation with artists and architects, turned the Stedelijk Museum into a dynamic centre of modern and especially innovative art and culture. Something new for this time was his aim to bring this art closer to the common man, 'the passerby and the man in the street', and furthermore to involve young people in it. He did this from the conviction that art has a social function and that a museum director should show 'the creativity of a period'.

Unlike his predecessors, Sandberg did not see art as an independent development or tradition but as something that organically, 'like a plant, a flower on a stem', arises from society, as something that comes from 'the growth of our society, the relationship of human-being to human-being'. He considered it his task to exhibit in his museum that which pointed forwards: 'in the direction in which our society is moving'.

The basic material for the book is the interviews that art critic Paul Aletrino held in the years 1970–1971 with Sandberg for the VARA radio "Staalkaart" [Colour Card] he made at that time. Then, text fragments were added from the TV portrait that Theo van Haren Noman and Aletrino compiled in the following year for the NOS. It was also possible to use the conversations that Aletrino held in March and April 1981 with Sandberg to evaluate a number of subjects and make an addition. A wonderful support in this was the documentary biography that Ad Petersen and Pieter Brattinga made in 1975 on the occasion of the Erasmus prize, which was awarded to Sandberg together with the art historian E.H. Gombrich.

That biography was equally a big support for me when, in 1981, I was given the task to compile this book from the material that had been collected. I arranged the chapters according to the most important themes which were raised in the interviews. In addition, I turned the spoken language of Sandberg into reading language and reflected as faithfully as possible his own word usage. The text was authorised by Sandberg for the first edition.

Each of the chapters discusses a different facet of

Sandberg's comprehensive and lively vision on twentieth-century art and society. He participated actively in this as typographical designer before, during and after the Second World War.

Sandberg recounts and contemplates his life, in which he quickly set aside his idea of becoming a painter, because he needed interaction with people and wanted to stand in the middle of society. He talks about health, vegetarianism and fasting; and about Herman Gorter, who explained Marxism to him in countless conversations.

He talks at length about the museum as institution *and* as building for the public, and about the city as working and living community. He mentions many major artists and architects, most of whom he knew personally. These include Piet Mondrian, Picasso, Kandinsky and Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Gerrit Rietveld. He also talks about artists who participated in the Russian Revolution (1917).

Referring to his activities, Sandberg's controversial exhibitions are reviewed: "Cobra", "Bewogen Bewe-ging" [Moving Movement] and "Dynamisch Labyrint" [Dynamic Labyrinth] or Dylaby. And also art criticism, which he believed should rather approach art with a question of where this can lead, what it expresses about the direction in which we are going, than with a judgment. According to him, those who experience it themselves write best about it. The book ends with a postscript by Sandberg, written in October 1981.

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Summer 2004 / Spring 2013