

Marleen Brock, *STUK 1977-2015. Een geschiedenis* (Dissertation University of Leuven 2015; Veurne: Hannibal, 2015, 303 pp., ISBN 978 94 9208 134 6).

In 2005, the former secretary for Culture in Flanders, Bert Ancaux, compared the cultural policy in the Flemish Community to that in the Netherlands. In Flanders, it was a home for culture, he said, whereas in the Netherlands, cultural policy was a mirror palace. The Dutch had built an impressive construction of high culture, which for outsiders appeared confusing and impenetrable. In Flanders, on the other hand, the standards were lower, whereas its doors were open and welcoming. Comparing the cultural policy in these neighbouring countries, who share more than just their language, helps understanding both sides. Comparative research in this field, however, remains scarce, with the exception of Quirine van der Hoeven's doctoral thesis (2012) and her co-authored policy report *De grens als spiegel* (2005).

Research into the national cultural policies on both sides of the border also remains a small and fragmented field. The only overview of cultural policy in Flanders is offered by De Pauw (2007). In addition, a series of more theoretical studies have been written by Laermans and Gielen. Finally, several edited volumes and case studies have been commissioned by cultural institutions and local and national governments. In short, a study offering a long-term overview of Flemish cultural policy, such as *STUK 1977-2015. Een geschiedenis*, is more than welcome.

STUK started in the 1970s as *studentencentrum* Stuc in Leuven (the change of name will be discussed below) and has since grown into an internationally renowned interdisciplinary centre for the arts. Its history provides a unique insight in the development of Flemish cultural policy over the past forty years. In Flanders, an important role is reserved for the so-called *kunstencentra* (not to be confused with the *Centra voor de kunsten* in the Netherlands). In these nationally funded institutions, first defined in the Performing Arts Decree of 1993, the innovation of interdisciplinary forms of (performing) arts was supported. Stuc was among the first institutions to be funded as a *kunstencentrum* by the Flemish government. In this position, Stuc has been able to shape the development of both the performing arts in Flanders, and in setting the goals for cultural policy.

Brock offers a lively description of the first years of Stuc, when the stage-cum-pub for students went through the process of outgrowing student debates on board members, volunteership, programming, and budgets (or rather, the lack thereof) towards a more professionally managed performing arts centre. From the very beginning, the programmers staged ambitious

performances and managed to contract leading figures. This soon led to questions of whether Stuc could remain part of the university's Cultural Council (*Kultuurraad*), or rather that Stuc should follow its own course. Already in 1981 a separation between the *Kultuurraad* and Stuc was proposed, but the two were to remain together until 1995, when the last of the influence of the student-led *Kultuurraad* was abolished. The annual dance festival hosted by Stuc, *Klapstuk*, gained formal independence from Stuc in 1986, mainly for financial reasons. The two organisations would slowly drift apart, despite maintaining personal and institutional ties.

With its recognition as *kunstencentrum* in 1993, Stuc became an official part of the avant garde theatre in Belgium, together with renowned institutions such as Kaaithater in Brussels, Nieuwpoorttheater in Gent, and Limelight in Kortrijk. The *kunstencentra* set out to be 'laboratories of future theatre'. In spite of Stuc's new, national orientation, students from Leuven University continued to constitute the majority of Stuc's visitors. After 1993, Stuc and *Klapstuk* professionalised their organisation and managed to gain (inter)national recognition. This, in turn, led to a growing frustration among the university population, for Stuc still was part of the *Kultuurraad*. This provided the necessary support for the separation between the *Kultuurraad* and Stuc, already proposed in 1981. In 1995 the partition was officially sanctioned. In the same year, agreement was reached on the much desired relocation of Stuc, which felt severely restrained by its accommodations on campus. After a large scale renovation of a former university building in the city of Leuven, STUK, under a new name, entered its new home in 2002.

Meanwhile, a new direction in Flemish cultural policy had made the distinction between *kunstencentrum* Stuc and dance festival *Klapstuk* redundant and even counterproductive. Shortly before taking up residence in their new building, the two institutions joined forces as STUK, the name it has carried since. The new accommodation, as well as the ability to concentrate all activities in one place and in one organisation, boosted STUK's programme. A spectacular growth in visitors in the first years of the new millennium resulted. This confirmed STUK's position as one of the most important cultural institutions in the performing arts in Belgium. The downside to the success was that STUK became part of the Flemish cultural establishment, thus weakening the experimental and innovative character of the programming. The connection to the university and its students, traditionally the core of the audience, also watered down due to this development. The ensuing discussion resulted in the choice for what Brock, referring to Blairite politics, aptly calls STUK's 'Third Way', balancing artistic innovation and high visitors turnout. As a new Performing Arts Decree was enacted in 2015, a new phase in the fascinating history of STUK has begun, which falls outside the scope of Brock's study.

Brock tells a lively story, taking the reader along through the history of Stuc/ STUK. Her beautifully illustrated book brings the atmosphere and

events to life. In the occasional references to other studies, it becomes clear that this popularizing history is based on Brock's dissertation. Her study is based on thorough research in the STUK archives and manages to translate the overwhelming amount of facts into a coherent whole. Nevertheless, translating a thesis into a book for a wider audience always costs a pretty penny. It is a missed chance that Brock chose to restrict the book to the walls of the former *studentencentrum*. Her story mainly caters to the needs of those who were already interested in STUK. If one is looking for a case study of Flemish cultural policy, a thorough understanding of the context is necessary.

As it stands, Brock has missed the opportunity to make her book relevant for more than those who have, at one point or another, been involved with STUK. Placing the development of STUK in the context of Flemish cultural policy over four decades would have been a much desired contribution to a largely untilled field of study. Especially the debates underlying both cultural policy and the programming of a *kunstencentrum* like STUK would have deserved more attention, as well as a wider audience. A rich and detailed study of an avant garde arts institution such as STUK might have shed more light on the discussion on innovation as an aesthetic criterion in cultural policy, as advanced by De Pauw in his *Absoluut modern*, to name but one example. In brief, *STUK 1977-2015. Een geschiedenis* offers a rich display of compelling anecdotes of a fascinating case of an avant garde institution. It is a page turner, but for an audience smaller than STUK deserves.

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