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THE
COLD WAR
AND
BEYOND

1945-2009

CULTURE

- 1 Parts of this article are based on Jaap Kooijman, *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008). See Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Introduction," in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci, eds., *Hollywood & Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity, 1945-95* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 1-16.
- 2 Ernest Mathijs, ed., *The Cinema of the Low Countries* (London/New York: Wallflower, 2004).
- 3 Bart Hofstede, *In het wereldfilmstelsel: Identiteit en organisatie van de Nederlandse film sedert 1945* (Delft: Eburon, 2000), 247.
- 4 The tax subsidy program revealed an important shift in Dutch policy, as the program was introduced by the Ministry of Economic Affairs rather than the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, which before had been the only ministry involved in Dutch cinema.
- 5 Bart Hofstede, *Nederlandse cinema wereldwijd. De internationale positie van de Nederlandse film* (Amsterdam: Boekmanstudies, 2000).
- 6 As Ernest Mathijs has pointed out (in Mathijs, *The Cinema*, 1), discussions of Dutch cinema often "hardly care about the films themselves, often reducing cinema to a sociological phenomenon (a curiosity), an economic enterprise (a commodity) or a source of concern (a threat). ... It almost seems as if film discourse in the Low Countries could do away with discussion of what actually happens on the screen."
- 7 Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).
- 8 Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30.4 (Autumn 1989): 39-47.
- 9 Hans Schoots, *Van Fanfare tot Spettlers: Een cultuurgeschiedenis van de jaren zestig en zeventig* (Amsterdam: Bas Lubberhuizen/Filmmuseum, 2004), 99-102; Xavier Mendik, "Turks Fruit/Turkish Delight," in Mathijs, *The Cinema*, 109-118.
- 10 Mendik, "Turks Fruit/Turkish Delight," 112.
- 11 Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 47.
- 12 Steven Jay Schneider, "Sporloos/The Vanishing," in Mathijs, *The Cinema*, 177-185.
- 13 Roger Ebert, "The Vanishing [review]," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 5, 1993, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19930205/REVIEWS/302050304/1023>.
- 14 Cynthia Joyce, "A Director of 'Character': An Interview with Academy Award-Winning Director Mike van Diem," *Salon.com*, April 3, 1998, <http://www.salon.com/ent/int/1998/04/03int.html>.
- 15 Alan A. Stone, "A Second Nature: *Antonia's Line* Re-imagines Life, after Patriarchy," *The Boston Review*, Summer 1996, <http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR21.3/Stone.html>.
- 16 Hans Kroon, "Waarom Amerikanen van *Antonia* houden," *Trouw*, March 28, 1996; Tom Ronse, "*Antonia* in Oscarland," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, April 3, 1996; Ab van Ieperen, "*Antonia*: Een echte Amerikaanse pionierswestern," *Vrij Nederland*, March 30, 1996, 17.
- 17 Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 76.

THE PRESENCE AND
IMPACT OF DUTCH PAINTERS
IN TWENTIETH-
CENTURY AMERICA

GAIL LEVIN

"We never heard in Holland that there were artists in America. There was still the feeling that this was where an individual could get places and become well off, if he worked hard; while art, naturally, was in Europe," said Willem de Kooning in a 1963 interview with David Sylvester, a distinguished art critic.¹ De Kooning's remark, stereotypical and reductive though it sounds, reflects a common tendency to limit Dutch cultural input in America to seventeenth-century New Amsterdam or to the artists of the Golden Age of Dutch painting — Rembrandt, Hals, or Vermeer — and their influence on later American art, from Edward Hopper to Larry Rivers. Although another Dutch-born artist, Vincent van Gogh, has captured the American imagination, he never came to the United States and his tormented life took place mainly in France at the end of the nineteenth century.

A number of artists born and raised in the Netherlands actually came to America during the twentieth century and made their presence felt. Three in particular — Piet Mondrian, Willem de Kooning, and Karel Appel — won international fame and had an impact on postwar U.S. culture. While this essay will discuss other Dutch visual artists whose influence may not yet be fully understood, its scope does not allow an encyclopedic survey of all artists from the Netherlands who have worked or now work in America.

Adriaan Lubbers

Although Piet Mondrian's paintings inspired by New York City are now world famous, those of Adriaan Lubbers (1892–1954) merit attention both for their quality and because he was probably the first Dutch painter to work in twentieth-century New York and attract significant notice. He first arrived in 1916 and worked at odd jobs in the city and across the Hudson River, in Hoboken, NJ, a settlement that had long attracted Dutch sailors. In Amsterdam he had trained as a mechanical engineer and was largely self-taught as an artist. When he insisted on pursuing a career in the arts, his well-to-do father disinherited him. Lubbers returned to the Netherlands in 1919 and settled in Bergen.

After more travel in Europe, Lubbers returned to New York, arriving on September 30, 1926. The next day he was interviewed by the *New York Times* in a feature that identified him as “an ex-immigrant, who fought off starvation here ten years ago by taking odd jobs as chauffeur, factory hand and singer in seaman’s restaurants.” He told the reporter that “[it] was while I was in Europe that I came to realize what a great subject for a painter New York is and made up my mind to return when I could.”² He drew, painted, and produced lithographs, capturing the energy of Wall Street and the distinctive skylines with their bold skyscrapers. In the spring of 1927, Lubbers showed his new work at the Kraushaar Galleries, a major commercial venue on Fifth Avenue. “Mr. Lubbers is able to carry out his conceptions of the Titan city with power and dramatic intensity,” wrote the critic in the *New York Evening Post*.³

“I want my pictures to be strong. I want them to show this city with its tremendous tragedy and its pulsing energy as it really is,” said Lubbers, who stayed in the United States until the spring of 1928.⁴ He then left for Paris, where he met Piet Mondrian, whose portrait he painted in 1931. Lubbers later settled in the Netherlands, but revisited the United States, traveling in 1934 to Chicago, where he painted the World’s Fair (A Century of Progress International Exposition), and to New York again in 1937; he returned for the last time in 1954.

In 1937 Lubbers was honored with an exhibition held, under the auspices of the Netherlands-America Foundation, at New York’s Rockefeller Center. The exhibition’s honorary committee included such notables as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and Willem de Vlugt and Fiorello La Guardia, the mayors of Amsterdam and New York. Featured were two murals, both panoramas of New York, painted for the Holland America Line ship *Nieuw Amsterdam*. “Except Ernest Fiene [a German immigrant],” wrote the critic Howard Devree, “it is doubtful if any American has devoted as much attention to the New York waterfront as this Dutch artist. The whole show is New York: bridges, skyscrapers, street vistas,

nocturnal panoramas. Lubbers has painted the city with the fervor of a convert.”⁵ Lubbers’ work attracted a remarkable amount of attention in the press. The idea of painting New York in murals was then in vogue since it was the time of the Federal Arts Project — under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a part of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Murals for schools, post offices, libraries, and other public buildings were going up in record numbers.

Willem de Kooning

By October 1926, when Lubbers was first getting interviewed in the press, Willem de Kooning (1904–97) had just arrived from his native Rotterdam and taken refuge in Hoboken, the same New Jersey shipping town where Lubbers had worked a decade earlier. De Kooning, who had fled poverty and arrived in the United States as a stow-away on a freighter, initially boarded at the Dutch Seaman’s Home there. In Rotterdam he had apprenticed with commercial artists in a design firm and then studied at the Academie van Beeldende Kunsten. In America he proved adaptable, working at first as a house painter in Hoboken for nine dollars a day, and then in commercial art in Manhattan. After a year, de Kooning discovered a lot of other artists and an entire community of painting and poetry in Greenwich Village. By the mid-1930s, he was working on abstract murals for the Federal Arts Project and later in Queens for the New York World’s Fair of 1939. The Depression years were a time of enormous socializing and solidarity among artists and writers, who were all suffering through the tough times.

After years of struggle, de Kooning began to obtain recognition during the late 1940s. Important American critics, especially Harold Rosenberg and Tom Hess, promoted him as a leader among abstract expressionist painters, just as the reputation of his friend and American contemporary, Jackson Pollock, began to decline as a casualty of alcoholism. De Kooning shared with Pollock and other contemporaries a love of jazz, and in the early 1940s he used to go to jazz clubs in New York, together with the composer Aaron Copland and Max Margolies, a vocal coach, writer, and the cofounder of Blue Note Records, whose portrait he sketched about 1944.⁶ Like Lubbers and Mondrian before him, de Kooning painted some important pictures inspired by New York City, such as *Gotham News* (1955–56) or *Police Gazette* (1954–55), the latter title calling to mind famous crime-scene photographs of the city by the photojournalist Weegee (Arthur Felig).

Some of de Kooning’s abstract images, especially those of women, took inspiration from tooth paste advertisements and anticipated developments in

pop art of the 1960s. Though de Kooning did not embrace the pop aesthetic, Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) famously convinced him in 1953 to hand over one of his drawings so that he could erase and exhibit it as a neo-Dada joke. Another pop artist, Roy Lichtenstein (1923–97), produced a series of ironic parodies of a giant de Kooning-like gestural brushstroke, in his own crisp, hard-edge style. De Kooning's impact, however, was much broader than such direct challenges, and in the early 1950s his influence was so prevalent that it seemed contagious. It was then that Jack Tworok (1900–82), who had met de Kooning while both were working on the WPA in the mid-1930s, seemed to come under his spell; the two had adjoining studios and met at The Club at 39 East 8th Street, where hip artists congregated in the 1950s.

We can easily see de Kooning's hold on younger contemporaries such as Milton Resnick (1917–2004) or the early work of Al Leslie (b. 1927). Both hung out with him at the notorious Cedar Tavern and also participated with him in the famous 9th Street Show, which members of The Club organized in 1951. At that time, de Kooning's example held sway, though some of these young artists later gave up the abstract expressionist style and moved on, in Leslie's case returning to realism.

Another painter who came under de Kooning's spell and formed an interesting link to his Dutchness is Joop Sanders (b. 1921 as Joan Alfred Levy in the Netherlands), who arrived in New York in 1939, having already studied in Amsterdam with Theo Ortman. After a brief formal study with the German immigrant George Grosz at the Art Students League, Sanders worked informally painting still life in de Kooning's studio in the early 1940s. The two Dutch artists had met by chance one evening in a loft where the music of Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, and Samuel Barber was being performed. Sanders and de Kooning's wife, Elaine (Fried), also painted each other's portraits. Both she and Sanders were among the younger artists showing with de Kooning in the 9th Street show, nor would she be the last young woman painter to respond to her husband.

The metal expressionist sculpture of John Chamberlain (b. 1927), where those bold, gestural brushstrokes are transformed into three dimensions, also reminds us of de Kooning, whose influence is indeed so vast that a multitude of younger artists either continue to imitate his gestural style or experimented with some aspect of his work and then moved on. The continuing vitality of de Kooning's influence is evident in America in the work of the British-born painter Cecily Brown (b. 1969), who moved to New York after graduating from the Slade School of Art in London in 1993. Like de Kooning, whose work she credits as influencing her, she delves into sexuality and attraction. Her output, like much of his, is semi-figurative. She must have encountered de Kooning's work

at an early age since she is the daughter of the same David Sylvester who interviewed the artist and has written about his work.

De Kooning's influence was such that he eventually received two Presidential Medals of Freedom and, to commemorate his seventy-fifth birthday, was named an officer of the Order of Orange-Nassau. In 1982 he was invited to a dinner at the White House in honor of Queen Beatrix during her state visit. The year after his death, the Academie van Beeldende Kunsten that de Kooning had attended in Rotterdam was renamed the Willem de Kooning Academie.

The painter Al Held (1928–2005) once commented in an interview: "[T]hings from de Kooning could be lifted because it came from a lineage.... It wasn't so much that de Kooning's style didn't refer back to de Kooning so much as that it was a broader language."⁷ Art critic Michael Kimmelman wrote of Held: "Inspired by Mr. de Kooning and Hans Hofmann, Mr. Held also looked with admiration at the works of Piet Mondrian, and he achieved in these canvases an extraordinary balance between seemingly contradictory elements."⁸ Held soon abandoned abstract expressionist gesture to make geometric hard-edged paintings with a distinct link to Mondrian's reductive aesthetic. The intermediate works, his "Taxi cab" paintings, were a response both to the pace of New York streets and to Mondrian's painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, an homage in 1942–43 to both jazz rhythms and the city, that the Museum of Modern Art acquired soon after its completion.

Piet Mondrian

Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) was already famous in New York before he took refuge there during World War II. Living in Paris since 1919, he had had to abandon paintings there during World War I, and not long after Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s he found himself on the Nazi's list of "degenerate modern artists" (those whose work was considered *entartete Kunst*). When the Spanish Civil War was raging and wider conflict seemed inevitable, he departed for London in September 1938. But when a bomb exploded in the building next to his studio, Mondrian urgently decided to flee to New York, where he arrived, at the age of sixty-eight, on October 3, 1940. He had won praise as "the architect of modern painting" from one of American art's most influential teachers, Hans Hofmann, himself a German émigré.⁹ Mondrian was also a favorite of the American Abstract Artists, a group founded in 1936 to exhibit the new art. Several of the group's members responded to the influence of his art and theory, including Harry Holtzman, Lee Krasner, Carl Holty, George L.K. Morris, Balcombe Greene, Albert Swinden, Ilya Bolotowsky, Burgoyne Diller, Fritz

Glarner, and Charmion von Wiegand. Some, like Diller, were introduced to the De Stijl movement through Mondrian and then went on to explore the work of other De Stijl artists, such as Theo van Doesburg and Georges Vantongerloo.

Mondrian's paintings on exhibition in the Museum of Living Art (housing the collection of Albert Gallatin), then located at New York University, had attracted many American fans during the 1930s. Among them was Harry Holtzman, a founding member of the American Abstract Artists and a former student of Hofmann. Holtzman had felt so inspired that he had gone to meet Mondrian in Paris in 1934. The two men, four decades apart in age, developed a close friendship. Thus it was Holtzman who, financed by his wife's money, was able and eager to help Mondrian emigrate to the United States and find him a New York studio (near his own) in which he could live and work.

The American Abstract Artists voted in November 1940 to invite both Mondrian and the French refugee Fernand Léger to join their organization. Mondrian accepted with pleasure and even volunteered to pay the annual dues of four dollars, a gesture welcomed by the young American artists, who considered him their idol. When a reception was held to welcome the two European artists, Mondrian, who had just recovered from the month-long journey by convoy ship across the Atlantic in wartime, turned out to be "the life of the party."¹⁰ He had such a good time that he made a date for a few nights later to go dancing with other members, including the artist Lee Krasner, who remarked: "I met Léger; but he was not one of my gods as Mondrian was." Mondrian not only showed his work in the annual exhibitions of American Abstract Artists; he socialized with the younger members. "Mondrian I saw on many occasions," Krasner recalled. By the time she met the older Dutch artist, her own abstract paintings had already reflected the influence of his work. Thus, she relished the opportunity to socialize with him: "We were both mad for jazz, and we used to go to jazz spots together."¹¹ "We discovered that we liked to listen to jazz and we used to go to a Café Uptown or Café Downtown, I can't remember now, and dance." She considered Mondrian one of her most outstanding partners for dancing. "I was a fairly good dancer, that is to say I can follow easily, but the complexity of Mondrian's rhythm was not simple in any sense."¹²

Mondrian's influence on American artists continued long after his death. These artists, who tend to paint hard-edged, geometric abstraction that is reductive, include Leon Polk Smith, Charles Biederman, Ad Reinhardt, and Barnett Newman. Smith was actually so thrilled to meet Mondrian at an exhibition opening in New York that he openly acknowledged this influence and eventually painted *Homage to "Victory Boogie Woogie" No. 1* in 1946-47. Mondrian's legacy continued in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the work of minimalist artists, whose work is stripped down to its basic features. Minimalism

includes artists as diverse as Frank Stella, Peter Halley, Brice Marden, and Agnes Martin, all of whom might be said to owe a debt to Mondrian.

Although previously associated with abstract expressionism, Barnett Newman became another figure important for minimalist artists. His four *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* paintings, produced from 1966 to 1970, make reference to Mondrian's focus on primary colors, but the provocative title also challenges Mondrian. Nonetheless, Newman even employed tape, as had Mondrian, and also adapted his flat planes of pure color and vertical lines. His critique suggests the important position that the Dutch painter held for him. People often perceive spiritual qualities in the work of both artists. Newman found his spirituality in a secular existence; his Jewish agnosticism encompassed reading the Kabbalah, which he mined for some of his titles.

In contrast to Newman, Mondrian's spiritual quality derived from his long-held belief in Theosophy, which combines Christian and Eastern religious ideas. For some of his followers, it was his spirituality that appealed above all else. This was true for the Chicago-born Charmion Von Wiegand, who is said to have wept at Mondrian's funeral and who pursued Theosophy herself. While several first met him in Paris, including the Swiss-born Glarner and Holtzman, they did not become close to him until his years in New York. With Mondrian, many different aspects appealed to the diverse artists who met him or got to know his work.

Karel Appel

Like de Kooning and Mondrian, Karel Appel (1921-2006) fell in love with American jazz. Born in Amsterdam, Appel studied there at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten (National Academy of Fine Arts). In 1946 he had his first solo show at the Beerenhuis in Groningen and was chosen for the *Young Artists* show at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. By 1948, Appel had joined with Constant and Corneille to found the Dutch group Reflex in Amsterdam, which then became part of the international Cobra group founded in Paris, where he moved in 1950.

In 1954, Appel's reputation was such that he attracted the New York dealer Martha Jackson, who gave him his first solo show in America. In 1957 Appel went to New York and took over a studio on 66th Street that had been used by the abstract painter Sam Francis. Appel immersed himself in the milieu of jazz, appreciating the value of improvisation in both music and abstract expressionist painting. He also began to spend time in California, but New York held more of his attention. A banner year was 1960: he won the Guggenheim



Willem de Kooning (left) and Karel Appel at an award ceremony, in 1968.

International Award, showed paintings and sculpture in a second solo show with Martha Jackson, had a show in Los Angeles at the Esther Robles Gallery, and displayed one of his graphics at the David Anderson Gallery in New York. Thereafter, Appel showed frequently around the United States, including in a major retrospective exhibition that began at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1961 and toured a number of museums in the West. In 1970 he collaborated in San Francisco on jazz recordings with Chet Baker, Merrill Sanders, and other musicians.

Ever restless, Appel moved about and won much recognition in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, returning to New York in 1971, where he began a series of large-scale sculptures in polychrome aluminum. By the next year he had begun to live part-time in New York, where he felt the streets inspired both the objects he made and his subsequent paintings: "My eye is drawn to a pile of discarded objects. Sometimes I feel extra-lucid, sometimes dreamy. What I discover is what any New Yorker can see in the street: old beds, mattresses, lamps, pieces of magnetic tape, kitchen utensils, advertising throw-aways. ... And just as in Amsterdam after the war, the street becomes my studio and the place to recharge my batteries."¹³ In 1976 he wrote about New York in a poem: "City of the world, I sniff you, I see you, I feel you."

Appel's street art appears to have influenced the constructions of the artist and art dealer Betty Parsons, among others. His reputation continued to flourish with another retrospective that toured American cities in 1973-74, including New York, Miami, Oklahoma City, Ft. Lauderdale, and Phoenix. By 1985 more than a dozen major American museums had Appel's work in their permanent collections. Alfred Frankenstein's monograph on Appel appeared in 1984.

As early as the 1970s, Appel had taken the initiative to make contact with the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg and suggested that they collaborate. Beginning in 1957, Ginsberg had made many trips to the Netherlands, meeting Dutch poets such as Simon Vinkenoog. Now Ginsberg and Appel arranged to meet. The latter was accompanied by other Dutch poets, such as Bert Schierbeek and Jules Deelder, in 1982 at the Naropa Institute of the Boulder Center for the Visual Arts in Colorado. The occasion was the preparation for a Jack Kerouac festival to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of *On the Road*, and Appel was asked to design a poster. To Ginsberg's surprise, after Appel produced a couple of bold, colorful images, he handed him the paintbrush and encouraged him to "put on words." This spontaneous collaboration led to a series of paintings and visual poems. "With each succeeding improvised work," Ginsberg later wrote, "Karel left space open to me to make up words and put them in all over, big, right on top of his spaces. Sometimes he'd suggest a color, sometimes a space, other times encourage me to make up my own mind, go ahead. Finally I realized he was actually free of shame and proud to let everything happen"¹⁴

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Once again working across media, Appel collaborated on a theater piece, "Can we Dance a Landscape?," a ballet performed in the fall of 1989 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He came up with the design, which consisted of nonrepresentational backdrops evoking hilly landscapes, and the theatrical concept, working together with Japanese choreographer and dancer Min Tanaka and the Vietnamese composer Nguyen Thien Dao. The publicity called Appel's design "Surrealist" and identified Tanaka's choreography as in the Japanese Butoh style, an experimental dance form emphasizing the grotesque.¹⁵ Appel also created sculptural shapes that descended from above, including the head of a beast and a wreath.

More recently, many Dutch artists have been able to work for a year in New York as residents in the studio at the Museum of Modern Art's PS 1 in Queens, which is run by the Stichting Fonds voor Beeldende Kunst, Vormgeving en Bouwkunst. A second studio for Dutch artists has been added in the Tribeca neighborhood of Manhattan. Such support for this American experience may reflect the prestige that Dutch visual artists have garnered for their work in the United States. Perhaps the next de Kooning is waiting to be discovered.

- 1 Willem de Kooning to David Sylvester, quoted in Clifford Ross, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics: An Anthology* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 43.
- 2 "Ex-Immigrant Back As Famous Artist," *New York Times*, October 2, 1926, 33.
- 3 *New York Evening Post*, April 2, 1927, quoted in *Adriaan Lubbers... zie hier mijn nieuw adres...* (Amsterdam: Gebr. Douwes Fine Art, 1988), 9.
- 4 "Once A Peddler Now to Show Art," *New York Times*, March 20, 1927, E4.
- 5 Howard Devree, "A Reviewer's Notebook," *New York Times*, November 7, 1937, 191.
- 6 See Gail Levin, *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000), 75.
- 7 Al Held to Paul Cummings, interview of December 12, 1975, Archives of American Art (hereafter AAA), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 8 Michael Kimmelman, "Al Held's Passage in the 50s From Action to Abstraction," *New York Times*, January 12, 1990.
- 9 Hofmann left an undated essay, "Toward the True Vision of Reality," in Hans Hofmann papers, box 7, reel 5808, AAA.
- 10 Virginia Pitts Rembert, *Mondrian in the USA* (New York: Parkstone Press USA Ltd., 2002), 56.
- 11 Lee Krasner to Barbara Rose, interview of March 1972, reel 3774, AAA.
- 12 Lee Krasner to Barbaralee Diamondstein, interview of 1978, AAA reel 3774 sent to Krasner by the Columbia University Oral History Program.
- 13 Karel Appel, quoted in Pierre Restany, "Street Art," in *Karel Appel: Street Art, Ceramics, Sculpture, Wood Reliefs, Tapestries, Murals, Villa el Salvador* (Amsterdam: H. J. W. Becht, 1985), 7-8.
- 14 Karel Appel, quoted in Allen Ginsberg, "Playing with Appel," in *Karel Appel: Street Art*, 248.
- 15 Jack Anderson, "Some Cows, A Goat and (So to Speak) Real Hoofers," *New York Times*, October 20, 1989, C3.

AMERICAN MODERN ART IN THE STEDELIJK MUSEUM AMSTERDAM

JAN VAN ADRICHEM

As a trading nation and place of transit, the Netherlands has become particularly adept at signaling trends abroad, adopting them, and passing them on — much to its own advantage. This national trait has also manifested itself in certain Dutch museums of modern art. In the decades following World War II, Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum (with the Gemeentemuseum of The Hague and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven not far behind) molded itself into a "transit hub" for international contemporary art. From 1950 onward, the Stedelijk developed a reputation for having an independent-minded and progressive exhibitions and acquisitions policy, aimed at international modern art and design. Together with a handful of museums in Scandinavia, Switzerland, and Germany's Ruhr area, these three Dutch museums were the first to show and collect visual art from the U.S., thus introducing it to western European audiences. Between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s, the Stedelijk acquired an ensemble of American visual art of exceptional quality, comprising some 80 paintings, 100 sculptures, reliefs, installations, objects, and neon works, and 115 films and videos. That the museum thus distinguished itself in the international art world early on was the result of policies pursued by its directors Willem Sandberg (1945-63) and Edy de Wilde (1963-85). Yet, how exactly did the presentation — and, later, acquisition — of American modern art by the Stedelijk take shape under their leadership, and to what extent did the museum give American art a foothold in western Europe?