

# frieze

## Vincent Vulsma



Vincent Vulsma 'A Sign of Autumn', 2011, installation view

## Stedelijk Museum Bureau

Vincent Vulsma's exhibition at the SMBA, the Dutch artist's first in a public space, was a nimble exercise in institutional and post-colonial critique. The show's title, 'A Sign of Autumn', was taken from French historian Fernand Braudel's description of the moment when a country is able to benefit most from dominating global capital accumulation, just as its position is on terminally shaky ground. Vulsma's sparse display of borrowed objects – a sub-Saharan mask, an assembly of Ray Eames walnut stools along with stools from Central Africa, and a series of Jacquard-woven textiles – highlighted Western modern art's chequered relationship with its colonial past. It also outlined the political, economic and cultural implications of reflecting on the post-colonial from within a Western art institution. In the Netherlands, a country still ill at ease with its imperial wanderings and currently subsumed by xenophobic populism, 'A Sign of Autumn' was a timely provocation.

The exhibition's central object was a Baulé mask (named after the West African region that straddles Ghana and the Ivory Coast) on loan from Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum (Tropical Museum). The Parisian dealer Charles Ratton, who moved in Surrealist circles, acquired the mask from German ethnographer Hans Himmelheber, who himself brought it to Europe in the early 1930s. It was subsequently included in the Museum of Modern Art's infamous 'African Negro Art' exhibition in 1935, in what was an institutional confirmation of Surrealism's – and Modernism's – obsession with the colonized 'other'. At SMBA, Vulsma's *No. 124* (all works 2011) displayed the mask face-down in a specially constructed case, revealing its many import stamps

and inventory labels exposing its journey from Western Africa to Northern Europe, from ethnographer to commercial dealer, and from modern art to ethnographic museum. The work's title refers to the number of exhibitions held at the SMBA, adding the institution's history to the fettered contexts to which the mask has been subjected.

Vulsma's display also asked whether the presentation of 'ethnographic' objects within a contemporary curatorial programme could instigate a rethinking of outdated modes of cultural classification. Within the context of SMBA's '1975' project – a 'two-year programme exploring the relationship between contemporary art and colonialism' (1975 was the year the Netherlands withdrew from Suriname) – the exhibition propagated the idea that cultural production was itself complicit in new forms of colonization gathered under the rubric of post-colonial reflection.

Hung elegantly on the walls was *WE455*, a set of six reproductions of Kuba textiles from the Congo, which Vulsma produced from scans of Walker Evans's photographs of 'African Negro Art', using computer software to translate them into a weave structure. The punch-cards employed by the loom used to make the textiles were, according to the artist, the basis for the development of elements of computer hardware. In Vulsma's work, the 'ethnographic' is appropriated from a documentary photograph and transformed into commodity. That this commodity finds form as an art work is what Joshua Simon refers to when, in his accompanying essay, he talks of 'commodities [being] most true to themselves as art'. If we follow Simon's idea of privatization as the most advanced form of colonization, then Vulsma's post-colonial reflection comes full circle.

The exhibition's final components were 'Socles (a c b)': copies of walnut Eames stools, borrowed from a Dutch design dealer, placed upside-down on darker wooden stools on loan from the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren (the stools were flipped in *Socles [d]*). Here an object of modern US design and a so-called ethnographic object are placed on top of one another, their respective cultural and museological categories inverted. Vulsma's choice of readymade – what Simon terms the 'unready-made' – is a pertinent one. If institutions, artists and curators really want to speak of a post-colonial global visual culture, Vulsma's reconfigurations and re-classifications challenge the institution to think critically about what that means for production and exhibition models. They also demand that cultural producers – and here Vulsma must include himself – consider their own role in new forms of colonization.

## Nick Aikens

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