New challenges, new priorities: analyzing ethical dilemmas from a stakeholder’s perspective in the Netherlands

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This article aims to explore new directions in analyzing ethical problems as a subject of museological training. The regular updating of approaches toward applied theories and ethics should be an integral part of the professional self-definition of museum studies programs. This self-definition and its regular actualization serve as an answer to important changes that have been taking place in the heritage field and in society as a whole during the last decade. By using the controversy about the removal of some works of art by the Iranian born artist, Sooreh Hera, from an exhibition in the Municipal Museum of The Hague, the validity of an ethics model that is under construction at the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam) will be analyzed. The article emphasizes the position of the professional when confronted with controversies, rather than theorizing controversy as such. After a short introduction about ethics as a basis of professionalism, this article will develop an argument for a new professional ethics based on the new relationship between museums and society. The Sooreh Hera case study illustrates the complexity of this relationship and the need to apply adequate methods of analysis in the teaching of professional ethics.

Keywords: museum ethics; professionalism; stakeholders; Netherlands; Sooreh Hera; social responsibility; museum studies

Ethics and professionalism

Reflection on professional ethics should be one of the key subjects of any professional training program – museum training programs not excepted. To some extent, ethical concerns lie at the basis of the very concept of professionalism. It can be argued that museum work had developed into a profession by the end of the nineteenth century. The creation of professional associations, the publication of professional journals and handbooks and the foundation of curatorial training courses provided the parameters of professionalism. Codes of professional ethics were also the result of this professionalization process. The German Museum Association was the first national organization to adopt a code of ethics. In 1918, it published a code of behavior toward art dealing and the public: Grundsaetze ueber das Verhalten der Mitglieder des Deutschen Museumsbundes gegenuber dem Kunsthandel und dem Publikum. A few years later in 1925, the American Association of Museums adopted its first Code of Ethics for Museum Workers.

Both codes (and those which followed) can be seen as expressions of a tendency to look inward to techniques and professional behavior more than outward to service
and society. This authority-based and hegemonic discourse has been described by Laurajane Smith as ‘authorized heritage discourse’ (Smith 2007, 5). The canonization of professional principles, as expressions of this authorized heritage discourse, was more or less completed by the publication of the proceedings of the Muséographie conference, organized in 1934 by the International Office of Museums (Office International des Musées 1934). Many of these principles are still considered to be cornerstones of professionalism. However, the authorized heritage discourse has increasingly been challenged in the last decades of the twentieth century, resulting in new concepts of professionalism involving new approaches to professional ethics.

The 1970s witnessed a growing awareness of the social role of museums in many parts of the world. The UNESCO’s Recommendation on Participation by the People at Large in Cultural Life and their Contribution to it (1976) was an important milestone. According to the Recommendation, ‘participation by the greatest possible number of people and associations in a wide variety of cultural activities of their own free choice is essential to the development of the basic human values and dignity of the individual’ (UNESCO 1976, Preamble). The Recommendation reflects new demands created by, for example, policies on social inclusion (which brought the work of community development closer to traditional museums), by emancipation movements (such as the indigenous movements in New Zealand, Australia, the USA and Canada) and by the growing multiculturalism in European countries. In addition, changing museum policies regarding repatriation provided museums with new roles in the process of self-determination and cultural identity of communities and therefore helped reverse the ‘mechanisms of forgetfulness’ (Vrdoljak 2008, 259), thus contributing to the opening of a new chapter in the relations between museums and society.

These developments resulted in the emergence of a new paradigm with a new sense of democracy in the museum and heritage field, as in the politically engaged grassroots initiatives in Latin countries, referred to as ‘community museology’ or ‘sociomuseology’ (Moutinho, Bruno, and Chagas 2007). Sociomuseology focuses on the role of heritage (tangible and intangible) in community development. It advocates an active and activist role of heritage institutions and heritage professionals. Following the ‘cultural turns’ in cultural studies (Bachmann-Medick 2007), many European and North American museum studies programs adopted a ‘reflexive museology’. Reflexive museology is ‘informed by the premise that exhibits of other cultures are neither neutral nor tropeless, despite claims otherwise. Rather, exhibits are informed by the cultural, historical, institutional, and political contexts of people who make them’ (Butler 2008, 22).

The museum space is increasingly seen as ‘contact zone’ (Clifford 1997), a place for encounter and dialog. The ideal expression of the new paradigm is a museum that genuinely opens up its narrative for user-generated content and cocreation (Meijer-van Mensch 2009, 24). This involves new definitions of authority, as well as new definitions of the relation between museums and stakeholders. The Internet has facilitated the emergence of ‘citizen curators’, which brings forth the dilemma of reconciling two seemingly contradictory intentions: to democratize control of, and access to, culture and to preserve and value the curator as subject expert (Proctor 2010, 40). A possible solution to this contradiction is redefining the role of the
curator, emphasizing his or her key role in a community of interest, i.e., as facilitator (Waterton and Smith 2010, 11).

The curriculum of the Reinwardt Academy represents an integrative approach to heritage and heritage institutions. Behind this approach lies the conviction that the process of attributing heritage values is not exclusively the responsibility of heritage professionals. It involves a whole range of stakeholders, including the crucial role of the source community. The role of the professional is perceived as facilitator, rather than authority. As future professionals, the students learn to be open to new definitions of heritage and new approaches for the care and communication of heritage, resulting from emerging types of interactions between heritage institutions and their stakeholders (Meijer and van Mensch 2008). In this context, the teaching of professional ethics is very much connected with developing an ability to recognize and identify the diversity of stakeholders and their interests.

As a consequence, the teaching of professional ethics at the Reinwardt Academy does not only focus on the internal processes and procedures of heritage institutions but also looks at every decision-making process from a stakeholder perspective. This means that any discussion about the ethical dimensions of museum work (including collecting, conservation, restoration, documentation, registration, exhibiting, education, marketing, public relations and management) starts with the identification of actual and potential stakeholders and their actual and potential interests, including interactions among stakeholders. The bottom line is that the interests of all stakeholders are respected. Of course, interests will often conflict and ethics involves a complex process of carefully weighing the arguments.

This article argues that stakeholders should be actively involved in the weighing process. In this context, the term negotiation will be used. To demonstrate this argument, the core of the article is the analysis of a recent problem with exhibiting some controversial works of art by the artist Sooreh Hera in the Municipal Museum of The Hague. Before focusing on the case study, it is necessary to discuss some of the parameters: stakeholders, participation and teaching professional ethics.

**Stakeholders**

The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage identifies three main categories of stakeholders: source communities, national governments (the state parties) and professionals (UNESCO 2003). The identification of these three main categories of stakeholders is not without importance. ‘Each brings with them a different idea of community and a range of beliefs in the importance and contribution of heritage to their social, cultural or political project’ (Crooke 2010, 16). However, the complex dynamics among the three parties is often not recognized, and museum professionals dominate heritage discourse, claiming a natural and exclusive right to ‘pass objectified, informed and verifiable judgments upon the value of heritage’ (Schouten 2010, 36). In this authorized heritage discourse, heritage is the thing, rather than the cultural values or meanings that the material thing may symbolize. To Laurajane Smith, ‘all heritage is intangible, and may usefully be viewed as a cultural process of meaning and value production’ (Smith 2007, 4). As a consequence, Smith’s definition of heritage is ‘a cultural process or performance that is concerned with the production and negotiation of cultural identity, individual and collective memory, and social and cultural values’ (Smith...
By using the term ‘negotiation’, Smith refers to the conflicting interests of individuals and groups as stakeholders.

Smith’s definition of heritage contextualizes contemporary practices of ‘liberating culture’ from the authorized heritage discourse (Kreps 2003). A ‘new heritage discourse’ advocates cocreation and co-curatorship and thus recognizes the role of stakeholders in the process generally referred to as musealization, i.e., the attributing of values in the process of creating heritage (Sturm 1991). ‘By identifying and naming the material and non-material elements that constitute their environment, people realize their right to their world and gain control over it’ (Kreps 2003, 10).

Museum theory and practice should be ‘appropriate’ in the sense that they prioritize local concerns. Christina Kreps advocates an ‘appropriate museology’ as an approach to museum development and training that adapts museum practices and strategies for cultural heritage preservation to local cultural contexts and socioeconomic conditions. Ideally, it is a bottom-up, community-based approach that combines local knowledge and resources with those of professional museum work. (Kreps 2008, 26)

Museum professionals are increasingly prepared to let communities play a role in the making and interpreting of museum collections. The following three examples will illustrate some of the dilemmas involved in such projects. The case studies have been instrumental in generating new opinions on professionalism at the Reinwardt Academy. The ‘Memory of East’ Web site (www.geheugenvanoost.nl), initiated in 2003 by the Amsterdam Historical Museum, is a virtual collection of objects and stories amassed by the inhabitants of the eastern part of Amsterdam. The project is one of many in the early twenty-first century intended to give people the opportunity to share their stories and their heritage. In the case of the ‘Memory of East’ project, however, communities were initially not in complete control as there was still some curatorial intervention: contributors were invited, and their stories were collected, selected and formatted by curators and curatorial-trained volunteers. Since the beginning of 2010, the site has been independent of the museum, facilitating more direct control by the contributors of their own stories.

Another more recent example of participatory museum work is the ‘Give & Take’ project of the Zoetermeer City Museum (2009). In this project, the population of the Dutch city of Zoetermeer was invited to donate an object that symbolized the feeling of ‘being at home in Zoetermeer’. In the follow-up project, ‘Zoetermeer’s Room of Marvels’, the museum organized a series of workshops in which museum processes and procedures were discussed and deconstructed with the help of museum professionals, artists and philosophers (Van der Ploeg 2009). Thus, the museum became a center of civic dialog (Meijer 2009, 135), questioning basic issues such as identity, heritage and the problems of appropriation and manipulation. By giving the citizens of Zoetermeer a role in documentation, registration and conservation, the museum created a sense of shared responsibility in the process of ‘making heritage’. By doing so, a new transparency of museological processes was created. This transparency can be described with the help of Goffman’s well-known model of social interaction in which – like in theatrical performances – there is a front region where the ‘actors’ are onstage in front of the audiences and a back region where the ‘actors’ can be themselves (Goffman 1990). One could say that the importance of the Zoetermeer project is that participation and transparency were not limited to front
stage but extended to back stage, i.e., extended to the region hitherto considered to
be the refuge of the professionals.

In a similar way, the source community was involved in documenting the
collection of old topographical photographs in the Stadtmuseum Düsseldorf (Meijer-
van Mensch and Bartels 2010). In this documentation project (October 2009 through
February 2010), the participants were not just ‘used’ as volunteers but accepted as
cocreators of heritage. The key workers, with their specific knowledge on the history
of the Düsseldorf topographical landscape, were the ‘real’ specialists. Because of the
bombings during the World War II and the grand-scale urban development
programs in the 1960s, large parts of the city changed in appearance. The mostly
older key workers had vital content-based knowledge about old Düsseldorf which
the museum staff relied on as essential to the museological process of attributing
value. The museum professionals became facilitators providing a platform.

The Düsseldorf project showed that the ideas of what participation is, and should
be, differed among the museum staff. For the director, ‘participation is when all
people can work on an equal basis in the museum’; for the educator, ‘participation is
an essential part of democracy’, while for the curator of the photo collection,
‘participation is the successful opening of the museum to an interested public’
(Meijer-van Mensch and Bartels 2010, 10). These three opinions reflect three forms
of participation as described by Nina Simon (Simon 2010, 190–1). The curator’s view
can be identified as ‘contributory’. The participants added information based on
their personal expertise. According to the director, participation in the Düsseldorf
project was ‘collaborative’. In Simon's words, to the director the museum is ‘a place
dedicated to supporting and connecting with the community’, where participants
develop ‘the ability to analyze, curate, design and deliver completed products’
although the museum ‘sets the rules of engagement’ (Simon 2010, 190). Finally, to
the educator, participation is, or at least should be, ‘cocreative’. The museum should
be ‘a community-driven place’ (Simon 2010, 190). Basically, these differences relate
to the role of the source community in the decision-making process.

The participation paradigm is about a fundamental democratization of
museological tools and processes, as more parties become involved in different
levels of decision-making regarding heritage, inside as well as outside museums. This
democratization, however, offers no guarantee for equality in negotiations on
museum affairs. On the contrary, the fields in which stakeholders establish relations
with museums and among themselves are frequently characterized by conflict and
contestation. In this sense, participation poses new challenges and priorities for
museum ethics.

The projects described above show that the participation paradigm, first
institutionalized in the form of ecomuseums and neighborhood museums in the
early 1970s, began to be adopted in more traditional museums by the first decade of
this century (Van Mensch 2005). The new paradigm involves an increased social
engagement of museums, and this social engagement has two directions. On the one
hand, museums show an interest in an expanded series of stakeholders but, at the
same time, accept that new stakeholders show on their part an interest in the policy of
museums. The concept of stakeholder does not necessarily refer to a party that visits
or acts directly in the museum, but may be a party that acts directly or indirectly upon
the museum instead. The Sooreh Hera case study that will be described hereafter will
show that this is not limited to participatory projects. Museums are increasingly
forced to reflect on the mechanisms that possibly ensure ‘the continued misrecognition of a range of stakeholders’ (Waterton and Smith 2010, 5).

**Teaching professional ethics**

Because of growing social awareness in museums since the early 1970s, ethical conduct has been negotiated with the motivation that a museum performs its duties for the benefit and under the trust of society. Therefore the museum must be socially accountable for its actions. As the Institute of Museum Ethics at Seton Hall University (New Jersey, USA) very clearly states on its Web site: ‘Whether seen in terms of day-to-day decision-making or forging an overarching socially conscious mission, museum ethics is about an institution’s relationship with its public(s)’ (www.museumethics.org/content/about). This ‘mission statement’ became very clear during the institute’s inaugural conference, *Defining Museum Ethics* (2008), that brought together museum theorists, museum professionals and ethicists to discuss what the terms transparency, accountability and social responsibility mean in a museum ethics context. Keynote speaker Richard Sandell advocated an activist approach for museums and their ethical conduct. For Sandell, museums are ‘spaces where ideas can be challenged through discourse, visual and verbal’ (www.museumethics.org/content/2008-conference/profiles). The publication *Re-Presenting Disability*, edited by Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, explores the activist potential of museums to shift public perception of issues such as inequality and injustice as well as to stimulate further experimentation and practice (Sandell, Dodd, and Garland-Thompson 2010).

The identification of a plurality of stakeholders as a core aspect of new directions in ethics can also be found in more generic, and perhaps less socially assertive, evidence. For instance, the latest version of the *Code of Ethics for Museums* of the International Council of Museums (2006) recognizes the influence of diverse voices in the work of museums and their interests. Article 6 of the present code is dedicated to the collaboration between museums and (source) communities, whereas the old 1986 code emphasizes collaboration among museums and between museums and local or national governments. The new code calls for ‘respect for the wishes of the community’ (art. 6.5) and the creation of a ‘favorable environment for community support’ (art. 6.8). For example, ‘acquisitions should only be made based on informed and mutual consent without exploitation of the owner or informants’ (art. 6.5). Other sections of the code solicit respect for objects and materials, ‘taking into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated’ (art. 4.3). However, by focusing on contemporary communities from which heritage has been derived, the code avoids the issue of the plurality of stakeholders.

Making students aware of the social responsibility of museums and how this relates to relevant ethical issues is one of the priorities regarding the concept of professional development at the Reinwardt Academy. The Academy was founded in 1976 as a new style museum training program, offering a full-time 4-year bachelor’s degree program. By the mid-1970s, the role of the curator as the leading professional in a museum was increasingly being challenged by the so-called ‘new professionals’. The program responded to new needs of the profession. The profile of these new professionals reflected the professionalization of collections management,
conservation, exhibition design and education. In the 1980s, the organizational structure of Dutch museums changed accordingly. Collections-based curatorial departments were replaced by a functions-oriented structure. Instead of collections-based departments managed by subject matter specialists, museums organized themselves around the care of collections (with departments of conservation and documentation) on the one hand and communication (with departments of exhibition and education) on the other.

Thus the Reinwardt program did not focus on curatorial responsibilities, but offered specializations in the field of collections management, conservation, exhibition design and education. The curriculum is grounded in an overall concept of professionalism as the balance among theory, practice and ethics, aiming at training reflexive practitioners to be employed in the wider heritage field (Meijer and van Mensch 2008). The danger of a fragmenting profession requires a new and renewed interest in a museum-related theoretical framework, as well as a general ethical approach as a basis of the curriculum as a whole.

The model being tested at the Reinwardt Academy proposes to deconstruct ethical cases by means of carrying out a stakeholder analysis and considering outcomes of museum action for, and with, these stakeholders. Basically, the professional identity of the museum worker and his or her core responsibility lies at the intersection of the (intangible) heritage that is entrusted to the care of the museum and the community (or communities) with an interest in this heritage. However, a model based on such simplistic dialectic is of limited utility for an analysis of the ethical responsibilities in the museological field. In reality, there is a multitude of stakeholders with diverse interests and interactions with the museum. Moreover, the analysis should include the actual and potential interaction among stakeholders. Of course, interests will often conflict. Ethics typically involves a complex process of carefully weighing arguments.

The model as developed within the Reinwardt Academy is based on a review of old and new codes of ethics from national and international museum organizations. It starts from the recognition of seven basic responsibilities, i.e., seven entities to which the museum professional is accountable. Potentially, these responsibilities represent conflict zones where, on behalf of the museum institution, the interests of the museum professional have to be negotiated with the interests of other stakeholders.

(1) Responsibility to the maker (and first users) of the object and his or her society.
(2) Responsibility to the preservation of the information value (including the aesthetic and emotional values) of the object and its physical and intellectual accessibility.
(3) Responsibility to the institute with which the professional is associated, regardless of whether this association is temporary or permanent, paid or unpaid, or whether they are employed by the institute or have volunteered their services.
(4) Responsibility to those who made the activities possible by financial support.
(5) Responsibility to colleagues inside and outside the institute concerned, including professionals associated with nonmuseum institutes such as academic researchers.
Responsibility to the visitors of permanent and temporary exhibitions and to participants in other activities.

Responsibility to the community as a whole, now and in the future.

The objective of this model is to provide richer insight into ethical dilemmas identifying the core problem(s) and players. It is based on two assumptions. First, the perception of what makes conduct ethical is the result of an active negotiation of interests among stakeholders. That is to say, values and principles are, to a great extent, negotiable, and identifying a solution between involved parties also characterizes what is considered to be ethical. Many so-called best practices in ethical conduct are the result of a successful process of negotiation among stakeholders. Some of the most striking polemic ethical cases have been less successful in engaging in a process of negotiation of interests, meaning that stakeholders are not clearly identified or approached. The following case study is an example of the failure to negotiate between stakeholders.

Second, outcomes might be as important as intention and results (outputs) in the perception of what is ethical and what is not. Perhaps more than that, the outcome might be, or become, the fundamental target of ethical decision-making. That is to say, intention is not good enough; a museum must be accountable for its outputs (that is, how intention becomes concrete) and, more than that, for the impact of its actions on society and the evolving relationships among the stakeholders involved. This dilemma between intention and actual outcome is also illustrated by the case study.

Sooreh Hera and the Municipal Museum of The Hague

How the Reinwardt model is applied is shown in the following case study regarding the controversy involved in the inclusion and subsequent exclusion of three works of art by Iranian-born artist Sooreh Hera in a 2007 exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (Municipal Museum of The Hague). The case study illustrates the diverse and conflicting interests of a number of stakeholders, as well as the costs of failing to engage in negotiations. The dilemmas presented in the case study cannot be understood in isolation from contemporary sociopolitical realities in the Netherlands. These realities provide a new and barely recognized challenge in the public discourse about museums and the museum profession in the Netherlands.

The image and self-identity of the Netherlands were for a long time that of a diverse and tolerant society. The second half of the twentieth century, however, witnessed a strongly felt social and political insecurity within large parts of the country vis-à-vis the increasingly culturally diverse composition of society. This cultural and ethnic diversity is mainly the result of two developments. First, as a consequence of the decolonization process after the World War II, people from the former Dutch colonies (such as Indonesia and Surinam) settled in the Netherlands. Second, from the 1960s onwards, the needs of the labor force encouraged people from, for example, Morocco and Turkey to migrate to the Netherlands. According to Statistic Netherlands (www.cbs.nl), citizens with a migration background represent about 20% of the population of the Netherlands. This number is growing fast, in particular, the number of Muslim immigrants from countries such as Morocco,
Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Somalia. Most of these immigrants settle in the major cities and are changing the urban demographic profile.

For many critics, the idea of a multicultural society has proven to be a failure. In this atmosphere, new populist political parties have emerged: Leefbaar Nederland (Liveable Netherlands: 1999), Lijst Pim Fortuyn (Pim Fortuyn List: 2002), Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom: 2005) and Trots op Nederland (Proud of the Netherlands: 2007). These political parties have created a distinct profile for themselves as part of a nationalist and populist right-wing political movement, emphasizing the assimilation of immigrants, especially Muslim, into Dutch society – thereby forcing them to give up their own cultural identity in favor of adopting Dutch norms and values.

The populist political parties advocate a national identity based on so-called Dutch indigenous traditions. Thus the issue of national identity, and with it (intangible) heritage as the expression of these norms and values, has entered the political arena, a process boosted by events such as the attacks on the World Trade Center (New York, 11 September 2001), the assassination of film maker Theo van Gogh (Amsterdam, 2 November 2004), the Jyllands-Posten cartoons controversy in Denmark (2005) and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this political debate, not just the political ideology (assumed) of the Muslim community in the Netherlands was at stake but also expressions of Muslim cultural and religious traditions.

One of the most outspoken public figures representing strong anti-Islam sentiments in Dutch society is Geert Wilders, leader of the Partij voor de Vrijheid. He very much opposes cultural relativism and, according to him, the main problem in the Western society is that the elite tend to believe that all cultures are equal. He rejects the idea that Islamic values are equal to those of ‘the’ Dutch culture, which is based on Christian, Jewish and humanist traditions. According to Wilders, ‘Islam is a political, totalitarian ideology, with worldwide aspirations’. Islam, says Wilders, ‘wants to dominate and submit us all’. Wilders incites intolerance toward Islam in the Netherlands, exploiting a range of positions from the total rejection of Islam as a religious and cultural tradition alien to Dutch culture, to the fear of being dominated by Muslim norms and values and to the uneasiness about a rapidly changing ethnic makeup of the major cities, as well as respect for these ‘new’ traditions as expression of a long history of tolerance in Dutch society.

It was in this political climate that in November 2007, the Director of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (Municipal Museum of The Hague), Wim van Krimpen, ordered two photographs and a video by the Iranian-born artist Sooreh Hera (b. 1973) to be removed from an upcoming exhibition shortly before the opening. The works of Hera were part of the exhibition 7-up, with works of recent graduates of the Vrije Academie (School for Fine Arts in The Hague). Every year the Municipal Museum of The Hague honors a selected group of recent graduates from the Vrije Academie and gives them the opportunity to exhibit their work in the museum.

The removed photographs and film were part of a series of seven works called Adam & Ewald, de zevendezagsgeliefden [seventh-day lovers] (Hera 2008). The works show seven male homosexual couples, figuring as the male–male version of Adam and Eve (Ewald being a masculine given name) during the archetypical day of rest (the Seventh Day). Sooreh Hera got inspiration for her Adam en Ewald project from the statements of a Dutch politician from a small fundamentalist Christian party,
who said that if God had allowed homosexuality, Adam and Ewald, not Adam
and Eve, would have been in the Bible (quoted on Sooreh Hera’s Web site: www.soorehhera.com).

The contested photographs show a male Iranian couple (Khosro & Farhad) in an
intimate domestic context. Even though both males are stripped to the waist, there
is no explicit sexual connotation. The other photographs from the series also show
male couples in similar contexts, but in the Khosro & Farhad photographs the
couple wears masks to hide their identity for fear of reprisal. The masks are based
on old Iranian representations of the prophet Muhammad and his nephew and son-
in-law, Ali.

The following is a chronological overview of the events. During the mounting of
the exhibition, the director conveyed a positive view toward the work of Hera. However, the situation changed after the artist gave an interview to a newspaper a
few days before the opening. In this interview, she mentioned earlier problems with
her work and expressed her admiration for the courage of the director and his
decision to show it. This interview drew attention to the controversial nature of
Hera’s work. The Islam Democrats, a political party represented in the city council of
the Hague, informed the director that the masks of the Iranian gay couple bore
images of Muhammad and Ali. They explained that this sort of imagery formed an
unacceptable insult to the Muslim community (Zwagerman in Hera 2008). When
asked for a reaction, the director said he did not know about the specific Muhammad
and Ali connotation and meaning behind the usage of the masks. He said that he
chose to include the work of Sooreh Hera because he thought that the works had a
special artistic value. He also said that as a museum director he never used political
criteria for exhibiting works of art (Maiburg 2009, 5).

The day after the interview, the director decided to show the series but without
the Kohsro and Farhad photographs. In a press release, the museum stated that this
decision was made because the works might and could be offensive to specific groups
in society. The director was more explicit in an interview to a daily newspaper by
referring to the Muslim community. He explained that it was his choice not to use
provocation as a means to discuss issues that are important in society (Maiburg 2009,
6). The key to the subsequent controversy was the conflicting interpretations of the
director’s words by the various stakeholders. Was the director’s decision to censor the
photograph motivated by fear or by respect?

Hera did not accept the director’s compromise. She decided to withdraw the
whole Adam & Ewald series from the exhibition. She accused the director of
cowardice for caving in to Muslim extremists (Campbell 2008). In an interview with
the daily newspaper NRC Handelsblad, the director replied that this was nonsense.
‘There have been no threats against the museum,’ he insisted. He mentioned his
concern for the safety of his staff as a reason for removing the photographs, as he
was afraid of terrorist actions. However, no mention was made of the opinion of the
staff of the museum itself, some of the staff themselves being Muslim.

Contrary to his earlier remarks, the director said that he was not impressed by the
quality of the work (Hollak 2007). For Hera the case was clear. On national
television she declared: ‘Of course he’s afraid, but he won’t admit it. He chose fear
[...] an Islamist minority now decides what is and is not on display in a museum’. Hera herself received serious threats and was forced into hiding. ‘We’re going to burn
you naked or put a bullet in your mouth’, she repeated to *Sunday Times* journalist, Matthew Campbell, referring to menacing emails (Campbell 2008).

Mobilized by artist members, the arts community in the Netherlands published an open letter to the Dutch Minister of Culture in the national newspaper, *NRC Handelsblad*, harshly criticizing the museum director. The authors expressed concern about threats to the freedom of artistic expression in the Netherlands. At the same time, members of the gay community made a connection between the decision of the museum and their concern about the discrimination of homosexuals in Islamic countries, in particular Iran (Hera’s country of origin). Not long before the controversy around the photographs, a homosexual was sentenced to death by hanging by the Iranian regime. The word ‘censorship’ soon became a corollary in the case.

Shortly after Sooreh Hera decided to withdraw all her work from the exhibition in the Hague, Ranti Tjan, director of the Municipal Museum of Gouda, offered to exhibit the controversial photographs and film in his museum. Tjan stated that the city of Gouda wanted to be a ‘free haven’ as Gouda had been for centuries. He attested that he valued the political dimension of Hera’s works and, in his opinion, precisely because of this political dimension the works must be shown in a museum (Hollak 2007). After Tjan’s invitation, the museum was criticized and even threatened by parts of the Muslim community of Gouda. The director had to hire bodyguards and the exhibition was postponed. Sooreh Hera again accused a museum of censorship.

One year after the controversial photographs were first due to be exhibited, they were finally displayed by the museum of Gouda in a show about contested art from the sixteenth century to the present day (Maiburg 2009, 6). This time (October 2008), little protest was heard from the Muslim community. In fact, despite earlier commotion, there was no public debate at all. The exhibition context (contested art) probably neutralized the provocative nature of Hera’s works. Moreover, the photographs were printed in rather small size, thus reducing their impact.

**Reflection**

This article discusses three interconnected issues: ethics as the cornerstone of professionalism, ways of teaching professional ethics and community involvement in professional decision-making processes. The linking concept is the assumption that the professional needs to develop sensitivity for the different and often conflicting interests of stakeholders. This involves an understanding of the complexity of the relationship between the concepts of community and stakeholder, and this also involves an engagement with broader social–political contexts. In the case of the *7-up* exhibition, the Municipal Museum of The Hague did not intend to involve any interest group apart from the artists. It was not considered as a participatory project. Nevertheless, in the cascade of events that followed, a growing number of communities raised their voices as stakeholders. The museum was not prepared to deal with the conflicting interests of the stakeholders and avoided engagement in a public debate with the conflicting parties.

The controversy concerning the Sooreh Hera works can only be fully understood in the context of the polarization within Dutch society. The self-censorship of cultural institutions that resulted from the project initiated concern about the loss of
intellectual and artistic freedom in Dutch society. The need to look at a broader social–political context to understand such ethical conflicts was also advocated by the late Cuyler Young, former director of the Royal Ontario Museum, in his reflection on the *Into the Heart of Africa* controversy (Cuyler Young 1993). In his opinion, that conflict would perhaps not have become so heated if earlier that year a ‘young black’ had not been shot by the police (Cuyler Young 1993, 174). In a similar way, the Sooreh Hera controversy is connected with the assassination of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist in 2004.

In a traditional educational setting, a case study such as the one described above would be analyzed in a group discussion using information provided by the media. Ideally stakeholders are invited, but this is not always possible. An obvious compromise for an educational setting is role-playing. Students are required to identify with the position and interests of the different stakeholders. This identification is an important part of their developing professionalism. Key to the professionalism, as advocated by the Reinwardt Academy, is the participation paradigm as described above. Students are expected to learn how stakeholder perspectives can be combined with different forms of participation, starting from the notion that it is an ethical responsibility of museums to look for ways to involve as many stakeholders as possible in decision-making processes.

The model introduced earlier in this essay is used to structure the analysis. The model, identifying seven responsibilities toward stakeholders, serves as a first inventory of interests. Most of the publications during and after the Sooreh Hera controversy focused on the relations between the director(s) as stakeholder(s), and the other stakeholders involved, with the director(s) as key actors. With the help of the model, during the class exercise the emphasis shifts to the interaction among the multitude of stakeholders, focusing on the participation of the diverse stakeholders as actors in the decision-making process.

In analyzing the Sooreh Hera case at the Reinwardt Academy, the students identified the following points as relevant for further discussion. According to the model, they asserted, the first question to be answered is to what extent the opinion of the maker, i.e., Sooreh Hera, should play a role in the decision-making process. She was born in Iran and, as one of her supporters wrote, her work conveys ‘a woman’s anger at the fundamentals of the male Islamic faith’ (Zwagerman in Hera 2008). On her Web site, the artist is explicit about the intentions of her work:

> Religion always wants to control human sexuality, most prominently with a compelling taboo on homosexuality. The three major religions always fiercely opposed any deviant form of sexual practice even today, within the Muslim world homosexuality is a capital offence. ([www.soorehhera.com](http://www.soorehhera.com))

In an interview she added: ‘Works of art can be provocative. It is not an artist’s job to paint flowers. Art should shine a light on social issues’ (Campbell 2008).

Actually, two dimensions of the integrity of the works of art are at stake, according to the students: the conceptual framework and the artistic integrity. The artistic integrity of the series as a whole was not respected when it was decided to exclude the Kohsro and Farhad photographs. In the Municipal Museum of Gouda, the series was shown complete but in small size, thus respecting the conceptual integrity of the series, but with little respect for the artistic expression of each work.
individually. The general thematic context of the exhibition neutralized the political message of Hera's work.

The Director of the Municipal Museum of The Hague mentioned both his responsibility toward the staff of his museum and his responsibility toward the Muslim community as key elements in his decision-making. In the public debate, however, the opinion of the staff was not heard. The interference of the Muslim party (Islam Democrats) obviously influenced the decision not to show the contested works. Only later were very strong opinions expressed by the Muslim community throughout the Netherlands about the exhibition, after the decision had already been made. On the other hand, artists, critics and other leaders of the art world rejected the decision of the Museum as censorship of artistic freedom of expression. The gay community in the Netherlands expressed strong opinions against the removal of the contested photographs, because they identified with the intention of the artist to expose the ‘hypocritical’ attitude toward homosexuality in countries such as Iran (Campbell 2008).

The public reactions, as expressed in the media, were not reactions of visitors. The real controversy, as located by the students, was provoked not by exhibiting controversial works of art, but by not exhibiting them. Actually, many people, including members of the Muslim community, became aware of the possible controversial nature of some of the photographs only through the discussions and heated arguments that followed Hera’s first reactions to the decision of the museum. As the students acknowledged, in the debate, the art world, the gay community and, to some extent, the Muslim community profiled themselves as communities of interest, addressing social issues more fundamental than the exhibition itself.

Through the learning process, the students came to understand that, although the museum did not seek community engagement, the exhibition unintentionally became a contact zone. ‘Different meanings of community, reflecting assorted assumptions and aspirations’ (Crooke 2010, 16) were expressed, without resulting in a new dynamic or synergy, however. The consensus that emerged from the discussion among the students is that the actions of museum professionals provoked conflict among stakeholders and, perhaps more importantly, failed to engage the conflicted parties in a process of negotiation. The latter created confusion and feelings of mutual distrust among the stakeholders as well as toward the museum agency. Students saw the arguments the museum director made during the public debate as evidence of an inability to engage in ethical negotiation. Provocation, worries for security of staff, low artistic quality of Hera’s work—these allegations were attempts to justify the choice of the museum to the different stakeholders involved. The media was a major site upon which conflict was enacted, but not negotiated, since not all involved parties were able to act to a similar degree.

Students recognized that the refusal of the museum to give shape to a more explicit role as ‘contact zone’ reflects its refusal to adopt an activist stance. According to the director, the Municipal Museum of The Hague, as an art museum, is not the place to discuss inequality and injustice. Such rationales are not motivated merely by the fear of violent reactions, as they represent a more fundamental rejection of the role of (art) museums as political arenas, thus denying the sociopolitical intentions of artists as well as the potential of the museum to shift public perception on important social issues (Sandell, Dodd and Garland-Thompson 2010).
The Sooreh Hera case study offers two important lessons for students learning at the Reinwardt Academy, and by extension for any museum or museum studies program. First, the lack of discourse and communication between the stakeholders hampers balanced decision-making. As future professionals, students need to learn that decision-making at all levels is, in fact, a delicate balancing act. Since very often stakeholder interests are mutually contradictory, balanced decision-making does not automatically mean that all interests can be equally satisfied. This requires sensitivity to the interests of stakeholders, but also the ability to engage in a process of negotiation.

In this case study, the lack of ability and preparedness to negotiate left all responsibilities to the museum (director). The inability of the Hague museum (director) to communicate with the different stakeholders proved to be counterproductive. The director’s decision was based on negative considerations (fear), rather than on a clear view of the role of museums with regard to the increased complexity of its stakeholders. The challenges of the new participation paradigm remove from the museum the sole responsibility in mediating negotiations. Museums have a responsibility toward the impact of their acts. However, this responsibility does not depend only on the museum to foresee and control the consequences of its work in society, as ethical practice is a matter of shared responsibility with all parties involved.

Museums, at least in the Netherlands, have little experience in engaging different groups of stakeholders in decision-making processes. Participation usually is limited to the interaction between staff and one group of stakeholders as was, for example, the case in the Zoetermeer and Düsseldorf projects. Possible contradictions within such groups of stakeholders are veiled by using terms such as source community. The Sooreh Hera case is important because it makes contradictions explicit. The model presented above serves as a learning tool to explore and define the contradictions as well as a framework to develop policies for the future.

Conclusion
Ethical concerns lie at the basis of the very concept of professionalism. New demands created by, for example, social inclusion, emancipation and multiculturalism contributed to the opening of a new chapter in the relations between museums and society – involving new definitions of the relation between museums and stakeholders as well as new definitions of professional authority. New views on professional ethics connect with the concept of participation. The bottom line is that stakeholders are identified and their interests respected.

The Sooreh Hera case is an example of an exhibition that de facto functioned as a contact zone. The museum did not seek participation, but the decision to show some controversial photographs – and afterward the decision not to show them – evoked strong reactions from various communities with different and conflicting interests. The museum did not relate to these communities, thus avoiding an active and activist role as a space where ideas can be discussed in an open and mutually respectful climate.

Contemporary professionalism in the museum field tends to be based on functions-oriented organizational structures, rather than collections-based structures. Concepts of professional ethics serve as a binding force between professional
specializations. At the same time, professional ethics should bring the participation paradigm into the decision-making processes in all functional areas of the museum. This is a major challenge in museum work and in museum training.

The case study described here, and the method of analysis, will bring the student to the core of the ethical debate. The striving for more equality among stakeholders and the sharing of responsibility are important aspects of a new ethics based on social responsibility. Only when museums are able to develop an integrated policy in this respect can we truly speak of the cocreation of significance. In this context, the role of the future professional is one of facilitating mutual understanding and respect among different interest groups. Professional ethical conduct involves not only the capacity to identify stakeholders but also the sensitivity to their often conflicting interests, resulting in an active policy of negotiation.

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Photographs of the contested works of art by Sooreh Hera can be found on her Web site: www.soorehhera.com/gallery.html

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