

## **Foreword - Digging for the truth:**

Last year I read *Artquakes and Vincent van Gogh* (2001), the first book by Bouwe Jans in which he describes his adventures with the authentication of a painting signed 'Vincent' that he bought in 1993. He called it *The Diggers*. In the words of Jan Hulsker, who wrote the foreword to that book "Bouwe Jans's tale epitomises the frustration of scholars and other researchers (who are sometimes derided as "amateurs"), but who open-mindedly come forward with new findings". Jans's new book, *Artquakes Aftershocks*, presents the continuation of the debate on the painting's authenticity since the publication of his first book. Once again, painful confrontations take place between the establishment on the one hand and Bouwe Jans joined by independent Van Gogh scholars on the other. Although I am not an art historian, I read both books with great interest. As a social and organizational psychologist I am intrigued by phenomena like power, identity, social influence, collusion and truth. It is with these psychological eyes that I have devoured the text, although my passion for art and concern for justice were equally involved.

Jans's experience is only one of many examples of the difficulty people or organisations with different interests have in engaging in a meaningful, open and constructive debate. Such confrontations may result in feelings of threat; task conflict and can easily result in relational conflict. In Jans's case personal or professional identities may be threatened: "Who is this 'amateur', without a proper education or position, to challenge our knowledge, our judgements and our reputation?"

The threat may be more directly linked to material interests; art is big business, especially when the maker is called Vincent Van Gogh. And big business makes powerful and glorious careers possible.

Keeping owners waiting unduly for an opinion, providing only brief, sometimes invalid reasons or justifications for a final judgment, and other behaviors described by Jans, may all be expressions of a (conscious or unconscious) conflict of identity or interest. Whether so intended or not, they emphasize power differences and frustrate the public. Furthermore, the offering of just a 'yes' or a 'no' verdict on authenticity carries the message, that the authenticating body (in this case the Van Gogh Museum) has no doubt at all about the rightness of its opinion. This frustrates the owner who may have good reason to believe the painting to be genuine, though it may also serve to reduce uncertainty or anxiety on the part of the Museum. If one would allow a 'maybe' (cf. the suggestion by Gary Schwartz in chapter 11), then others might come forward with more unknown, potential Van Gogh paintings and even worse, existing authenticities of paintings on museum walls may be questioned. Commitment to earlier judgments and the need to save face further diminish open-mindedness and may stimulate overconfidence. In the end, not only feelings of distributive justice (whether the decision outcome is felt to be just) but also of procedural justice (whether the way the decision has been reached is just) are frustrated.

Bouwe Jans has had the courage to challenge the establishment. He is a David taking on Goliath, he is a Don Quixote who does not give up, he is the child that keeps on asking 'why' and who finally exclaims what others do not dare to say: 'The emperor wears no clothes'. Bouwe Jans finds out and tests reality. He is ... a digger.

In the process of finding out more about *The Diggers*, Bouwe Jans is unearthing realities about power and truth. The more he digs, the more the establishment digs itself in. Truth appears to be closely linked to power, identity and interests. *The Diggers* is, after ten years of research, a thoroughly studied painting, but the conclusions drawn from this knowledge base differ greatly. The time seems ripe for wider debate on the way paintings are authenticated.

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