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„call-out culture / cancel culture“

Intro:

Breda photo is a photography festival that, in 2020, took place between September 9th and the 25th of October in, you guessed it, the city of Breda, the Netherlands. Breda Photo is said to be the biggest festival of its kind in Benelux, boasting a program of slightly over 50 exhibiting photographers in 15 locations.

The festival happened to take place in a year which brought with it challenges within the art world which gathered under the topic of "cancel culture" or "call-out culture".

While "cancel culture" does not originate in 2020, but goes a bit further back, to the rise of the #metoo movement, circa 2017, its biggest impact could be traced in 2020. To "cancel" can mean to stop giving support to a person and to be critical of their actions, it can go further into "boycotting" - refusing to buy someone's books, see someone's movies, engage with someone's art, and so on. It can also take up the form of addressing an institution that displays the work of someone whose actions one is critical of, which is a form of "de-platforming".

With the opening of Breda Photo, one work became the centerpiece of the photo festival, the work of Dutch artist and advertising man Erik Kessels.

The work showed 60 composite reshuffled portraits of people that presented as women and that had undergone facial plastic surgery to an extreme degree. The work was placed in the Skatepark Pier 15 in Breda and the local skating community alongside visitors were encouraged to skate over the images to leave their marks. The work was titled "Destroy my face". The work was heavily promoted by Breda Photo festival on their social media channels, on the social media channels of the skate park, and the social media channel of Erik Kessels.

From there the work came to the attention of the collective "We are not a playground", as well as other young voices active on social media, in the Netherlands and abroad. "We are not a playground" decided to draft an open letter addressing the organization of Breda Photo in which they argued that the work was unfriendly to women, objectified women, and promoted violence towards women. The letter gathered over 3.000 signatures in a couple of days. It spread widely, gathered traction, started a commotion, led to eventual discussions within the skating community, alongside the art community, and in the end to the threat of withdrawal of sponsors.

The case of "Breda Photo" brings with it a mix of questions that touch upon the limits of freedom within the art field, awareness of historical context, and the need for institutional self-actualization. The following article dives into ways of addressing them.

Link to article: <https://www.platformbk.nl/en/call-out-culture-cancel-culture/>