

**Opening Speech – The Vincent Award  
Gemeentemuseum, The Hague**

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Director Tempel,  
Mr Broere,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here to honour the artists shortlisted for the 2014 Vincent Award.

This year's Award is a celebration of European art – a tribute to five very talented artists: Pierre Huyghe, Manfred Pernice, Willem de Rooij, Anri Sala and Gillian Wearing.

But the Vincent Award is more than that.

It is a celebration of the individuality and uniqueness of all human beings, a celebration of how we interact with each other and our environment.

It is a platform to spur European talent, as well as to promote debate in a free, united and peaceful Europe.

And that is why I am especially pleased that, at long last, the Vincent Award has made its way to The Hague – a city that has historically been a

refuge for free-thinkers and, more recently, home to my organisation, the OPCW, and other international organisations working in the service of humanity.

I have to admit, when Mr Tempel first invited me to speak to you today, I was unsure whether I was the right person to do so.

The OPCW, as most of you know, is a science-based organisation committed to the elimination of chemical weapons and the promotion of peaceful uses of chemistry.

Most of my colleagues are probably more comfortable using a mass spectrometer or other chemistry instruments than a paintbrush.

But I draw inspiration from Albert Einstein, who strongly believed that art and science could not exist without each other.

He once said, and I quote: “The greatest scientists are artists as well.”

Certainly, there’s a lot more connecting art and science than meets the eye.

After all, science – like art – is a form of human expression.

In fact, science needs art to imagine where it can go before it has the tools to go there.

This is because art informs how we think about science.

How we practice it.

How we advance it.

And when science draws a blank, art often helps stimulate new directions.

As Roald Hoffmann, a Nobel Prize winner in chemistry, put it: “There is a limit to what science can explain – we need art to explain what science cannot.”

This especially applies to where our humanity fails us when science is misused.

The First World War is a case in point – a tragic conflict which claimed over 16 million lives and whose centenary we are marking this year.

In the last year of the war, John Singer Sargent, a leading society artist of his day, was commissioned by the British government to contribute to a Hall of Remembrance in London for those who had perished in the conflict.

Unsure of his approach for such an important work, Sargent was concerned that he would not be able to find a subject worthy of the occasion.

This was until he went to the Western Front in August 1918 and witnessed a mustard gas attack near Arras.

The horrific scene repelled Sargent, but it gave him a subject that he thought captured the tragic essence of the war.

His painting, titled “Gassed,” features a row of men blinded by their exposure to gas.

Each man, eyes covered in bandages, walks past other gas casualties spread over the battlefield.

Unable to see, the men guide themselves through the scene by placing an arm on the shoulder of the man in front of them.

Sargent’s painting struck a nerve with the public and immediately became an iconic image of the horror of war and of chemical weapons.

An image which we at the OPCW have long worked to prevent from ever having to be seen again.

Over our seventeen-year history of implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention, we have overseen a global effort to rid the world of chemical weapons.

Our record speaks for itself.

To date, 87% of all declared chemical weapons – from over 98% of the world's territory and population – have been destroyed.

We have conducted more than 2,500 inspections of industrial facilities in over 80 countries to make sure chemical production is exclusively for peaceful purposes.

And we have unrolled programmes aimed at protecting our populations against chemical attacks, and expanding international cooperation on peaceful uses of chemistry.

The recent mission to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons – the first ever to remove a major arsenal of weapons of mass destruction – has amply shown the strength of global consensus against these heinous weapons.

The success of this mission has also shown new pathways to multilateral cooperation on disarmament, along which we must all tread more firmly.

The sight of suffering wreaked by chemical weapons in Syria left nothing to the imagination.

They, as does Sargent's painting, show us all too clearly what it is that we are working to prevent – humankind ever again having to experience the scourge of chemical weapons.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Your presence here today to honour artistic achievement is a powerful reminder that the human imagination is still the most powerful tool we have in moving forward as a civilization.

The arts stimulate our minds, they enliven our senses and enrich our souls.

Above all, they inspire us.

Last year I had the honour of accepting the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the OPCW for its achievements in the field of chemical disarmament.

The Prize consists of a medal as well as a Nobel Diploma bearing a painting by Norwegian artist Jan Erik Willgohs.

What we see in this beautiful painting is the light of the sky and cloud formations rising above a peaceful mountain-ridge.

Willgohs explained that his inspiration for this painting came from traditional Chinese thought, which believes that art should remind people of what is precious and important in life.

At a time when our society faces new and profound challenges, at a time when so many of us feel insecure in the face of change, the arts must remain a vital part of our lives.

A society without the civilising influence of the arts can never reach its full potential, nor understand its past and where its future lies.

Its purpose and meaning resides in the collective memory on display in our museums, the pictures and sculptures in our galleries, the music and plays of our theatres and the books in our libraries.

Diminish the role of the arts in society and we risk falling into Oscar Wilde's well known definition of a cynic: knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Looking to the future, I believe that if art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him – as the five artists nominated for the Vincent Award have done so well.

Thank you for your attention.