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Visitor

Changing Heritage Practices

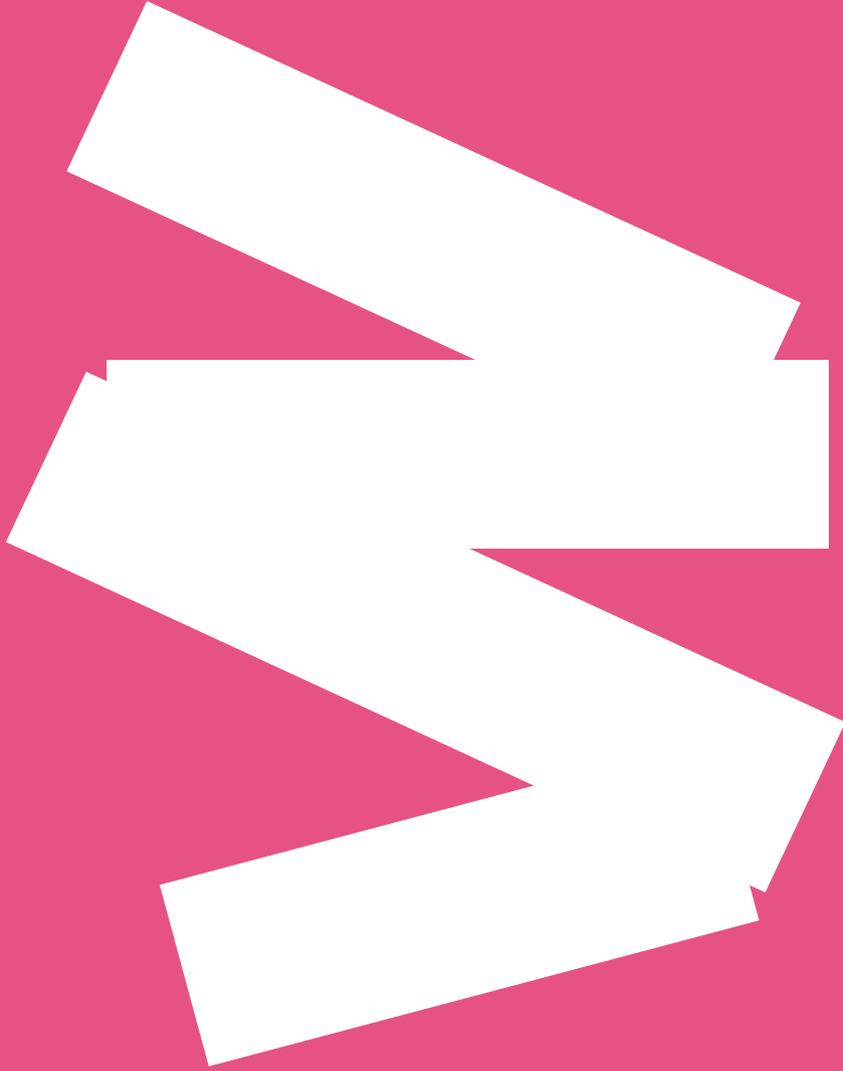


TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Foreword, or On Exhaustion Wayne Modest	5
1	Introduction, Gathering Critical Visitors Together Eliza Steinbock and Hester Dibbits	11
2	Roundtable on Intersectional Practices <i>After The Critical Visitor</i> With Danielle Kuijten, Mirjam Sneeuwloper, Stevie Nolten, Rachel Somers Miles, Dirk van den Heuvel, Fatma Tanis, Vanessa Vroon-Najem. Moderated by Hester Dibbits and Eliza Steinbock	47
3	How Countless Little Stories Shape (our) History Shivan Shazad	71
4	Practising Ideas or, How Decolonial Thinking Slowly Gave Form to the Collection Presentation of the Van Abbemuseum Charles Esche	85
5	Get Crafty! Get Curious! On Cut and Paste Practices at IHLIA LGBTI Heritage James Parnell and Jim van Geel, interviewed by Eliza Steinbock	105
6	Polyphonic Curation Looking Back and Ahead to the Colonial Past at the Amsterdam Museum Inez Blanca van der Scheer, Imara Limon, Margriet Schavemaker, Vanessa Vroon-Najem, Annemarie de Wildt and Gonca Yalçiner	125
7	Diary of a Diversity Researcher at the Bonnefanten Arent Boon	159

TABLE OF CONTENTS

8	With an Eye on Power: Doing Deep Democracy and Deep Listening at Imagine IC Jules Rijssen and Danielle Kuijten, interviewed by Hester Dibbits	173
9	Musing on A Queer Museum of Failure Liang-Kai Yu	195
10	Emotion Networking: A Heritage Practice Hester Dibbits	211
11	Why Am I Here? Why Not? On Minoritized Publics in Residence Julius Thissen, interviewed by Eliza Steinbock	231
12	Queer Scenographies: From the ‘Obscene’ to Care and Repair Dirk van den Heuvel	249
13	Visibility and Vulnerability in the Physical Space of the LGBTI+ Archive Noah Littel	261
14	Learning through Art: Joseph Grigely and Art as a Perspective for an Accessible, Representative Museum Nynke Feenstra	279
15	A Hold on Art: Crippling the Van Abbemuseum Barbara Strating	299
16	Decolonising Archives and the Need for Emotional Accessibility as Part of a Safe(r) Space Charles Jurgens	321
	Acknowledgements	349
	Colophon	350

fashioning the world

Foreword, or On Exhaustion

Wayne Modest

Exhaustion: “a state of extreme physical or mental tiredness”, or “the act of using something up, or the state of being used up”.

I have been thinking about exhaustion for some time now. Perhaps it is a reflection of my own state of mind in the troubling world in which we live. Every day, we are confronted with a growing sense of hopelessness, with the unyielding inequality and injustices that seem to define our contemporary world. Or, it may just come from my ongoing work in museums, and especially in the “ethnographic” museum. Unquestionably, these institutions can be exhausting, as we all struggle with their history, with the histories of their practices, but also with how to imagine them anew in and for the present and the future. Surely, this is not just my struggle. It would not be exaggerated to suggest that this is one of the struggles of our time. As questions circulate about how to deal with the colonial past, what to do with the remains of the colonial past in the present, then the ethnographic museum has become increasingly contested.

The concept of exhaustion (together with that of failure) came to mind as I sat to think about this publication, and about the project from which it emerges – The Critical Visitor. It wasn’t the project itself, which made me exhausted; nor did I believe

it to be a failure. No. I remain committed to projects of intellectual and practical inquiry; a belief that through reorienting our practices, we can rethink institutions, remake the world.

But I wondered who is this critical visitor which is the project's focus? Is it someone who proffers critique towards museums, towards the museum in which I work? Was it a colleague, or the many colleagues with whom I/we have worked, activists outside but also inside the institution, who have been committed to fashioning different kinds of institutions, different in the sense of more just and equitable futures. Were they exhausted? I wondered what kind of critique we expect, even welcome, from such visitors? And, mindful of the current political climate in which museums like ours operate, a museum that has been the focus of long histories of critique from very different political positions, are all critiques equal?

But my thinking about exhaustion, thinking about *something being used up*, was not limited to a person, to a critical visitor, even if this remains urgent. I wondered as well whether the protracted nature of the critique had something to do with the institution itself. This is not just about an unwillingness to change on the part of the museum itself, or its staff, but a certain kind of systemic inability to change. Perhaps what is used up, what is exhausted, are the concepts we use, the very intellectual foundations on which the museum is based. Do the dividing categories of ethnography or art still work to define the work that institutions do? Is preservation as a mode of "museuming" the way forward, or should we think through the analytical lens of care? Is it the very category of museum that is used up?

As the project progressed I was pushed to think of this more and more. A number of major challenges occurred in the world that would not leave museums unaffected. Rising discontent about the afterlives of colonialism in the present would lead to the emergence of movements, such as *decolonizing the museum*, protest movements, such as *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall*, all question the role of cultural and academic institutions in sustaining colonialism's grip on the world. Across the world, monuments celebrating colonialism and colonizers were being toppled, and there grew discontent about what to do with colonial objects within museums. The COVID 19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the global anti-racism mobilization that followed in its wake, would raise questions about who had the right to life, and how this right to life, to breathe in fact, was unequally distributed, based on racial ideologies that had their founding under colonialism. This too would bring major challenges to museums like mine, from activists, but from the general public alike. Even the International Council of Museums (ICOM) would seek to change its definitions of what a museum is in response to these shifts, a process that was not without its controversy.

Taking all of this together, then, I ask whether it is the conceptual foundations of what a museum is that has reached its limits, that has been used up, that is exhausted.

And even as I ask these questions, we at the Wereldmuseum continue to believe in these institutions, in our museum and the importance of these kind of museums. The last decade has taught us that perhaps a new, more critical visitor is emerging, one who might not just be interested in the museum as a collector and cataloguer of culture. Rather, they see the museum

as a site to contribute to fashioning the world as we want it to become. And while we at the Wereldmuseum may feel challenged, even feel a sense of exhaustion sometimes, we see this also as an opportunity and even as a responsibility. For us, we do not want to remain on the side of the criticized. No, our commitment is developing practices that will help foster world citizenship, to fostering worldly citizens. Our vision is to contribute to the training of the critical visitors of the future, even if they in turn criticize us. To do this, we believe that our people, that our concepts, but also that our *practices matter*.

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critical visitor

Gathering Critical Visitors Together

add-and-stir

critical / -ity

intersectional

emotions

visitorship

professional learning community

power relations

Gathering Critical Visitors Together

Eliza Steinbock and Hester Dibbits

There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.

Audre Lorde (1982)¹

How are you guided in your museological, curatorial, or archival practice? Explain the concept guiding you, the principles, the thinking, frameworks. Likely you can't, or feel you shouldn't. This is tacit knowledge. Knowledge of the gut, of the fingers, muscles, sinew and bone. Still, you are committed to your work, dedicated even. This edited volume is an opening to theoretical reflections on practices that are aimed towards inclusivity, so that these practices 'in the field' – so often not discussed, shared or dissected – become accessible to readers and a greater public. We are aware that our insistent refrain "practices matter!" might be heard as a cultural worker's chant, a call to look beyond the carefully crafted language of an annual report, or a sleek marketing campaign. It may direct our attention to the shuffling on the work floor, whispered talks in hallways, and to the meeting rooms where eyes roll. Practices matter in that it matters what we do: how they are carried out, by and with whom, what materials, and in what space.

This publication discusses current museum and heritage practices that aim to address the demands made by critical visitors who have been historically marginalized within a

cultural context. The book aims to develop more self-critical approaches to practices conducted by those in and adjacent to museums and archives, especially for how they might fall short, perpetuate, or be frustrated by systems of inequality. By sharing these reflections from cultural heritage professionals working in the Netherlands, we hope to foster a more open atmosphere, further an agenda of social justice, and provide critical vocabulary and examples to other readers who may face similar struggles.

This edition is meant for students and professionals in the heritage field and other interested and involved readers. It brings together shared experiences and reflections from scholars collaborating with and professionals working within cultural institutions in the Netherlands. It draws heavily from the experiences and knowledge of the scientific, public and private partners who joined in *The Critical Visitor* project's Field Labs, a research format whose aim was described as “testing intersectional approaches to inclusive actions at museum and archive sites”. In shaping the volume, the editors have been inspired by the generative provocations and learnings from the five Field Labs. The essays herein contain reflections from practitioners on how their inclusivity and accessibility practices work, what and who they produce, what emotions are active and inactive, what ethical horizon they are oriented towards, what logics organize their practice, what concepts give it form. The contributors also look into the nitty-gritty of processes to examine the emotions that color and shape intersectional experiences of practicing diversity and inclusion: the impatience, the effort of channeling cooperation, the sharpness of guilt and shame, and the exhaustion of what Amal Alhaag terms “dirty feminist work”. With this volume, we hope to forge connections amongst theory, practice

and ethics, with the aim of achieving greater critical reflections on professionalism in the practice of heritage-making.

What is the problem at stake? People are composed from different constellations of identification. Our cultural identity is where *how we feel ourselves to be* and *how we are seen by others* comes together. We are shaped in relationship to others: biologically, socially, and legally. How do our various statuses privilege or oppress us? These positions can be fluid, and can work with or against each other. To be pressed to identify exclusively with one identity category or struggle might be felt as wrong, because, hey, “that’s not all that I am”. In certain contexts, representations of specific group dimensions can have an emancipatory effect. It highlights voices that otherwise may have been unheard or unseen. But structural inequalities cannot be overcome by inviting one person per issue to the table. Equitability requires tailor-made accommodations and adjustments that account for different needs. Then, how does this work out in museums and heritage spaces? What does striving for equitability look like in professional practice? Which day to day challenges are to be tackled, which theoretical and ethical frameworks, concepts and guidelines can be helpful here?

Our Starting Points

In 2019, we – a group of academic researchers and professionals – formed a consortium to work on these questions by engaging with the criticality and the needs and demands of ‘the critical visitor’ to heritage spaces, as imagined or actually articulated. Over a period of four years, we met in different constellations and different settings, online during the Covid pandemic, to learn from each other and to find ways of supporting each other in our search for more equitability. The project was set

up based on the idea of ‘practice what you preach’, giving an impulse to what we consider to be a growing network of ‘critical visitors’. How was this idea translated into the design of the project? And how did it work out? Before tapping into these questions, we will first introduce the core terms of our project: our understanding of museum and heritage work and the notion of ‘the critical visitor’. The other concept that will be introduced here is ‘intersectionality’, which we regard as a way of thinking and acting that has the capacity to move us from the either/or binary logic of identity to consider the vectors of becoming both/and, an arena where power dynamics are also under scrutiny. We will end this introduction with some reading guidelines for this book.

Museum and heritage work consists of a dynamic repertoire of activities that relate to how the past is dealt with in the present, with an eye towards the future. This repertoire is diverse and ever changing. Most of the work stems from the experience that certain environments, objects, practices or knowledges need special attention. The reasons may differ, according to what is considered to be at stake: the wellbeing or maybe even the future at large of an individual, a group or people, or the world they inhabit. The actual work can be challenging, because of the multitude of actors and ethical dilemmas involved. What and whom is given care, who is being listened to, and who not? Museum and heritage work may include developing a collection, deaccessioning it, programming, exhibition making, presenting, annotating, questioning, managing, documenting, constructing and transforming, forgetting, abandoning, leaving unnamed and erasing.² But there is more. First, heritage work is collaborative work. It is not only done by professionals, but also by others, and these others also bring in important expertise and knowledge.

Moreover, as stakeholders they want to be acknowledged, seen, listened to. Thus, professional heritage work requires empathy and sensitivity.

Curating the past – as in musealisation, heritagization, fostering, safeguarding, showcasing, collecting, archiving, revitalising etc. – can have a positive effect, but it can also, albeit unintentionally, do harm. People may have divergent interests, feelings and memories in relation to actual objects, places, traditions and practices. Mutual misunderstanding, or even sentiments of disgust, antagonism and polarization can be the result of such divergent experiences. By acknowledging the history and the impact of the past – in all its different dimensions – we are better equipped to work in an ethical manner with the past towards the future, to acknowledge and eventually curate the past in the process of re-generation.

Curating the past with a focus on inclusion and regeneration is relevant as we do not want to just replicate the past, but stimulate critical reflection. Curating the past is an intervention that may work out differently depending on the context. This means that, in working with (traces of) the past, not only the practical dimensions of the work should be taken into consideration, but also the conceptual and ethical dimensions. In this sense, theory, practice and ethics are always interrelated. When we talk about museum and heritage work, we also encompass archival work. We could, when it comes to the issue of inclusivity, have extended our conversations to all sorts of interactions in everyday life where people work with (traces from) the past towards the future, and we sometimes did in the scope of our project. But our primary focus was on work done by professionals within publicly funded institutionalized spaces that are part of what is

called ‘the heritage sector’ in the Netherlands. These institutions have a history, and so does the professional work that is done within the institutions. For some, their practices address the pressing histories of colonialism, modernity, and forced labor, while for others histories of gentrification, migration, or the AIDS crisis play an outsized role.

We have adopted the notion of the ‘critical visitor’ from the Dutch Research Council’s 2018–Roadmap for their funding instrument *Smart Culture*. These writers attribute a sea-change to tackle structural exclusions in the cultural sector as partly due to the figure of the ‘critical visitor’.³ Critical visitors are making new demands to present culture in inclusive ways, which are to be accessible for all abilities and speak to diverse backgrounds. Acting beyond the bounds of typical ‘visitorship’ in which one tends to feel separate from the place they just pass through, the critical visitor’s articulated demands for fundamental and radical change makes them over into activists who claim a stake in their cultural, artistic and material heritage. Activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, direct or otherwise intervene in social reform with the desire to make changes for the perceived greater good. What actions are taken then, in relation to critical visitors?

Around the time that we started preparing our project proposal, the government renewed the 2011 national Cultural Diversity Code with the new name of Diversity and Inclusion Code that guides the ethics of cultural institutions, and, in fact, requires compliance to receive subsidies. With great fanfare, the Dutch Museum Association announced 2019 as the year of “connection and inclusivity” for employees and visitors.⁴ In response, the *Musea Bekennen Kleur* (Museums recognize color, confess

to color, show their true colors) launched in March 2020 as a platform for thirteen (now twenty) museums to practice (self)reflection on how they will foster diversity and inclusion according to the Code’s so-called “four P’s”, also adopted by the Dutch Museum Association: the programming, publics, personnel and partners (*Programma, Publiek, Personeel, Partners*).⁵ We also wish to acknowledge two important P-word dimensions added by STUDIO i–platform for inclusive culture: the collection (*pronkstuk*) and personal (*persoonlijk*).⁶ Power (*kracht*) figures in this volume as a critical P-word in English that underpins activist efforts to achieve greater diversity and inclusion, by dismantling the barriers and systemic discrimination that actively excludes. Many Dutch cultural institutions also responded to the massive second wave of the Black Lives Matter movement ignited by the brutal murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin and other officers in late May 2020. In light of these on-going concerns and fresh commitments, our project took up the notion of ‘criticality’ as being a key element of the contestations held over, around, and about cultural heritage. Together with fifteen committed public, private and scientific partners we were awarded funding from the Dutch Research Council from February 2020 until January 2025 to carry out research into how such criticality is framed conceptually, initiated by publicly funded institutions, and guided by specific heritage practices.

Our approach to the critical visitor is in alignment with feminist standpoint theory, which privileges the knowledge produced by those who are marginalized, who have the perspective of how power operates to oppress and can articulate best what needs to change. We believe that within heritage spaces, (presumed) publics, partners, or personnel who voice criticality

towards dominant monocultures, thereby becoming positioned as ‘critical visitors’, are key to identifying exclusionary barriers and routes to equity. What particularly interests us is when a contestation is put forward by a socially marginalized party, how are heritage practices a means to transform the balance of power, rather than the business as usual to shore up dominant parties, narratives, and traditions? At stake is access to public space and the practice of democracy as formulated by Hannah Arendt: who is allowed to enter public space, voice their criticisms, make demands and who is excluded from participating in it?⁷ What leverage is used to break open entrenched power structures? How are demands being anticipated, translated, or ignored by the dominant group in the Netherlands representing a ‘white monoculture’ within the institutionalized heritage field?⁸ How have these disputes come to build platforms that amplify voices other than the native Dutch, straight, cisgender, Christian, colonial and male perspectives? Where does criticality bleed across the perceived divide between the host institution and its visitors?

Our overarching question for the *Critical Visitor* project was how can heritage spaces best engage with this criticality in their initiatives, anticipate accessibility needs, and implement inclusive practices? This is where intersectional thinking comes in. Although we agreed that the real, imagined, or anticipated critical visitor is a catalyst in the sector’s anti-discrimination work, we argued for the need to go further than conducting empirical research on how singular publics or visitors are being included to fulfill such demands for diversity and inclusion. An ‘add-and-stir’ identities inclusion model does not ultimately transform heritage spaces in a long-term sustainable fashion. Although it can foreground one dimension of those

who have been excluded, it also conceptually over-simplifies personal and group identities that are multiple, in-flux, and non-unitary.⁹ “Who walks through the door?” is not the right question, but “Who activates that space?” Our research project therefore took an intersectional approach towards the study and development of the initiatives and practices aimed at inclusivity and accessibility across and within singular institutions. Intersectional theories map and transform the interactions of schemata for masculinity and femininity with social difference categories of race, class, age, ability, sexuality, religion, residency status, as well as multitude emerging factors that influence personhood/subject positions.

The idea was that taking time to sit together to investigate the notion of intersectionality and different traditions of intersectional thinking and practice could help us to tackle the complexity of how to navigate, anticipate and transform dynamic overlapping and interdependent systems of privilege and oppression. *The trick is to be aware that the power dynamics that are in us, are also present in the institution.* Thus, the question is: What do we see when we look at everyday practices in heritage institutions through the lens of intersectionality that “fosters more expansive understandings of collective identities and political action”?¹⁰ Under what circumstances might intersectional thinking bring us in the cultural sector, or within particular cultural organizations, to a shared vision of a more just horizon?

The project design

To work on these questions we devised a research program that asserts that critical visitors challenge the assumptions of the space where objects of heritage are stored, exhibited,

and safeguarded by institutions. Alternative heritage spaces founded by (former) critical visitors, such as private or community archives/collections like IHLIA LGBTI Heritage once was, generate important counter-archives and cultural solidarity practices, which deserve to be studied as heritage work. Their engaged and reflective stance cultivates the criticality necessary for what Hester Dibbits terms ‘heritage wisdom’ which can also be promoted inside institutional heritage spaces.¹¹ Hence, we identified how vital it is to acknowledge and account for the generative role of critical visitors, employees, and activists in evolving and diversifying museum and archive practices as well as to examine how inclusive practices themselves can produce critical visitors.

Through the method of triangulating ‘theory-ethics-practice’ that is used in the Reinwardt Academy’s training of heritage and museum professionals we organized the research formats in terms of studying theoretical concepts like intersectionality, solidarity, criticality, the anarchival, storytelling, and decolonial thinking, while being guided by the ethical horizon of social justice in the implementation of our various practices of heritage and museum work. In this regard, we redefine professionalism not as neutrality but as criticality, which brings along a heightened desire to weave accessibility needs with queering and decolonizing frameworks.

Together with consortium partners from the heritage sector, our research team led three different kinds of research formats: (1) the Field Lab at partner’s sites to evaluate current practices with intersectional approaches, and further refine them for broader application; (2) the Queer Salon series at Het Nieuwe Instituut to bring together intersectional groups of publics and

personnel from ‘insider’ dominant collections and ‘outsider’ archives to exchange perspectives on inclusivity and accessibility; and (3) the expert meet-ups for Archival Interactions that brought together artists and archivists to develop strategies for conducting intersectional archive/artistic research especially when faced with the loss of and gaps in collected knowledge. During these sixteen sessions we discussed recent experiences of being, of anticipating and of negotiating with the so-called critical visitor who demands accountability from museums, archives and heritage spaces for serving wider publics, for engaging minoritized constituencies, for responding ethically to their colonial legacies. Through having museum and heritage professionals co-create the research agenda, together with scholars, artists and activists, we have established a short line to influence the implementation of daily working practices in cultural institutions – selection, collection, preservation, display, interaction – in order to alleviate structures of exclusion.

The rapidly evolving set of inclusivity, cultural diversity, and accessibility practices in the Netherlands makes for a dynamic living lab of evolving experimental, proven, and to-be-improved practices. The research program acknowledged that ongoing initiatives have tools and means for practicing diversity and inclusion work, but as yet do not have a formal network or platform through which they can exchange information and that provides a means of reflection or quality control. In other words, what has been lacking is a space created for a ‘professional learning community’ on this urgent topic. Consequently, our consortium project – bringing together researchers at five universities and ten professional and heritage partners plus a growing group of ‘buddies’ – seeds future collaboration. This edited volume is our effort to extend and expand this group

of participants (see below for the more than 70 people who took part), and to share the work in progress of inclusivity practices at these many differently sized institutions and types of practitioners.

Critiques of intersectionality played an important role when we designed our research project. It was clear to us that our focus should be on everyday practices in museum and heritage spaces, but also that we should take time to familiarize as a consortium with the history of the concept of intersectionality, and with the theoretical and ethical dimensions of its practice. We will follow this line of thought here by looking more closely into the uses of intersectionality before continuing this introduction with some reflections on what learnings we gleaned through this interactive, partner-led project design.

Intersectionality and its uses

The use of intersectionality as a term, theory, or method is surrounded by different disputes. Simply invoking the term to describe ambitions to be a more inclusive person, program, or institution does not instantly create a fully developed practice aiming towards social justice. Authors Antonio Duran and Susan R. Jones underscore that “it is simply not enough to use the term intersectionality to describe experiences of marginalization; individuals must be prepared to enact change by using the framework.”¹² The popularized use of the term has brought with it the charge that intersectionality has a standing as a buzzword, made meaningless through overuse. When used as a shorthand for being a part of devalued groups, i.e. saying “I’m an intersectional person”, it potentially falls short of the promise of intersectional theorizing of larger, complex

oppressive social structures enforced through categorization of difference.¹³ In Duran and Jones’ summative assessment: “Rather than engaging its original focus on structural inequities, intersectionality has become a proxy for multiple identities.”¹⁴ Further, Jennifer Nash’s study of what she terms “the intersectionality wars”, has pointed out that the debate about the ‘whitening’ of intersectionality is undergirded by the broader claim “that intersectionality is terrain that has been taken over—colonized—by (white) women’s studies.”¹⁵ For our purposes, the observation that intersectionality has been colonized by some actors might be extended to the troubling or unsafe travels of the term through cultural institutions that are centered on white thinking, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, and ableism. In some cases, then, the use of the term does exactly what it is meant to fight against: drum up exclusion by becoming what Sara Ahmed has called a “non-performative”, in which saying the word stands in for doing an action, and even blocks further actions of doing.¹⁶ In short, just uttering the word can be an empty gesture.

Relatedly, using the term intersectionality without citation or elaboration may cause further exclusion in the sense that there is a general lack of awareness about the history of the concept. This problem is pressing, since the concept of intersectionality has become at times diluted to refer to an individual facing multiple oppressions rather than an analytic for focusing on dynamic and interlocking axes of oppression and privilege that occur on the levels of structural, representational, and political levels.¹⁷ While the idea’s origins come from challenging a single-issue approach to discrimination, a much longer history is claimed for intersectionality being born out of black feminist practice.¹⁸

In a TED Talk titled “The Urgency of Intersectionality” (2016) Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw explains that her conceptualization in the 1980s was forged in a juridical context, as a way to frame and address the fact that Black women are specifically discriminated against as Black women, rather than just as Black, or just as women.¹⁹ This mode of intersectional thinking is aimed at solving the problem of describing when someone belongs to more than one group that is being categorically excluded, or more generally devalued, stigmatized, and oppressed in a structural manner. These multiple forms of discrimination tend to fall out of the existing frameworks for legal and social understandings of oppression that focus on either gender, race, class, sexuality, religion or age. Thus, intersectionality is a concept that insists on bringing into one frame the multiplicity and the interactivity of identity as it shifts from one context to the next, and even when aspects of identity shift in their registration as privileged, unmarked, or oppressed in and across these different arenas. When intersectionality is used in uncited, blanket or superficial ways, the rigor of thought developed out of the lived experiences of historically and structurally marginalized Black women and women of color is violently occluded.

Another way in which intersectionality might become exclusive is that the concept of intersectionality is by now wholly part of academic jargon and that by using it the boundaries between the academic and non-academic world are confirmed. Although intersectionality describes the complexities of highly relatable lived experiences and arose through activism, the now elaborated set of texts on it as a method and theory for research can be hard to grasp. Hence the word used without further explanation or context by researchers might signify as being elitist, and inadvertently exclude those from the conversation who have

not had academic training in feminist thinking. There have been attempts to translate the concept into another word or into an image to reach a wider audience by being more easily graspable. A Dutch term that is often used as an alternative to the English-adapted word, *intersectionaliteit*, is *kruispuntdenken*, or ‘crossroad thinking’, introduced by the editors of the 2001 groundbreaking volume, *Caleidoscopische visies: de zwarte, migranten- en vluchtelingen vrouwenbeweging in Nederland* (‘Kaleidoscopic Visions: the Black, Migrant, and Refugee Women’s Movement in the Netherlands’), by Maayke Botman, Nancy Jouwe and Gloria Wekker.²⁰ We highly recommend the Dutch reader to consult this volume, which is written in an accessible manner, based on activist and lived experiences. Similar to ‘crossroad thinking’ is the typical visualization used to explain the concept: an image of a traffic intersection with signposts labeling the different social categories that influence a person’s experiences of privilege or oppression. While elaborating how lived experience is composed of many different identity vectors, this crossroad image still works with fixed categories, and tends to ignore the dynamic interplay between them. It can also lead to the issue that as long as some identity vectors are not accounted for in the analysis, some forms of difference will always have to be bracketed. The translations of the term into different metaphors, languages, and images can be helpful to grasp the general sense of how identity is multiple and dynamic, but it also risks reductionistic understandings of identity formation and social transformation.

Our interactions and what we learned

In their research publications the core team of Hester Dibbits, Dirk van den Heuvel, Eliza Steinbock, Noah Littel, and Liang-Kai Yu developed critical understandings of intersectional

approaches to heritage work. For instance, Littel tracks changes in the ways that keywords and categorization systems have been used in Dutch queer and feminist archives, regarding themes of sexuality, gender, class, ethnicity and race; Steinbock and Julian Isenia experiment with a kaleidoscopic lens on Black/anti-colonial and queer/trans/sex worker archives; Van den Heuvel and Martin van Wijk queer the biographical white gay man in architecture collections; and Yu identifies aesthetics of loneliness that signal racial marginalization in two major HIV/AIDS and queer-themed museum exhibitions.²¹ However, even though we assigned and discussed readings during our consortium interactions, we did not come to a working definition for how intersectionality could, or should, be understood in heritage or cultural work. Instead of conceptual refinement, we gained a plurality of possible understandings. This was largely because *The Critical Visitor* aimed first of all to generate a more horizontal working group for parties involved directly, on the work floor, with the development and implementation of diversity and inclusion practices. We therefore wanted to address the need for these professionals and activist-minded cultural workers to gather and exchange on a platform not aligned with any one institution, or government body. In other words, what *The Critical Visitor* tried to bring about was a space for a professional learning community to coalesce around this urgent topic of redressing multiple forms of discrimination and legacies of systematized oppression through the lens of intersectionality. With the wide variety of daily practices, training, and disciplinary backgrounds, we found that only through detailed discussion of actual practices and our own experiences, could we as a group sharpen and widen our vocabulary on intersectional thinking. How did this work out? What did we learn?

Our research has been process-oriented. We have found that this approach builds in reflection while doing. Critiques on the notion of intersectionality from within the group and from our readings were impulses to continue to adapt and revise our ways of working in the iterative process of multiple Field Labs with consortium partners and the series of expert meetups. A fundamental change after the first Field Lab was when we started the use of a buddy system, so that each person was free to bring a colleague who they thought would benefit from being a part of the discussion. As work-package leaders, we recalibrated the Field Lab program's emphasis to be presentations from each host (and their collaborators), rather than outside speakers, so we could dive deeper into how their practices were informed by or reflected an intersectional approach. We found that intersectional thinking is an approach that if engaged with awareness and care can illuminate, decenter, and even provide a route for dismantling oppressive, exclusionary structures that undergird modern/modernist cultural institutions. We had examples of practices aimed at redressing white supremacy with its specific Dutch variable of white innocence, and at the aftermath of imperialism/colonialism in the VOC archive of testaments and last wills. We also discussed examples of practices that would challenge masculinist heterosexism in historical narratives and presumptions of ableism.

In the conversations about developing and reflecting on intersectional inclusivity practices one salient issue returned again and again. Sometimes, for some groups, it is better to not be included. There is a price for being included. There are also always conditions for being included. We should push back on platitudes of 'happy' diversity and inclusion, to recognize that it can never be fully achieved. It is important to realize from the

start that the logic of heritage- and memory-making is based on selection, a necessarily exclusive practice, and as such practices of inclusivity in the heritage sector will always fall short, and require reiterations, redoing, and rethinking.²² Clearly, there are limitations to practices of inclusion, and dangers even for some materials and bodies to be brought or held inside. Heritage materials may be violent, harmful, and traumatic, and there is no way to make them safe for everyone. Further, institutions should be held to account for the killing, silencing, annihilation, or devaluing of a knowledge system, that is, for enacting epistemicide.²³ Those seeking justice, and fighting against epistemic injustices, do so often at a personal cost.

As practitioners, we often work with communities and networks that we may, or may not, have personal ties with, which requires attuning our own positions and role in power dynamics. This practice of intersectional awareness in our group helped us to seek common ground and solidarity during our conversations. Within a few hours of our first Field Lab meeting the group reached consensus that the market logic of competition between institutions poisons our working relationships. We shared the experience of how the overarching pressure to champion success influences what one can say about their ‘home institution’, making us reluctant to share personal or institutional failures, or acknowledge the unease that comes with making mistakes. A number of participants expressed that they’d like to share personal stories, but it was difficult to trust that it would be ok to do so. At minimum there was an innate hesitancy to open up about the perils and pleasures of speaking about one’s intersectional experiences and doing intersectional work. Upon further discussion we heard from professionals that it felt difficult to discuss the internal problems, much less

to other professionals outside the institution because of the implicit sense that it might damage a reputation. At the same time, participants concluded that another hurdle for sharing best practices or innovative modes of being inclusive was because doing so implicitly seemed to be giving away trade secrets of what was working, an advantage in the marketplace of subsidies. So discomfort, money, and reputation were in the air as concerns.

While working with strict confidentiality in the group, we could start breaking down the silos between practitioners, those working freelance and those with permanent contracts, people located in knowledge centers, archives and museums, or those insulated in a large or small organization. It was a conscious decision for us to compose the consortium with partners and participants who would recreate the dynamics and tensions in the sector, in an attempt to, on a small-scale, map and reconfigure the marginalizing power dynamics that isolate us from one another. When things go wrong, as they often do, we learned how important it is to have colleagues you can count on to ‘call you in’, as in to hold you accountable for learning, and to ‘hold space’ by being fully present and without judgment while sitting with someone having a difficult time. After the first Field Lab, the meetings moved online due to the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which made it difficult to continue building up our working vocabulary and group trust. However, after a year and two online meetings, we did resume meeting in person with the final two Field Labs and savored the opportunity to have in-person exchange even more. Undoubtedly, we found that the small-scale intimate workgroup, and having time to get to know each other, is crucial to forming more sustainable means of solidarity work.

In the third archival interaction session many participants, both artists and heritage workers, articulated a desire to find space to reflect back on earlier work, rather than rushing headlong into the next deliverable. They also challenged the assumption that every output should be a presentation for the public, or result in an output. The desire was phrased as the need to do less, especially towards a goal directed already from the start. It is hard to be creative when you need to realize a product or a deliverable. In short, we need to get over the ‘project-based mentality’ that tends to frame diversity and inclusion as a trend for everyone to jump on, or a one-step solution. While it may be tempting to immediately shift into a solution-based approach, we learned from this research-creation process that this mode of thinking is detrimental to holding the space for critical voices to be articulated. In the third Field Labb, Setareh Noorani from HNI called for an end to solutionist thinking in heritage and cultural work that, for instance, thinks that digitizing an artifact means that accessibility or colonial repair is done, a ticked box. There was a general sense that the pressure to demonstrate diversity work in order to receive the subsidies, which these publicly supported Dutch cultural institutions need, had led to showing what was ‘new’ rather than a reformulation or improvement on previous work. Many participants felt that transformational inclusion would come from deeper dives into institutional memory and history, rather than adding a new layer into a program, or designing a project for one formerly marginalized group. We detected a shift for institutions to look inward, and critically at themselves. This internal work, while necessary, also triggered tensions amongst layers of management who worry about losing relevance for publics, even upsetting traditional publics, and a downturn in ticket sales.

Given the project-based subsidy system, the requirement to open up new revenue streams, and the sense of competition amongst institutions, there is a capitalist logic for profit and production underlying our discussions of intersectional practices in public institutions. These need to be vented, named, and accounted for precisely because they have an invisible impact on even being able to discuss practices. As a result, we have formulated a set of questions and reflections that we present here as they may be helpful to you as researcher or practitioner to address.

- 1 First, there are questions that relate to the impact of capitalist logics on research/partners, such as: Is heritage a product? Are visitors clients? Are museums a branch of the service industry? Another way to find out how how solidarity is or is not practiced is whether the front of the house aligns with the back of the house. Most heritage workers share a sense that values and ethics are changing. However, appeals to diversity, accessibility and inclusivity can be a façade put up for the public in contrast to, or even masking, the backstage that tells a very different story in terms of who is in charge of hiring (being hired), in leadership positions (making decisions), and what available support there is for change makers (contractually, financially, and strategically in the organization).
- 2 Second, in developing your inclusion practices, be clear about who it is you have in mind. How are they welcomed? Gestures of welcoming are not always felt as such. When fossilized institutions open their doors, not everyone wants to walk in. What kinds of issues do you want this visitor to become sensitized towards, to evaluate, and develop critical thinking skills around? What tools do you have in house or

need to develop so that your visitors will learn to identify bias? Are your visitors given opportunities to engage in independent self-learning, and to share this with other visitors, to produce collective knowledge?

- 3 Third, it is important to investigate affect and emotion as knowledge. Despite heritage spaces being primarily seen as custodians of historically valuable objects from the past, we identified that the affective structure of anticipation to a future encounter is very prevalent in the daily working practices of heritage presentation. For instance, cultural institutions rarely have a chance to reflect on what they have already done, and instead are in a cycle of thinking ahead due to subsidy cycles that demand planned projects link up to future projections of trends, and attractions that will bring in visitors. Hence in this planning phase the visitor is less an actual embodiment than a presumed figure who has yet to arrive. Where institutions can do better is to anticipate the diversity of the needs and interests of the visitor in a mode dedicated to break away from monocultural assumptions about a supposedly basic or general visitor. Who do you want to attract? Why?
- 4 Fourthly, another way that the figure of the critical visitor fits into the affective structure of anticipation is that by being imagined and conjured up by a heritage worker aligned with dominant mentalities the figure might incite fear, anger, or guilt. In our primarily (but not exclusively) white, heterosexual, and woman-identified group, which is representative of the sector at large, discomfort has been a key term, especially the phrase 'getting comfortable with discomfort'. If we don't practice this, emotions like fear, guilt and shame all tend to lead to shutting down, to throwing

up defenses against hearing or processing what the real and imagined critical visitor might bring up. Counter to the paranoid mode of anticipation in which any surprise is a bad surprise, there is also the unexpected happy surprise of something unanticipated. The affect of surprise can especially be triggered when one is working with activists. When meetings are disrupted, when dissent is voiced, when you learn something new about a colleague's particular struggle, when you suddenly realize you need to accommodate for chemically sensitive, anti-police or gender diverse publics: these can be experienced as threatening or happy surprises for some, or 'no surprise' to others. Pay attention to the affect of surprise, what does your response tell you?

It is important to recognize that the case is often, as Sara Ahmed writes in *On Being Included*, that those who name and bring up the problem of racism, those who speak of it and name the elephant in the room, become the problem.²⁴ These responses of displacing the problem to the person can reduce diversity work to managing or containing conflict, to managing the feelings of the (supposedly) well-intentioned sexist/racist/trans antagonistic colleague, and massaging egos. In this regard, we discussed how heritage workers can feel ambivalent about being for and against the organization, depending on whether they feel aligned with the institutions' or the critical visitors' demands, and whether they are treated as an outsider even within the insider role they have in the institution. This can be acutely felt when looking at who is hired freelance, for temporary projects, with non-permanent contracts, and yet who is expected or asked to do diversity and inclusion work, to conduct critical commentary, to take the risk, to speak out.

Very often those who are positioned as outsiders inside the organization do work of naming the problem, and become the problem, rather than the institutional center coming under fire.

Eloquently, Amal Alhaag, co-organizer and host of the second Field Lab on behalf of the Research Centre for Material Culture, called the additional tasks put on marginalized workers the “dirty feminist work”: the things that are not on any to-do list but involve the diplomatic labor of navigating an institution not made for you, of making people comfortable with your presence as a woman, POC, a queer.²⁵ Dirty feminist work is when you have to write follow-up emails, or need to talk with people before and after the meeting. It is the labor of deciding when you can be open about being invested in social justice more than in the institution. In the second Field Lab, Hodan Warsame and Aynouk Tan asked us all to reflect on the vital question: How is your institution complicit with forms of structural extraction and the exploitation of marginalized actors?²⁶ To tackle the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion we have to deal with the ways that labor is carried by some, is distributed, and compensated. Emotions and emotional labor generate in and out groups. To paraphrase Layal Ftouni, our invited speaker for the second Field Lab, we need to consider that the practices and politics of intersectionality do not begin and end with inclusion, but help to reconfigure the ‘we’ of the institution and its emotional contours.²⁷

By giving space to reflect on how emotions shape relationships, we can see that heritage is a process between people that has its own life aside from or outside of the archive, collection, or presentation itself. We had a session in Archival Interactions hosted by Het Nieuwe Instituut that probed how heritage is not

only material, but consists in the knowledge of how ‘heritage work’, and how a heritage institution works, is embodied in workers.²⁸ We discussed examples that show how multiply oppressed and intersectionally marginalized identities and cultural groups tend to use different platforms and ways of working within institutions to make their heritage accessible, visible, or simply known. Often POC, women, queers, trans folks, and migrants are hired ad hoc as a kind of visiting worker to do this critically innovative work, yet when they leave, the institutions lose their knowledge, know-how, memory. Taking seriously the proposition that heritage production is knowledge production, it seems vital to better support and centralize the critical heritage worker to not only minimize leaks and loss of alternative knowledge but to commit to the continued amplification of voices coming from marginalized communities. Such support systems within national collections are especially needed to redress the historical imbalance of who voices experiences and cultural perspectives.

In sum, through these iterative, horizontal, and experiential formats, we have come to see that conceptually engaging in intersectional approaches demands a reckoning with how categories operate at varying levels, and activate power dynamics within an organization. What many inclusivity practices shared was a common interest in historical, sensorial, and systemic perspectives that often implicitly articulated intersectional insights. These figured prominently in our exchanges and appeared to be effective when it comes to paving the way to more inclusive and accessible institutions.

Historical sensitivity is important when it comes to remembering past institutional or external critical interventions that

pointed out exclusions in the institute or proposed more inclusive practices. A recurring sentiment that has come up during and outside of the Field Labs is that conversations regarding making institutions more inclusive are constantly repeated, often without acknowledging or seemingly remembering projects that have come before. Due to turnover of staff and a lack of active memory regarding their own institutional history, earlier attempts and projects are often forgotten. Discomfort becomes buried, marginalized figures move on, and the center tends to hold. How can we make this work more sustainable, and end the cycle of exclusion (and exhaustion)? Institutions must be ready for self-study, to ask themselves: what has been done in the past, what have we been doing, and what do we want to change? In order to work toward an intersectional practice now and in the future, it is vital to reflect on these larger institutional pasts, both to critically learn from, but also to honor, the work already done by critical visitors and heritage workers before us. This historical awareness of the continual process and development of heritage institutes also needs to have a bearing on our own current practices, as it shows that it is vital to be transparent and record our current processes and practices to make the institute more inclusive, so that these efforts may be remembered or recovered by future staff as well.

In conclusion, we wish to return to the refrain of refusal with which we started: “that’s not all I am”. May this be a motto for you, and the work you do in countering and overturning those oppositional, exclusive binary logics that uphold ableism, white supremacy, imperialism and masculinist heterosexism.

Reading guide

This book in the series *Work in Progress* is directly inspired by the first volume in this series, *Words Matter*, which quickly became a text for institutions and organizations to use for workshops, reflection groups, and ideation sessions. Similarly, while it is an incomplete guide, and nothing should be followed to the letter, we encourage you to read it according to the key words that interest you. In each contribution we have included spaces for you to add your own key words and to track new ideas and points of connection. You might compare your tags with colleagues, or design a workshop around thematically overlapping essays.

As the Critical Visitor PhD Noah Littel has observed during the Field Labs, historical sensitivity is important when it comes to remembering past institutional or external critical interventions that pointed out exclusions in the institute or proposed more inclusive practices.²⁹ Inclusion is hardly a new development, currently the terms such as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) are used, others like multiculturalism have been discarded. Under what notions and umbrellas do we want to work? We are in a longer line of inclusivity terms: from equality to equity, and from diversity to inclusion and increasingly accessibility. Words get tired, and bodies get tired; new words can also be energizing for bodies and enable action.³⁰ Rather than dictate the right term or the language used to name our goals, or the process we want to set in action, let’s bear in mind the cyclical nature of this work, of exhaustion and animation, doing and reflecting, learning and unlearning.

With our assertion that heritage practices matter, we are trying to shift from focusing on the word itself to how words create

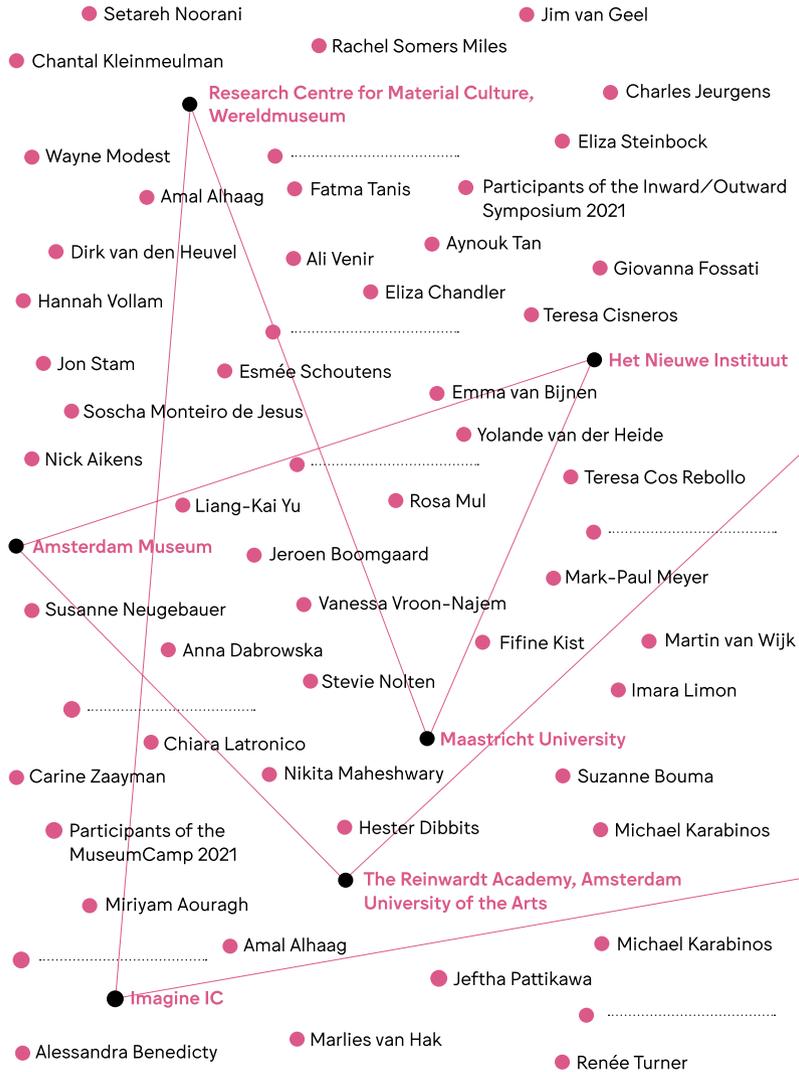
room for action. Rather than taking up the academic question of what decolonization exactly means, we asked, what do we DO when we are doing it, or say we are doing it? In the Field Labs we offered scholarly reference points for grasping this concept, and for crippling and queering, but ultimately through the focus on heritage practices, we wanted to learn what the term allowed us to do with the space of the institution. Are the institution's pre-existing values aligned with the commitments enacted by practices, or not? Conversely, we found out that tried and true practices are sometimes not in pace with the language of the day, and therefore fly under the radar of being seen as inclusivity practices. The reader can consider the contributions in this book as examples of how these dynamics of words and practices, that is, the communication patterns of saying and doing, actualize in what we called the Living Laboratory.

We want to thank everyone who joined us in the *Critical Visitor* and in this volume for being part of this experiment, for their openness, their efforts towards transparency, their acknowledgement of past mistakes and failures, and for presenting work in progress. As editors we decided not to assign institutions to the authors. Firstly, because during the course of the *Critical Visitor* project, the reality was that many of the contributors changed positions, left the sector, or started doing other kinds of heritage work. Secondly, in some essays, the contributors speak to practices that they have developed across and with many different types of institutions. Finally, our political reason for this choice is to allow space for participants to speak according to their own experiences and not on behalf of an authoritative institution.

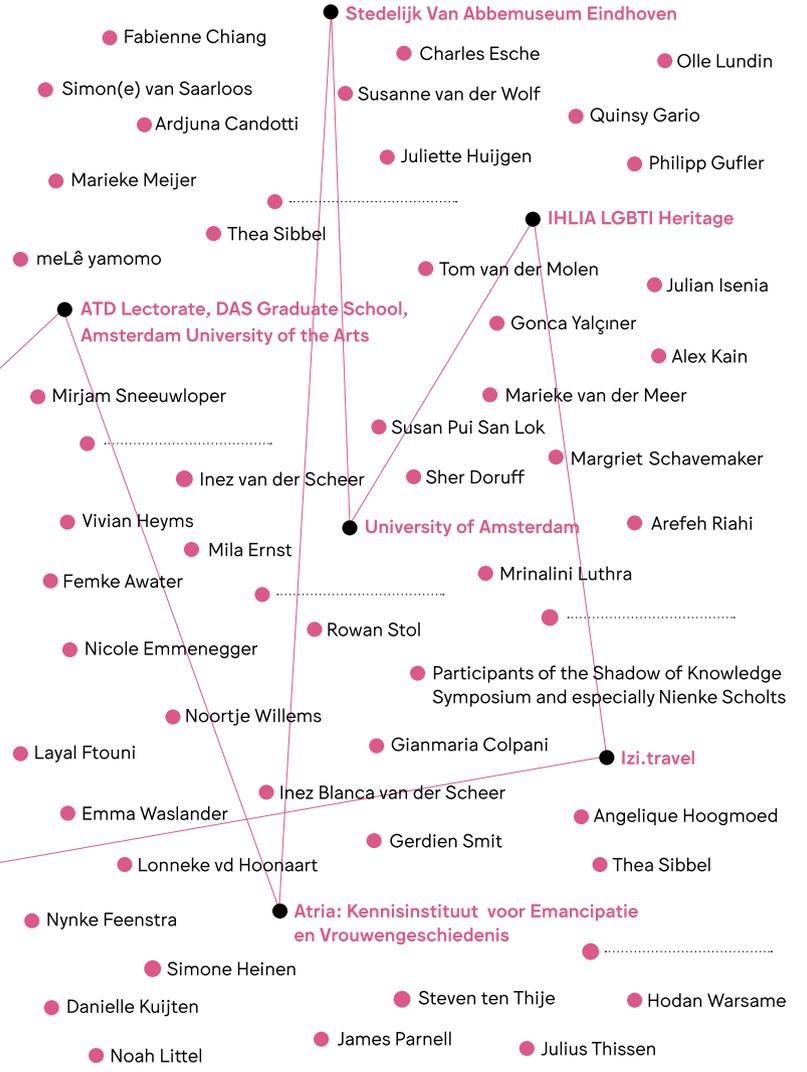
The contributions include an essay co-authored by a group of people who work together in an institution, single authored essays, interviews conducted by the editors, and a round table with people from different institutions. This variety of contributions allows us to present a plurality of starting points to look into how practices come to matter. Further, if you read the contributions from the front to the back of the volume, following our arrangement, you will encounter an array of opening points. We invite the reader to start anywhere and to graze across institutions, practices, specific (groups of) practitioners, or look into how we have layered the readings through key terms.

We wish to close by acknowledging the participants in our Field Labs and in the Archival Interactions meet-ups. Together with the book's designers, PutGootink, we created this scattergram of the wider field of contributors that informed this edited volume's form and message, this introduction's content, and all the knock-on effects to come, recognized and not. We invite you to critically visit our volume. Our hope is that you, the reader, will also become part of this network. Write your own name into it, and others who you think should be included and acknowledged in this network, heritage for all!

THE CRITICAL VISITOR NETWORK



THE CRITICAL VISITOR NETWORK



- 1 Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde. NY Crown Publishing Group, 2007, 138.
- 2 Hester Dibbits and Marlou Willemsen, "Stills of our liquid times: An essay towards collecting today's intangible cultural heritage," in *Die Musealisierung der Gegenwart: Von grenzen und chancen des sammelns in kulturhistorischen museen*, ed. Sophie Elpers and Anna Palm (Bielefeld, Transcript, 2014), 181.
- 3 "NWO Roadmap Smart Culture," Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research, September 2018, 6.
- 4 The new Diversity & Inclusion Code was introduced as an "instrument of self-regulation on diversity and inclusion, developed for and by the Dutch cultural and creative sector". Unlike the Cultural Diversity Code, the D&I Code focuses on all types of identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, level of training or education, age, and disabilities. See <https://www.platformbk.nl/een-betere-kunstwereld-met-diversiteit-en-inclusie-alleen-komen-we-er-niet/>
- 5 See <https://museabekennenkleur.nl/>
- 6 See <https://studio-inclusie.nl/en/>
- 7 Hans Teerds, "At Home in the World: Architecture, the Public and the Writings of Hannah Arendt," PhD thesis (TU Delft, 2017).
- 8 LAgrou. *De olifant in de kamer*. Amsterdam, 2008.
- 9 See Amy Levin, ed. *Gender, Sexuality and Museums: A Routledge Reader*. Routledge, 2010.
- 10 Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality (Key Concepts) 2nd Edition*. Polity, 2020, 166.
- 11 Hester Dibbits, "'Uit de bubbel.' Erfgoedprofessionals in tijden van polarisatie," *Boekman Extra 7*, (2017): 16.
- 12 Antonio Durano and Susan R. Jones, "Chapter 41 Intersectionality," in *Encyclopedia of Critical Whiteness Studies in Education*, ed. Zachary A. Casey (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 317.
- 13 See Kathy Davis, "Intersectionality as a Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful," *Feminist Theory 9*, no. 67 (2008); Anna Carastathis, Karen J. Leong, and Andrea Smith. *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons*. University of Nebraska Press, 2016; Patricia Hill Collins, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas," *Annual Review of Sociology 41* (2015): 1-20; Jennifer Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality," *Meridians 11*, no. 2 (2011): 1-24.
- 14 Durano and Jones (2020), 310.
- 15 Jennifer Nash. *Black Feminism Reimagined After Intersectionality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, 43.
- 16 Sara Ahmed. *On Being Included. Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press, 2012, 116-121.
- 17 See Durano and Jones (2020), 314; Collins and Bilge (2020), 166-7.
- 18 See discussion of Patricia Hill Collin's and Sirma Bilge's scholarship that includes Frances Beal, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Toni Cade Bambara, and the Combahee River Collective in Nash (2019), 42.
- 19 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "The Urgency of Intersectionality," *TEDWomen*, October 2016: https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=en
- 20 Maayke Botman, Nancy Jouwe and Gloria Wekker, eds. *Caleidoscopische visies: de zwarte, migranten- en vluchtelingen vrouwenbeweging in Nederland*. Royal Tropical Institute, 2001.
- 21 Noah Littel, "Patriarchale concessies, olifantenpaadjes, en bewustwordingsmechanismen: De ideologische achtergrond van catalogisering in Nederlandse LHBT+ archieven," *Historica* (June 2022); Eliza Steinbock and Wigbertson Julian Isenia, "How to Read Dr Betty Paërl's Whip: Intersectional Visions of Trans/Gender, Sex Worker, and Decolonial Activism in the Archive." *Feminist Review 132* (2022): 24-45; Dirk van den Heuvel and Martin van Wijk, "Queer Encounters in the Archive: Misplaced Love Letters and Autobiographical Homes," in *Queering Architecture: Methods, Practices, Spaces, Pedagogies*, ed. Marko Jobst and Naomi Stead (London; New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), 32-49; Liang-Kai Yu, "Performing Queer Loneliness in Art AIDS America (2015-17) and Queer British Art (2017)," *Sexualities* (forthcoming).
- 22 For a key discussion of how heritage practices are selective in that they are records of select episodes of social memory, see Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? Unsettling 'The Heritage,' Reimagining the Post-nation." *Third Text 49* (Winter 1999-2000): 5-6.
- 23 The term epistemicide was coined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "The Fall of the Angelus Novus: Beyond the Modern Game of Roots and Options", in *Working Paper Series on Political Economy of Legal Change* (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1996), 3.
- 24 Ahmed, (2012), 152-153.
- 25 Field Lab II. "Testing Intersectional Approaches to Inclusive Actions: The Solidarity Methods Lab," 15 and 16 October 2020, Online, 16 October 2020. Summary, 17 February 2021.
- 26 Field Lab II. "Testing Intersectional Approaches to Inclusive Actions," October 2020.
- 27 Field Lab II. "Testing Intersectional Approaches to Inclusive Actions," October 2020.
- 28 Setareh Noorani was among those who made these points in the discussion. Eliza Steinbock, "Archival Interactions #5: [De]constructing Heritage," per. notes, May 26, 2021.
- 29 See Noah Littel's forthcoming dissertation for further detail on cases related to alternative archives founded in the Netherlands that aimed to preserve the history of Third World women, lesbians, feminist movements, and homosexuals/queers. This is a key theme developed in their PhD dissertation. The insights developed in this paragraph were first articulated by Littel.
- 30 See Sara Ahmed's reference to a diversity practitioner's discussion of tired words and switching terms in her unpublished presentation, "The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," CentreLGS Colloquium *Text and Terrain: Legal Studies in Gender and Sexuality* (University of Kent September 25, 2004), 6-7, https://www.kent.ac.uk/clgs/documents/pdfs/Ahmed_sarah_clgscolloq25-09-04.pdf

After the Critical Visitor

Method

Rountable

safety

critical / -ity

systemic injustices

failure

visitorship

professional learning community

power relations

After the Critical Visitor

Roundtable on Intersectional Practices

With Danielle Kuijten, Mirjam Sneeuwloper, Stevie Nolten, Rachel Somers Miles, Dirk van den Heuvel, Fatma Tanis, Vanessa Vroon-Najem.¹

Moderated by Hester Dibbits and Eliza Steinbock, with the transcription prepared by Tessa VerLoren van Themaat

In the *Critical Visitor* project, we ask how the idea of intersectionality works in museum and archive practice, theory and ethics. The idea of the Field Labs was that workers from the cultural sector, from various areas and with different expertise, would come together in a collaborative manner, to learn from each other in a horizontal setting, to create a professional learning environment in which we reflect on everyday practices and the input from guest speakers and scholarly publications. As a ‘living lab’ the five sessions sought to capture the atmosphere of the last few years, particularly since Black Lives Matter as a global movement has impacted the Dutch cultural sector. The critical visitor is a prefiguration of an activist voice within and against cultural institutions that they have to take into account.

For this round table conversation we invited a range of practitioners from partner institutions to discuss the current climate of cultural preservation, collection, and production and the place of intersectional practices in it. Specifically we asked them to share their thoughts on four main questions related to 1) institutions, 2) intersectionality, 3) the critical visitor, and 4) emotions. The overarching aim for the discussion was to

identify what the main learnings from the Field Lab were, and to formulate a message to your peers and to further audiences.

1 How have institutions, including those you work with directly, been affected by changes wrought in society through social justice movements? How have you interpreted, incorporated, or related to the zeitgeist of decolonizing, queering, and crippling/accessibility practices? What kind of initiatives have been eye-opening and impactful for you, for your institution?

Dirk: For the Nieuwe Instituut it was a very new experience. I don't think the institute has ever participated in field labs like this. The whole *Critical Visitor* project was parallel to other actions to open up both the collection and the museum practices to improve our accessibility and question them. At the beginning you really had to explain to colleagues what was going to happen, but later much more enthusiasm came from participating in the *Critical Visitor* events. It benefited our parallel other activities, namely, the special project *Collecting Otherwise*, led by Setareh Noorani, was very good and is still ongoing. We also participated in Eliza Steinbock's expert meet-ups, the *Archival Interactions*, which was also excellent. Having those parallel trajectories was really helpful for us. The other good thing was the Words Matter book, because the institute participated in several sessions with Wayne and others to make clear how language is important.

Rachel: One of the most impactful things for me was hearing and sharing each other's approaches to trying to make change within the institutions in which we work. It's hard to hear the difficulties others are having within their institutions, but also

encouraging and inspiring to hear the ways that they are trying to affect change there, or their experiences and approaches to navigating directors or the use of particular kinds of language for example. I suppose it's kind of like commiserating in one sense, but it's also sharing tactics, strategies. All of the sessions have spoken to not just our individual experiences of working with institutions, but how to engage with the colleagues around us. That's part of the work that Stevie and I are trying to do at Sound & Vision, thinking through how we might involve other colleagues in this work, especially knowing that everyone comes with different experiences, different levels of knowledge or awareness, different ways of engaging critically.

Danielle: I feel that since Black Lives Matter, the language and awareness of social change is more present in public discourse and in heritage institutions. We see more activists calling out institutions, especially if they see your acts are only an act of window dressing.

Rachel: Some institutes are really leading in productive ways. And other ones do not move because they don't want to make the wrong move.

Danielle: But I feel that there has been a huge push to a broader conversation which was incredibly necessary, and I'm actually very happy that it happened. In certain circles, they've been there already for a long, long time, but now I see initiatives like *Musea Bekennen Kleur* find solid ground with institutions that finally want to make a change.

Stevie: And I think a network like this or a project like this helps to place those questions into a larger framework and to

different settings. You see that they are being asked at institutions too. This project and initiatives like *Musea Bekennen Kleur* illustrate that we are facing similar challenges and that these are not isolated events but systemic injustices. *The Critical Visitor* can function like a formalized network: a place where you can critically reflect on the practical problems in your working field, but also how to put intersectionality into practice. Often these concepts of radical equality or feminism, anti-racism or intersectionality, get commodified into a black square to post on social media. The work should not stop there. The work should actually contribute to a more equal society. Even though we bring these concepts into the institutional walls, I think we still need people from these social justice movements to remind us what it's actually about. This also means that we include these voices and take their critique to heart.

Danielle: There is the danger, something that we have to be constantly aware of, that some activists are more vocal than others. Thinking back to our discussions of togetherness and solidarity, we should consider those who are not there yet, have yet to find their voice to be present in public space. How can we have an eye on that and not just see the activists for the marginalized groups that have found their voice?

Eliza: And whose activism may well look and sound different.

Mirjam: Thank you for bringing this up because it made me reflect on the first speaker during the Field Labs, Eliza Chandler, who discussed disability arts and culture, as well as the evolving discourse on cultural representations of disability. Institutional changes often align with the prevailing spirit of the times, when certain topics gain momentum. It takes someone to introduce

and circulate ideas, much like Eliza Chandler did for disability arts at the funding agency for Canadian artists. While the current focus on empowerment and inspiration is valuable, it appears to be a moment calling for broader actions; decolonization and denormalization, initiatives that are gaining momentum globally and are (hopefully) unstoppable. It is empowering and inspirational. Though a focus on the 'zeitgeist' raises the question of whether institutions might be overlooking something important. Are we neglecting to build upon accessibility projects and collaborations, knowledge from our past? Perhaps our involvement in this project is a contributing factor to this broader transformative process.

2 Bringing the language of intersectionality to heritage spaces is a departure from where it often is used, in legal analysis and sociological studies. This move is a part of power dynamics that might be described as appropriating or liberating, depending on the context. Many of us learned about intersectional thinking in activism, specifically in the lineage of Black feminism activism and theory. How have you approached the question of academic language and translating what you have learned to your team? What do these concepts bring to your organization or your own practices? What kinds of actions or ways of doing practice-based heritage have been developed or implemented as a result of engaging with intersectional approaches?

Vanessa: This question reflects an ongoing struggle. For instance with our *New Narratives* program, we ask people from outside the museum to reflect on our collections and exhibitions, and add their unique perspective and personal stories through *New Narratives* tours. Intersectionality and questions

of power dynamics, historically and today, are recurring themes in these reflections. At the same time, we need to summarize these complexities while communicating the program to a general audience. These tours are advertised by spotlighting one aspect of identity, i.e. being a woman, or queer, or a person of color, while these, of course, can be intersecting aspects of identity. This is a balancing act which we perform in dialogue with our partners and, in this example, our marketing team. It would be easier to find a good solution if there is at least a shared understanding of the meaning of intersectionality within the institute. With our diversity & inclusion team we try to raise awareness in this respect and share knowledge about these concepts, for instance during monthly personnel meetings. We do not work so much by lecturing colleagues but through sharing personal stories and ‘learning by doing’ in the form of workshops. Still, a lack of knowledge, or of personal experience with structural disadvantages, or intersecting diversities in general, means the importance of critical thinking needs to be highlighted again and again, so this is an ongoing process.

Stevie: I had to think a bit about your question about power dynamics. What really pushed the sector to start thinking about intersectionality was the Dutch Ministry formulated *Cultural Diversity Code*. Problematically, this code of conduct has been used so that in order to access public funds it has become mandatory to write about the institute’s DNA in funding applications. Museums that lacked a sense of urgency before to deal with diversity, started to think like: “Oh, we need to do something about this.”² Whether intrinsically motivated or for financial reasons, because institutes are dependent on funding, diversity became a more important topic. But it doesn’t necessarily

touch on why this Code was formulated to begin with, which is that national or nationally-funded museums and archives largely rooted in systemic inequality. The Code itself didn’t fall out of thin air. The critique on the museum sector has been there for a long time.

What does it mean that, for example, this kind of project is co-funded by cultural institutions? What does it mean that certain institutes have the time and space to reflect on these kinds of questions and others can’t? I think that these are also valid things to unravel: “If you want to unravel where the power is, you unravel where the resources are.”

Danielle: In the second Field Lab about intersectional solidarity, I was constantly thinking: how can I make this accessible for my own team? How do I translate these big words and all these big ideas for my team that is busy with daily practice? My question is, not only how do you create critical programs and experiences for our visitors, but also how do we make all these concepts accessible for the team, who come from different places and have different backgrounds? Can we find a common language within which we can work?

Another question I had was that even though Imagine IC is always seen as an example for participatory work and for, in a sense, inclusion, I also know that there’s still a lot of work to do. The Field Labs reaffirmed for me that there are still different aspects that I have to work on. In parallel during this period, we participated in Studio i’s *Queer Baseline* publication that resulted in an article about my organization, which instigated an important conversation about language accessibility, specific

to imagine IC.³ For me complexity is not the same issue as academic language and its potential elitism. I think everybody can deal with complexity, whatever your background is.

Stevie: Intersectional thinking is a hard concept to grasp. Even though many people practice it already, despite never having heard the word, or of Kimberlé Crenshaw, or the Black, migrant, refugee feminist movement here in the Netherlands. But they practice it in their lives, every day. A key aspect of my research concerns positionality, that is, always considering how you bring yourself into your research. My references are not the same as someone else's, but these aspects can add value, or at least should be taken into consideration.

Mirjam: Reflecting on the projects presented and discussed during the Field Labs, I couldn't help but contemplate the absence of institutions in our gatherings that engage in similar work. This brings to mind past cultural practices involving 'critical visitors' before the term gained widespread use. Taking the Amsterdam Museum's history as an example, the *Transmission project* (2014–2016) involved collaboration with various queer and trans communities in Amsterdam. However, immediately following that, we curated the exhibition *1001 Women*. Shifting from discussing gender to a, at first glance, seemingly narrow focus on women was unsatisfying (for me). Yet, we recognized the necessity of the exhibition to address the lack of robust representations of women in our society. Sometimes, less-than-ideal steps are essential to bring the general public along. This prompts a reconsideration of the optimal path forward. This example underscores the non-linearity of intersectional practices. It's more a circular process, with constant exploration in various directions.

Hester: Maybe on an institutional level things are happening, because intersectionality is in the air. But who is doing this work? Especially in larger institutions, I can imagine that now that it is current, there might be management that takes over from curators or people on the floor who have long been developing intersectional projects.

Stevie: This touches on the problem of anonymizing work into a collective, team or speaking as an institution. It is an ethical problem for me to not give credit to someone who's asking two or three critical questions that can change the whole course of thinking. This is something that Rachel and I talked about within Sound & Vision, and we've been pushing for more recognition for this labor since I started working there two years ago. And it's great that now management is on board. But we've been asking for it for two years, and maybe some people already for fifteen years. The decision-making powers decide when the institute is "ready" to take on this work as a shared responsibility. It erases the push from within and also the push from outside.

I have seen such erasure firsthand through my informal network of other people of color working in museums. We texted each other messages like, "this concept is horrible", "this is so racist to her," and asking each other "what should we do?" We would buddy up because then you can see that what is being discussed and the things you are pushing for within your organization is not isolated, but is happening in a wider, systemic way.

Mirjam: There is an aspect that I haven't addressed yet, but it's been weighing on my mind, and I'm uncertain about how to navigate it. It pertains to the issue of 'pretty privilege' within certain manifestations of intersectional approaches.

I'm referring to the privilege associated with conventional notions of beauty and how it operates in our society. To be frank, if I organize a public program with someone who is not only an intellectually critical and inspiring thinker but also brings a unique perspective, along with a photogenic face, I can create an appealing advertisement, attract a sizable audience, and generate satisfaction within the organization. However, if I aim to collaborate with someone equally intelligent, perhaps not known to the larger audience who has a very interesting story to share but doesn't align with conventional standards of attractiveness on platforms like Instagram, challenges arise. The response isn't as positive. I believe this relates to societal perceptions of beauty in the context of difference, diversity, intersectional representation.

Eliza: There is a kind of 'Instagramization' of intersectional activism. Perhaps heritage organizations are trying to avoid getting slaughtered on Twitter, but the decisions made in marketing are also a branding and profiling exercise. I'm glad that you brought this up here because it refers to the matter of selling activism.

3 A grounding point of the Field Labs was the notion of the 'critical visitor'. How do you understand the critical visitor? Has it become a term you use? Does it describe a phenomenon of activism in and outside the institution adequately? What new questions are emerging in your organization that push us to rethink the generative role of the critical visitor? What do you think of being 'critical' or of the importance of criticality in the heritage sector? What language-specific connotations does it have for you?

Stevie: You had me at the word 'critical'. This was all Rachel had to say, and I was roped in. We are a team for Research and Heritage,⁴ so criticality is a big chunk of our work. However, when we talk about criticality within our institution, some colleagues flinch because they find it a negative word or it is something with a negative connotation. But for me this is not the case. I think criticality comes from a place of love because you care. So, you want to critically reflect and try to improve the organization, or improve society through your work; at the least, you are investing your energy in the institution. One of the organizational core values used to be 'happy', and this recently changed to 'multicolored'. However, I'm involved with multiple decolonization research projects and partners asked me, somewhat sarcastically: "how does it work, 'happy' decolonisation?" I think that this is a valid, critical question. Decolonisation is largely about acknowledging colonial history and incorporating how this violent past continues to affect society in the present day. Of course this is going to be uncomfortable, but that is okay, right? We will only get to the happy part if we work through the difficult parts together.

Vanessa: A note on the title of the project, *The Critical Visitor*. I think the visitor perhaps remained implicit. Who is this visitor and who are we? Who do we have in mind? We want to engage new publics by fostering new partnerships, by making changes in personnel, partners, and programming. But at the same time, potentially, this might alienate other visitors who then become critical visitors in their own respect. When the Amsterdam Museum discarded the label 'Golden Age' as a synonym for the seventeenth century, we received an enormous amount of backlash, also from visitors. So it is a balancing act: if you manage to be more accessible and more welcoming and more

representative for some, especially underrepresented groups, how does that affect other sections of visitors who reject that kind of change? Because I think if we say critical visitor we mean underrepresented groups and if you mean underrepresented groups, why not say so? And if you want to welcome underrepresented groups and perspectives, and have multivocality at the heart of your programming, then you need to do the same with staff and partners; they have to become more diverse, too. But like some already mentioned, that is a long process. That is where the ‘happy diversity’ ends and the difficult questions begin. It forces you to deal with resistance, and how to make the underlying concepts mainstream in your institution in such a way that the multiple publics within the institute understand and perhaps are excited about it.

Stevie: ‘Constructive criticism’ implies that critique can be non-constructive, which I don’t agree with. But at the same time, I think disruptiveness is helpful, also for social change. The call for equal treatment and equality (or diversity and inclusion) has come about because people are standing up for their rights in a disruptive way. That happens in the museum, but also outside it. The ‘disruptive’ section is regularly overlooked in the museum. In order to protect the public or the people, the emphasis is often placed on the end result that people like to see: we all get along. The act of taking a stand against injustice and inequality is often erased, and so is the labor that precedes it. I do see it moving more and more to the forefront. I think that our joint mission must therefore always be placed in the perspective of where that call comes from: from society.

Danielle: That friction between us is part of the work. That we are all different takes us further in our thinking and our practices. We don’t always have to reach consensus.

Rachel: It certainly seems like there are many institutions that are acutely aware of a kind of critical visitor, specifically in the context of being fearful of being called out by their audiences and others, of being ‘canceled’. A kind of scared fragility around making, but also not making, any kind of statement or impact or critical engagement with their own practices, lest they say the wrong thing or make the wrong move in any direction.

Vanessa: I am kind of missing the word ‘activism’. We have activists for visitors and they really helped our institution move forward by volunteering their criticism. First, they were invited to criticize but when they thought that we did not act upon that criticism quickly enough, they voiced their criticism outside, for instance the graffiti on the advertisement for our exhibition Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age. That was done by partners that we work with. So I think activism is something we should not overlook when thinking of the critical visitor.

4 Emotions like anger or love, feelings like discomfort or caring were often included in our Field Lab days, if not as a subject then as an experience. How do you understand the emotional labor required of yourself, and/or of the critical visitor? How do you feel about having shared so many emotions with colleagues regarding your daily practices? How do you deal with the recurrent sense of failing at inclusion and diversity work, and the failures of the cultural sector? What kinds of modes of caring are essential to extend to your partners and colleagues?

Vanessa: I see value in a focus on failure because we learn from failure. Although we discussed pitfalls, in general, failure has not been a real focal point. But perhaps before failure comes vulnerability. Because in order to be open about your failure or share your failures, of course, there's always a little bit of regret, shame, and discomfort. One of the things that I struggle with is how do you measure progress? And I don't think we really touched upon that subject. Yes, we all have the sense of purpose and the sense of urgency and the sense of the direction that we want to go. I think that is generally shared, but then the question is, how do you measure your steps? And that is really difficult. Because if you look at the demographic approach, it has lots of thorny issues. How do you do impact research?

Stevie: I found it very refreshing to hear about the insights of the Van Abbemuseum and how they worked, which obstacles they ran into and that it was a long process. It shows that these things take a lot of time: it's a marathon, not a sprint. The conversations that I had during the dinner were just as valuable because I could reflect with peers on emotional labour, what it means to do this kind of work in institutions, labor that is often unseen or not understood.

Vanessa: I was also a happy visitor. You have the opportunity to better understand the institutions that you may have been casually visiting before by being critically taken along in their struggles and decision making. You get to learn about the moment when choices have been made, and then see the final result. And this is necessary encouragement because, like Stevie mentioned, it's not an easy field. And I often feel drained, too. It is indeed a marathon and it's nice to have some pit stops. A way to refresh yourself with likeminded people.

Danielle: The Field Labs gave you time to step out of your own institution, to sit there as a person, and to leave the daily stuff for a moment. I find this quality time a necessary investment: as a person, and then also feeding it back to the workspace.

Rachel: What kind of 'behind-the-scenes' stories might actually help and encourage other visitors to think more deeply about their relationships with cultural heritage spaces, even if they don't work in an institution? Like the failures or the pitfalls? I think the Amsterdam Museum's *New Narratives* program does a good job in providing that sort of self-critical introspection.

Stevie: Do we live in a polarized society? I always find the concept a bit awkward because society is not polarized, rather the society we live in is very unequal and certain people make this more visible. The fear of polarization and taking a position as a museum are very much connected. On the one hand, we find the rhetoric of "we have to do something with diversity and inclusion", and we now know that it is important to have many different people involved with heritage-making. But at the same time, we also find it scary to explicitly challenge the norm. If you take a clear position as an institution, for example about the Golden Coach, it also means that some people cannot (or no longer) agree with the message that you tell as a museum.

Criticality from outside is seen as something really scary; people are scared that as an institute you might be 'canceled', whatever that means, if you take an active stance on certain topics, especially societal injustices. Hopefully as a sector, we learn to welcome criticality from outside of our institutional walls and develop ways to incorporate this in our work, instead of reacting in fragility or in defensiveness. This is why I really

like curators or directors taking accountability for the choices they make. Being vulnerable and transparent to your public is just as important as being vulnerable in your network or to your colleagues.

Vanessa: But we still have a financial model in which we need to earn 25% of the budget ourselves. We also need to keep our eyes on the broad public to meet that demand.

Stevie: I get that. But in such a polarized society, what is the place and role of the museum? Is the museum at the center of society? Or is the museum above society? Do you want to be a forerunner and explicitly propagate certain values and set a standard? Be safely in the middle of the pack, or maybe you don't want to change anything at all. I think that as a sector we regularly fight with ourselves about what the role of the museum is; the possibilities for fulfilling a social role differ greatly per museum.

Mirjam: Sometimes, it's not about fearing polarization. I've observed that the actions taken can be complicated for audiences who might not perceive the inequality or recognize they are part of that system. There are individuals (activists) who are critical, actively contributing to the dialogue and holding you (as an institution as well as a person) accountable. They anticipate swift implementation of improvements based on their critical reflections. However, if the broader public hasn't reached that level of awareness and you adopt a gradual approach to change, dissatisfaction arises. I believe it's this sense of discomfort that we must navigate.

Vanessa: I do agree. And my position is that as an institute we are not only in the middle of it because we are part of society. If you look at the new ICOM definition of the museum, we have aspirations to be a player in that field. At the same time, we are a collection of individuals working in a place with different positions and different views. And the same goes for our partners. An example we presented in our Field Lab was an exhibition that received criticism from some long-term partners: *Tourist Attraction Number One*. It showed that you can work with different societal partners who are polarized on a certain issue themselves. The artist had a different appreciation of Amsterdam's red-light district than the activists for sex worker rights, who protested the exhibition in front of our museum every Friday, until it closed. So how do you deal with that, when emotions run high, both as museum professionals and as an institute as a whole? How to bridge different positionalities and points of view? That is definitely a work in progress, and sometimes we fail. You cannot always make all sides happy. So yes, you need to take a stance, take a position, but also explain that position.

Mirjam: I'd like to mention the pressure to respond quickly and with confidence, resulting in limited space to be humble and insecure. This dynamic can foster an internal work environment where there's little room for making a mistake or owning it or consciously opting for a different approach. For instance, in our education and public engagement efforts, we adhere to standards for audio guides. While we understand the 'professional way', our desire to collaborate with communities on new tours often yields different outcomes. Audiotours with 'non-professional partners' may deviate from the old professional standard and might be perceived as amateurish or even 'failures', based

on specific criteria used to apply. Yet, these perceived failures (which they are not) are beneficial as they signal change.

Fatma: I'm just thinking about the term 'mistake'. I think I would want to add to it the qualifying words of being a harmful or harmless mistake.

Dirk: In some moments, it's a cliché, but in general institutions or people often feel they cannot make mistakes. There is a fear of making mistakes and therefore we see avoidant behavior. Somehow there should be some space for people to allow themselves but also others to make a mistake, or have disappointing results. A bit of tolerance is useful. It is troubling that all of us have to be personally super perfect, meeting the highest possible ethical standards all the time, while at the same time those standards often seem to shift, in time, or context. Especially in terms of the inclusion factor that is sometimes stifling or scaring people. That is why the baseline is that we do what we all are able to, and you try to make a next step.

Rachel: I'm thinking about the importance of doing my best to ensure the safety of the people I work with, especially those from outside who I bring in to collaborate on projects that are embedded within the institution in which I work. I'm protective of these collaborators, not because they are 'my contacts', but because I don't necessarily trust other colleagues to not do or say something that could be harmful to them. There's a small handful of people within the institution who I implicitly trust to offer the kind of care I'd like to see extended, that's deeply attuned to the fact that we are usually asking collaborators to do emotional labor in the context of our projects. Even in production tasks as simple as booking travel and accommodations for

speakers or collecting payment details for fees; there needs to be a certain kind of emotional care.

Vanessa: This is a very important question. Who are institutional partners and who are personal contacts? I'm also very protective of my network. I'm working on a procedure aimed at facilitating a safe transfer of personal contacts so they can become institutional contacts, and to make sure that there are measures in place to safeguard that these contacts are also emotionally cared for. It takes building trust, which is related to care, and to being mindful of equity and reciprocity. But again, that is a work in progress.

Method

solidarity

How Countless Little Stories Shape (our) History

add-and-stir

critical/-ity

gender and sexuality

colonialism

shadow stories

diversity thinking

art history

How Countless Little Stories Shape (our) History

Shivan Shazad

After a walk through the galleries of various Dutch museums, you may be forgiven for thinking that our (art) history is relatively linear and unambiguous. Many museums still tend to present history as the sum of various historical facts and events, with the great narrative – a resounding victory, the longest or most violent war, epics centring on powerful white men, or tales of influential styles and male painters – often prevailing. Take the Rijksmuseum's William Rex Gallery,¹ lined with paintings of war fleets and naval battles and portraits of admirals such as Michiel de Ruyter, with a giant model of a Dutch warship called the William Rex taking centre stage. In this gallery, the 17th Century is presented as a century of violence on water, something that researcher, writer, and curator Liang-Kai Yu was quick to notice when he walked through the Rijksmuseum's Gallery of Honour, causing him to wonder what had happened to all the other stories from the Golden Age.²

Masculinity and history

History consists of countless stories that are complex, overlapping, and contradictory rather than sequential and unambiguous. Taken together, they form a bigger picture. According to Liang-Kai Yu, we need 'shadow stories' from history to tell a bigger story that pays more attention to systematic exclusion and oppression. These are the stories of groups that do not fit within the 'masculine framework' of the great narrative. Today,

museums are increasingly freeing up space for these different, more personal stories in history. They do so on their own initiative or because they are prompted by funding bodies, partners, or social debate. The Rijksmuseum developed a multilayered perspective on the history of Dutch slavery and Indonesia's struggle for independence in two recent major exhibitions, *Slavery* (2021) and *Revolusi!* (2022). In the case of *Slavery*, the curators deliberately chose to tell the history of slavery from ten different, more personal perspectives and show how these true stories were interconnected. The museum also added complementary & Slavery labels to 77 paintings and objects for one year, exploring their relationship with slavery.^{3 4}

Add new histories and stir?

Multiple historical narratives are needed for a more complex, richer understanding of history as a great narrative and to explain this complexity to the public. Is the *add new histories and stir* approach sufficient, however? Does simply adding new stories solve the problem of structural inequality that is inherent in historical practice? The feminist and philosopher Sandra Harding⁵ raised a similar question, asking whether *add women and stir* was the solution to the gender gap in science and technology. Harding observed that a quantitative increase in the number of women in scientific institutions failed to change the social norms and structures specific to scientific practice. To achieve this, knowledge must be produced in a different way. I am reminded of this as I walk through the galleries of the Singer Museum in Laren for *The New Woman*.⁶ The exhibition showcases 70 works created by women or depicting women who, each in their way, fought for greater freedom of movement and emancipation. The historical period spans the first feminist wave (1880–1950), a period of great social change for women in the Netherlands.

The New Woman is organised around such themes as 'activism', 'key figures', 'creative geniuses' and 'motherhood'. While this is a wonderful exhibition with stories of unknown women for the most part, I cannot help but feel that the male epic has made way for female epics. Questions about the origins of economic, political, and social inequality between men and women are answered to a lesser extent. The exhibition does highlight how women were excluded from universities, professions, and/or art institutions but fails to explain what caused this gender inequality and why there was social support for this. Did the men and families in these women's lives always implicitly agree with this state of affairs? According to Harding (1995, p. 298)⁷, studying stories about women without taking account of the social relations they are part of poses a risk: "Studying only women explains little about how gender relations are organised, and why they are so differently organised in societies [...] their lives, like men's, are not understandable unless situated within the gender relations they have."

Harding sees gender as a symbolic system of social stratification that produces stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, such as the idea that all women automatically prefer motherhood because of their biology. Adding female stories to history does not change this symbolic system of gender inequality within history and in museums. This only occurs when the standards by which history as a science conducts its research changes. History is studied through objects, among others. If we want to make room for shadow stories, we need to choose objects that tell personal and relational stories. How did these skippers live with each other, how did they deal with illnesses and care for each other, but also with things like camaraderie, love or sex? In the context of a gallery that focuses on

the 17th Century and shipping, this means including the personal letters that mariners sent to their families about life and relationships at sea.

Invisible decision-making processes

A second more general problem with *add histories and stir* is that this does not clarify why some stories are told and others are not. Who makes this decision? Within the Rijksmuseum, we set up *Women of the Rijksmuseum*. This working group focuses on a new female perspective on the collection through a four-year research programme. Support for this research programme is strong inside and outside the museum. Gender equality is an essential theme in (art) history, in the diversity debate, and in politics today. The museum also established a queer working group a year ago, but it does not have the same clout yet. It is less organised, has a less extensive network inside and outside the organisation, and has fewer financial resources. This shows how financial resources, a good network, support, and being well-organised all play a role in which stories are told in museum galleries. More often than not, these organisational politics remain invisible to the public and outsiders. Adding complexity to a great narrative also requires more transparency and an explanation of the choices made in the design of museum galleries.

The infinity of diversity thinking

A third problem is the issue of diversity. How do you ensure sufficient diversity in an exhibition on women? These are also historical stories about women of colour and women who were attracted to the same sex. But the issue of targets within the diversity debate is also relevant. How do you make space for diversity within the groups for which these targets were

intended? The problem with targets, however well intended they may be in an attempt to rectify historically grown inequality, is that they leave very little margin for how people identify themselves. Like history, identities are complex, rich, and layered, varying depending on the relationship and context.⁸ Moreover, groups are assigned a category that they did not choose themselves. Who stands to benefit from this then? A recent study by anthropologists Rana & King (2022) on diversity in the cultural sector shows that cultural institutions see targets as ‘symbolic violence’. Persons of colour are categorised once again, much like enslaved people were during slavery.⁹ In addition, there is always a risk that boards of governors and supervisory boards use these target figures to report on their diversity policies to funding bodies, among others. This, in turn, may give rise to a negative policy incentive, which is then adopted by managers in organisations for hiring employees, potentially resulting in a tick-off culture.

How many different ‘shadow stories’ does it take to change history as a scientific discipline? And when do you have enough stories for a better understanding of the complexity of history? There is no such thing as an endpoint in diversity thinking. Diversity thinking makes space for as many different stories as possible, both in history and the workplace. This thinking is characterised by an emphasis on individual differences and identities. In the long run, however, this may neutralise structural inequality because all identities are considered equally relevant within diversity thinking¹⁰ at the expense of a shared struggle against power and oppression and for solidarity and justice. According to postcolonial and transnational feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, diversity thinking is the outcome of a postmodern discourse in which emphasis has shifted to

difference in the sense of *individual identity differences* rather than social-economic inequality. According to Mohanty, making space for local, personal histories is not the end goal but the key to a larger overarching narrative of exclusion. All these small, personal shadow stories together expose a larger story of power and privilege. Solidarity promotes a better understanding of these structural exclusionary mechanisms: by acquiring knowledge and making space for the stories of others and understanding how these stories are connected: “In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 505).

Promoting more solidarity is one of my missions as diversity & inclusion manager. At the Rijksmuseum, I work with a group of passionate diversity and inclusion ambassadors. The group currently consists of 15 employees from different departments with different levels of seniority. These ambassadors are my eyes and ears in the workplace and organise activities to make space for perspectives and stories other than the norm, such as during Ketj Koti or Pride. Recently, we discussed whether there is enough diversity within the group. Are all voices in the workplace adequately represented? This is an interesting question because this group is already tremendously diverse, including employees of different ages, genders, skin colours, sexual preferences, genders, cultural backgrounds, and neurodiversity. So, how many different identities do you need?

The outside history that is inside our history

Classifying people based on a single identity also shifts the weight of emphasis to this single, fixed identity. According to cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall, this is the theory

of essentialism (2009, p. 56)¹¹, whereby a single aspect of a person’s identity becomes the essence of this person. Hall describes how people start living in line with the political categories imposed on them in his quest for his identity as a Jamaican immigrant in Britain. Hall only became aware of his race when attending university in 1950s England. Identity politics thus create a double standard for individuals from marginalised groups, both externally and internally. Take immigrants who are forced to leave their country because of same-sex attraction. They may not identify as homosexuals but are forced to come out when they apply for asylum in the Netherlands. As such, their homosexual identity becomes their new identity and essence in the Netherlands. Ultimately, this double standard undermines solidarity for other identities and experiences by reducing people to well-defined categories and groups. Solidarity requires developing empathy for the injustice done to others. This is not about wanting to underscore your own or group identity but understanding how you are part of a bigger narrative of power, privilege, and exclusion.

The importance of solidarity

By making space for solidarity, museums operate a change in the great, masculine, historical narrative of the upper social strata that prevail within museums. This implies recognising power and privilege when studying and describing history. Whose history is told in museums? Which objects are used to narrate this history and which objects and stories are left out? According to Hall, there is no such thing as a national history unless it also includes all the shadow stories that are intrinsically linked to it:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been



there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth [...] Where does it come from? Ceylon - Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English.¹²

I stand before Isaac Israëls's painting *The Coffee Bean Sorters* (1893-1894)¹³ at the Singer Laren. In it, women sit at long tables sorting coffee beans. The wall label next to the painting states that Israëls wanted to show how widespread and invisible women's labour was in the Netherlands at the time. The text states that they are sorting Indonesian coffee beans but fails to mention their origin. I wonder who the women *and* men were who picked these beans daily on coffee plantations in the Dutch East Indies. What were their lives like? Who were the plantation owners? How did these beans find their way to the Netherlands? And can you even develop a history of mass industrial employment of women without taking the overseas coffee economy that prompted this mass labour into account? While practising and presenting history in this way may be more time-consuming, it ultimately ensures that museums tell a more comprehensive, layered, and transparent historical story.

demodernising the collection

Practising Ideas or,
How Decolonial Thinking
Slowly Gave Form to the
Collection Presentation
of the Van Abbemuseum

colonialism

critical / -ity

systemic injustices

modernity

art history

power relations

Practising Ideas or, How Decolonial Thinking Slowly Gave Form to the Collection Presentation of the Van Abbemuseum

Charles Esche

As part of addressing the question of museum practice, this text looks at the Van Abbemuseum's problematic history as a museum of modern art. Taking the tenets of decolonial theory as a starting point for thinking, it tries to show how an extended team in the museum and outside applied the theories to a rather canonical western modern art collection and its public exhibition. In doing so, I trust that the idea emerges of how a twentiethcentury art museum, one that originated in the heart of the colonial system, can begin to build relations with the plural and changing society around it. This text thus serves as both a consideration of how practice matters and an invitation to experience for yourself the exhibition *Delinking and Relinking* that runs at the Van Abbemuseum from 2021 to 2026.

What is the problem with modernity?

Modern art is connected to the more overarching idea of 'modernity'. This concept has many meanings but essentially defines the period from 1492 onwards when mostly western Europeans sought to free themselves from what they saw as mediaeval superstition and strict social hierarchies. They wanted the right to become individuals who could control the course of their lives and realise their desires. They understood themselves to be inventing a new kind of rational human society, though in practice modern men sat at the top of a hierarchy of freedom under which people of colour, women,

queer communities and many others were excluded or simply erased. Importantly, these modern ideas were forged in the encounters with other peoples as part of the colonial occupations that began when Columbus set sail for the ‘New World’ in 1492. In that sense, the modern cannot be separated from the colonial and the religious and intellectual systems that built the transatlantic slave trade or the massacre of indigenous peoples and the destruction of their cultures. The devastation produced by colonialism was justified by the idea of superior European cultural and scientific understanding that should determine all relations between life on this planet. It stood for a universal path towards truth, enlightenment and peace that originated and was formed by the specific experience of the western European elites. In this way, coloniality-modernity formed the basis for the current form of patriarchy and capitalism and constructed its ideas of freedom and justice in order to serve its own needs.

This understanding of modernity is at the basis of the decolonial approach that has guided the exhibition *Delinking and Relinking* and the choices made to show artworks and supporting material from the museum collection in its gallery spaces. In decolonial terms, it is possible to speak of a colonial-modern matrix of power that laid claim to a superior belief system that should define the world because it offered it the best possible future, while being built on racial injustice, the oppression of others and the destruction of the planet.¹ Modern ideas were accompanied by a belief in scientific rationality as an objective way to understand the world and eventually by national democratic sovereignty as an efficient way to organise power. Such apparently ‘neutral’ or ‘rational’ systems helped modernity to embrace a self-critical culture in which much of substance could be argued about passionately if the basic

colonial-modern values remained in place. One could therefore understand the history of the twentieth century as a series of attempts to complete the process of becoming modern begun by Columbus and Cortés. Modern reformers and revolutionaries sought to share the benefits of freedom and sovereignty with the individuals who were originally excluded from it. This set up the modern struggle between the political left and right through which both sides claimed to have a liberating agenda – one as a route to freedom through eliminating systemic inequality, private property, as well as racism, sexism, and other prejudices; the other through liberating each human’s potential to find individual happiness on their own terms and without the intervention of the state or collective interests. In this way, the great political struggles in the twentieth century were always struggles about who could bring more modernity into the world and each side rarely questioned the objective of becoming modern as a shared ambition, nor understood the dependence of modern forms of society on the colonial system of power and the oppression of excluded others.

The positive idea of freedom for initially white men and then gradually for more and more diverse human identities might still seem attractive, but its destructive sides have become more and more apparent in recent decades. Most obviously, the idea of granting freedom to all people is still very unfinished and seems to be beyond reach. Whenever steps towards greater emancipation are taken, there are always reactions that set the trajectory back by years or decades. Movement towards universal social justice has been painfully slow at best. Equally, the idea that all humans must eventually reach the level of consumption of Europe or North America confronts a finite world that refuses to bear the degree of exploitation required. Even

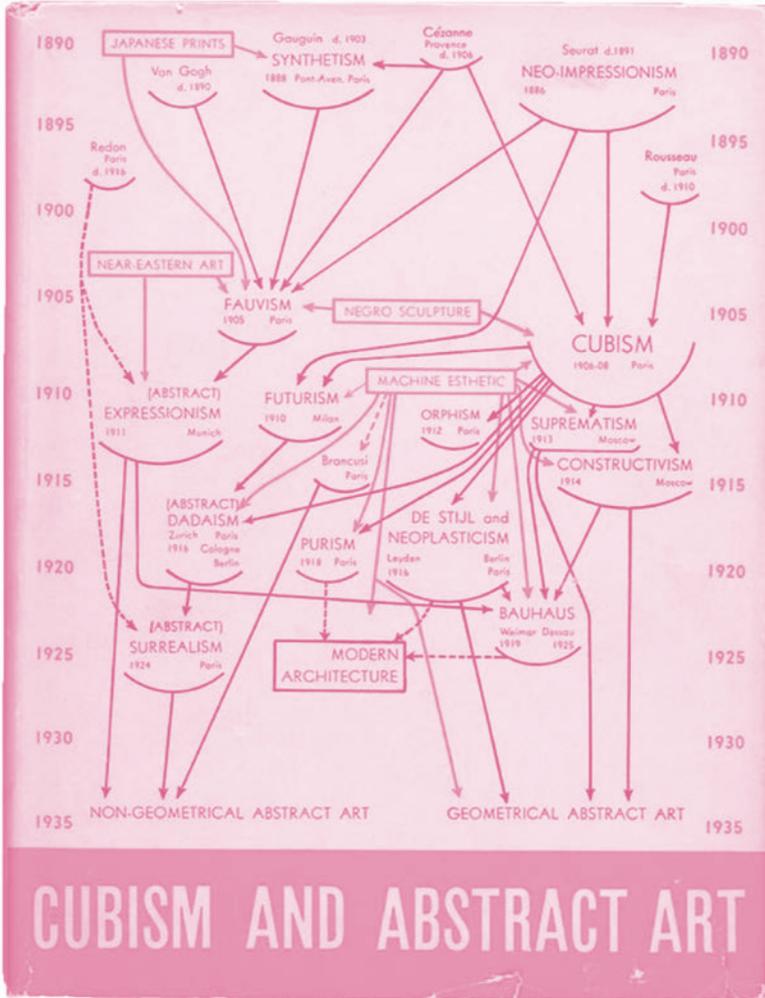
more fundamentally, modernity presumes human progress to be the final conquest and an efficient exploitation of all life and resources on earth rather than humans as part of and in relation to a world that exists beyond their needs.

Within this totalising world view, art has a particular role that makes it one of the areas within modern thinking that arguably has the greatest potential to change the mindset and open itself to other ways of understanding and cultivating worldly relations. While the creators of modernity in Europe imagined the universal human to be people like them, with their bodies and their scientific rationality, culture, and morality, art and artists were tolerated as mild but important exceptions to this rule. In this process, so much intelligence and insight outside the modern was declared ‘primitive’, ‘irrational’, ‘feminine’, ‘ungodly’ or ‘undeveloped’ and so forth, yet art was permitted a limited space to be some of those things for itself. It was a way to save ways of thinking that would otherwise have been fully erased like so much else under modernity’s hegemony. In this way, art could be seen as an exception that proved the rule of the modern and an autonomous area that could make up its own rules, though that was under the condition that its influence was limited to its own field and it had no voice in decisions that were essential to the survival of the colonial-modern matrix of power. Nevertheless, it is perhaps this license to be irrational or ‘undeveloped’ that art and art museums can use today to question colonial and modern ways of being in the world. Within a modern state as the Netherlands, the space museums could occupy is perhaps more precious than ever. From within the Van Abbemuseum, we call our work with the collection as a demodernising process that tries to give voice to ways of extending the public imagination of the world as seen from

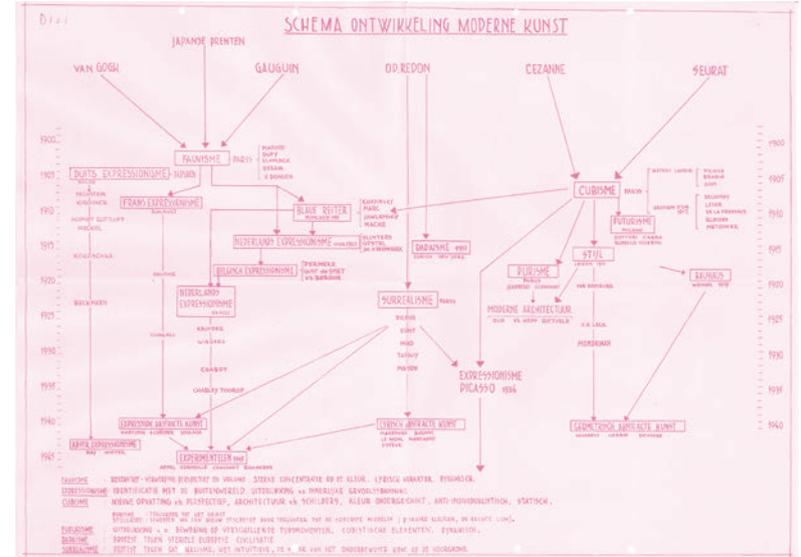
north-western Europe, as well as a way to create space for voices that have been marginalised in the process of imposing coloniality-modernity.

Van Abbemuseum as a home of modern art in a Dutch provincial city

In art historical terms, modern art was a late flowering of the socially critical ideas that emerged within modernity itself. Modernism in art began in the mid-nineteenth century as a radical aesthetic movement that also aimed to establish artists as sovereign creators and emancipate them from the role of artisans working on demand for patrons and collectors. The Van Abbemuseum started some years later as a museum of art established in 1936. Henri van Abbe’s wealth was based on plantation grown tobacco imported from the former Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) and turned into cigars in a number of factories including a head office and large factory in Eindhoven. There are traces of our founder’s connection to the colonies in some of the works in the collection but until ten years ago they were never made public. While Henri van Abbe’s collection was not obviously ‘modern’ in the narrow sense that it was full of cubist or abstract artworks, it was a collection of its own time. That policy was maintained and refined after 1945 by Edy de Wilde, the director who convinced the majority of the city council to commit to twentieth century art based on works that were aesthetically experimental and ‘ahead of their time’ (*or avant-garde*) in relation to the taste and comprehension of the majority. To support his argument De Wilde used a diagram of modern art developments similar to that drawn by Alfred Barr for the Museum of Modern Art in New York and from that time onwards, the Van Abbemuseum remained strongly influenced by the way modern art was defined internationally, above all in Paris and New York.



Alfred Baar, cover of catalogue "Cubism and Abstract Art", Museum of Modern Art New York, 1936.



Edy de Wilde, report to Eindhoven City Council, 1956.

That early decision to be a modern and aesthetically radical art museum was sometimes a source of discomfort for city councillors because it appeared removed from the taste and expectations of many people in Eindhoven. However, they remained broadly supportive of the museum, its collection and exhibitions throughout the years. The support from the city council and national foundations might also partly be explained by the rhetoric of freedom in the US-allied part of Europe during the Cold War. Free art and its right to unintelligibility for the majority could be justified as the West's toleration of a broad range of aesthetic languages in contrast to the Soviet system of artistic control and punishment of undesirable forms and ideas. This gave artists a license to experiment in the name of democracy and the health of a free society. This political role was further strengthened by broad recognition at the level of western governments on the need for pluralism and even of art's value as a non-scientific or non-rational worldview. This enthusiastic attitude towards modern art is found across the American Central Intelligence Agency and in state funded journals and commentary as well as the old principle of arm's-length government funding.

As part of this larger background, modern art found a place for itself in the industrial city of Eindhoven and has relied on the relatively stable public support ever since. As the economic and political crises beginning in the 1970s unfolded, modern art began a self-critical process familiar to modern philosophy since Kant. Out of this long process, responses to the exclusions and inadequacies of modern art included institutional critique, post-modernism and eventually global or alter-modernism. These movements are well represented in the collection from the return to painting in the 1970s to the

emergence of video, performance and relational art. Seen from a decolonial perspective, these challenges to the classic modern art narrative appear much more attached to modern art's basic understanding of art and society than was recognised at the time. The end of communist rule in Europe in 1989 had a slow but consistent impact on Western European culture and its infrastructure of publicly funded institutions. The protection the Cold War offered for free artistic expression as well as the perceived difficulty or irrationality of modern art for a general public gradually weakened support for the original rationales of state funding once the ideological battle was spent. In their place came financial motivations, above all tourist incomes, and the expansion of the creative economy justified public funding.

More recently, contemporary art has been used to identify art that takes advantage of a wide diversity of forms, media and geographies. As technology and travel connected artists more easily, artistic communities in East Europe, and later in Asia, South America and Africa began to be included in major biennales and international exhibitions as well as become part of the artistic narrative. The name 'modern art' began to be replaced by 'contemporary art' as a signifier of something different and more reflective of a new world order. Works from the international exhibitions and from a wider geographic range have also been added to the collection over the past fifteen years. This shift from modern to contemporary has been important for art but, again from a decolonial perspective, it did not yet shake up the categories of art, craft, design, ethnography, fetish, traditional culture, community art etc. that have shaped the idea of culture and the divisions between museum collections in the Netherlands and other European states. Beginning on such a decolonising journey will be a long one and will need

profound changes to the identity of the museum and what it does both locally and internationally. However, every journey starts with the first few steps and it is with an approach we call ‘demodernising’ that we choose to begin.

Demodernising art in Europe

Learning from decolonial scholars like Walter D. Mignolo, María Lugones and Rolando Vázquez Melken asks us in the museum to question the nature of modern and contemporary art and the broader concept of modernity as it has been understood in art museums up to now.² If modernity has been the cornerstone of this museum, then questioning it means rethinking the way the collection is shown and celebrated and repurposing some familiar activities. For us, understanding that the world in general needs to decolonise to respond to the challenges of the twenty-first century, we arrive at a proposal to demodernise the inherited understanding of art and culture. It is important that this process of demodernising recognises the aesthetic and imaginative achievements of modern artists: without their insights in time, space and seeing, we would be unable to look at our western selves with any critical eye. We share the desire of many modern artists to create a world that is more equitable and socially just, we can relive their passions and hopes through the collection, and we want to continue sharing their ideals. The question is how to continue that legacy in a changed world and how to add the voices of those cultures and peoples that were erased or excluded by modernity?

The task of demodernising is one that falls on European museums, but it is crucial that it is done in the name of decolonialising and with an understanding of how the latter is the primary goal. In other words, the urge to demodernise comes

out of a recognition of colonial oppression and its relation to the modern and not as a self-critical framework that ignores that exploitative and destructive side. Our embrace of the demodern position is a way to help Europeans come to terms with their place in a decolonising world, through reshaping the place art occupies in modern society and reconnecting it to peoples and histories that it has wilfully ignored for too long.

A demodernising museum

In concrete terms, the idea of demodernising the collection is worked out in the museum’s collection displays such as *The Making of Modern Art* (2017) or *Delinking and Relinking* (2021) with their plurivocal and multisensory approaches as well as in the tours and guides that accompany our museum visitors on their route through the artworks in the collection. The demodern approach addresses relations rather than individuals. It looks at the artists, artworks, the places they worked and the people they encountered as part of a story that art can tell about its creation and the environments to which it was responding. Equally demodernising means looking at the diversity and complexity of the museum’s possible users and viewers and attending to their requirement in order that they can experience the artworks and the stories around them. Two examples from the start of the exhibition *Delinking and Relinking* can serve to illustrate the approach. In the first room on the ground floor, the relationship between two pairs of artists unfolds. A remarkable painting by Wifredo Lam, a Cuban artist of colour, *The Bird Seller* from 1962 takes centre stage with a Picasso from 1943 slightly displaced in the corner. Touch replicas of both works are present, developed together with blind and partially sighted artists and visitors. A vitrine built into the unit presenting Lam’s work tells the story of the relations between Lam, Picasso and

Aimé Césaire, to whom Picasso was introduced by Lam and whose poems he later illustrated. In the other corner of the room, a sculpture and its shadows by the Argentinian artist Alicia Penalba stand opposite her teacher Ossip Zadkine, a Russian artist living and working in Paris. As with Lam, the complexities of modernist art's engagement with non-Europeans, with migration, colonialism and imperialism is core to the difficult relations between Zadkine and Penalba, who pushed her work in an abstract direction that met Zadkine's disapproval. In both of these cases, the exhibition takes canonical European modern artists and shows their engagement with other geographies and histories, raises a question about the limits of their work, and questions the way mainstream art history has canonised and excluded certain relationships, travels and types of artists.

If these rooms suggest modes for demodernising the collection through including multisensory objects and different narrative turns, the work with what we call 'constituencies' or groups that have a specific reason for working with the museum is equally part of our process. Rather than the modern assumption of visitors as bringing with them a certain context in terms of class, education, ethnicity etc, we want to listen to a diversity of potential users of the museum and share their responses to the works with everyone else. Facilitating the museum to speak with a plurality of voices is crucial to opening up to new dialogues and connections that can allow decolonial thinking to flourish. In the current presentation, we have structured this mainly through different audio tours. Showing the diversity of what art might mean to different people is a key motivation for making this exhibition and those of us working in the museum are searching for further ways to show how the changing understandings of what art was, is and might become is reflected



Installation view of "Proud Rebels" room in
Delinking and Relinking, Van Abbemuseum 2021
(Artists Sanja Iveković, patricia kaersenhout and
Marlene Dumas).

in the collection. This often brings us to connect with stories about the museum that have not been seen as very relevant until now, such as the roots of the museum's foundation in the tobacco plantations of Sumatra and Java or the active artistic programme in favour of National Socialist ideology during the Second World War.

Demodernising the collection also goes beyond the museum's own history and explores how artworks are connected to much broader social and political activities and events which they reflect on, document, or try to resist. The idea of modern art is often associated with artistic autonomy, meaning artists should be free to express themselves and exist independent of society or government. While this might be desirable in the abstract, it has always been a polite fiction because art is always produced under certain circumstances and with the approval of financial and cultural patrons, be they public bodies, academies, businesses, or private collectors. All play a major part in determining what counts as art and what does not, and artists cannot not make the rules for themselves - though they sometimes break the ones that do apply to them and find ways to establish new criteria. Interestingly, this rarely happens through individual effort but more usually in communities of artists who join in a collective push to change the boundaries of what is acceptable. Artistic and individual autonomy is therefore something a demodern museum needs to question and this exhibition tries to show how artists were shaped by their environments and how the idea of modern art was quite exclusive and inhospitable to people who do not easily fit into its criteria. That exclusion included women, people of colour, and differently abled bodies for much of its history though there were always important exceptions that allowed things to change. Nevertheless, it is

important to note how the only loans from another collection in this exhibition are from the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam and Leiden. The division between colonial or ethnographic collections and art collections is one of the most obvious ways in which the culture of colonising and colonised peoples was separated and a hierarchy between modern and primitive; art and craft was established.

Rewriting narratives and extending the sensory conditions of access required a huge collaborative work. It asked for a new level of openness of the traditional curatorial position, one that would be prepared to change the selection of works based on discussions with constituencies ranging from the Office for Queer Affairs to an inspired group of people with different abilities and to researchers into colonial histories. In decolonial terms, this process is called delinking and relinking, where the old mesh topology that held the modern narrative in place is cut and the loose connectors are rewired to other nodes that enable a new story to emerge. That new story is hopefully more sensitive and attentive to the society around it and to the changes in political and aesthetic expectation coming from a more diverse public. The aim and the hope of delinking and relinking is to build unexpected relations that people visiting the museum can take with them in their thoughts. They point towards a plurality of possibilities for life and earth in the past and present so that we can as individuals reshape how we act and behave in the futures to come. That is, in the end, one of the most meaningful goals of art: to imagine the world otherwise and, by imagining, to make positive change possible.

- 1 The term 'colonial matrix of power' is taken from Walter Mignolo and his fundamental theoretical construction of decoloniality. See for instance Walter D. Mignolo. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- 2 See for instance Rolando Vázquez Melken. *Vistas of Modernity*. Jap Sam Books, 2020.

A series of horizontal pink lines for writing notes. There are 20 lines in total. Two diagonal pink lines cross the horizontal lines, one from the bottom-left to the top-right, and another from the top-left to the bottom-right, creating a grid-like structure for notes.

Method

community-
based zine
workshops

Get Crafty! Get Curious!
On Cut and Paste
Practices at IHLIA LGBTI
Heritage

emotions

gender and sexuality

institutionality

shadow stories

intergenerational archive

hands-on

Get Crafty! Get Curious! On Cut and Paste Practices at IHLIA LGBTI Heritage

James Parnell and Jim van Geel, interviewed by Eliza Steinbock¹

James Parnell is a Hague-based curator, facilitator, dancer, and zinester who focuses on community building, collective learning, and the conflicts that arise in these practices. He often works in cultures and artistic communities on the margins, such as queer communities, Black communities, and independent publishers. He also works with the body, sharing and investigating embodied knowledge. Through the Dutch ballroom scene, he explores movement, energy, and emotions that are socially unacceptable, particularly for Black men, trans people, and people of color.²

Jim van Geel is a curator and writer based in Amsterdam. He is the Coordinator Public Program at the Rijksakademie and Curator of Public Program at the Young Design team of the Design Museum in Den Bosch. Previously he worked as Curator of Public Program at IHLIA LGBTI Heritage, Europe's Largest LGBTQI+ archive based in Amsterdam.

Eliza: I'd like to start with your personal positioning and background. How have you been involved with IHLIA LGBTI Heritage, and, who are you preexisting to and outside of that context?

James: My name is James Parnell. I started doing workshops with IHLIA around 2018–2019. But outside of that I mostly work as a freelance event organizer and curator in The Hague and

Rotterdam. I do community-based workshops, or other methodologies to build communities that I'm a part of, such as the ballroom scene. In my small-scale projects I'm always thinking of ways that I can use some of the resources that I have access to for these communities.

Jim: I'm Jim and I started working for IHLIA around March 2019 for about 2.5 years. My position there originally was called '*medewerker doelgroepen en activiteiten*' (employee working on target groups and activities). Which I thought just didn't have a nice ring to it. Eventually, I negotiated to change it to be coordinator Public Program. James' workshop was one of the first events I got to do there actually. It was not actually programmed by me, but on the invitation of the Queer Black Archive co-founders, Julian Isenia and Naomie Pieter in the framework of their exhibition *Nos Tei* (Papiamentu/o for 'we are here' or 'we exist') (running 12 July - 4 September 2019) at IHLIA LGBTI Heritage. *Nos Tei* was a response and addition to the exhibition *With Pride* by IHLIA (2018-2019). The exhibition *With Pride* showcased themes from forty years of Dutch LGBTI struggle and received some critique. Activists pointed out that the exhibition failed to include stories of racialized groups and people of colour in the Netherlands.³ *Nos Tei* was a step towards a more inclusive LGBTI history. James and I knew each other already from a workshop project that we did in Rotterdam years prior. But it worked so well within the IHLIA framework, that we continue doing them.

Eliza: James, why did you accept this invitation from Julian and Naomie? For instance, did it make sense considering the two things you mentioned that were important to you, being

community building and also making use of resources available from an organization?

James: I had known both of them from The Hague, and also trusted them. I love doing the workshops to see how different communities can express themselves or archive things that may not historically be archived. It felt like a really perfect fit, and it was one of my favorite workshops because it was super fun and the energy was really nice. There were different age groups, which was exciting and really inspiring. So, I felt really thankful for the opportunity.

Eliza: Jim, did you join as a participant, or as a curator of the public program?

Jim: I joined most of them as a participant, I would say.

Eliza: So what was the setup? Did you talk about what you wanted to do or was it more like you assembled certain things and then went for it? Tell me about how you decided to bring the zine-making workshop into *Nos Tei*, and then to other moments in IHLIA.

Jim: The intergenerational *Nos Tei* workshop was really fully Julian and Naomie's idea. What we did with the first zine workshop is that we had basically like 2 selections of materials, one was a selection of material that were all doubles from the archive, mainly journals like *Homologie* and magazines that are often included when we get a donation, so IHLIA already has ample copies. Since they would save them up, this was finally a good way to put all these doubles into use. The 'doubles' table was separated from the original collection materials that had

been pulled as being relevant to the theme of the workshop, for instance, sources that were from POC communities. These materials people could go through but had to copy to be able to cut and paste. Rarely did people want to do this extra little step, so later we brought this material out only for discussion and then stopped entirely.

Eliza: James, I'm curious from your perspective what you might have done differently for these IHLIA zine-making workshop, compared to other community-building activities?

James: The workshops always start by explaining what a zine can be. I would talk about the history of the making to give people context. A zine is an independently published magazine. It is a DIY publishing platform that has always been a way for people who are marginalized to self-publish about communities and art forms that aren't taken seriously in mainstream culture. It is a way that people can document the things that are important to them. A lot of zines come from the punk community, feminist community, communities of color, anarchist's scenes. Then I ask the community that I'm there with what stories they feel like they want to share with people that may be lost, or that feel like they need more space, or are stories that they haven't seen. In working with IHLIA, we had amazing access to this archive. I'm not someone who goes through archives everyday, most people don't have access to these types of archives. This gave people an opportunity to go through what's already there and then explore how to reappropriate that or also highlight stories that are missing. Although I brought my own zine-making practice, I think it just works really well with the archive because they have access to so much material.

Eliza: What kind of zines did you make before? Did you sell them at shops?

James: One of the first zines that I made was about nonbinary identity around 2017, which was somewhat popular. Then I made another zine that was archiving the Dutch ballroom scene before I became part of it. That allowed me to conduct interviews, talk about the history, and archive what was there and where the community was. Then from there I also started doing more community-based zines. In 2017 or 2018 I did a zine workshop specifically for people of color around Saint Nicolas and Black Pete. In this workshop people shared experiences and childhood memories like being forced to play Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*) by their families. My themes have always been about illuminating things that are important to me at the time.

Eliza: I'm also curious, in your role, Jim, as the curator of a public program, what kind of conversations did you hope to foster?

Jim: Any topic we hoped to build up a space for, for example, we did one in the framework of the Transgender Day of Remembrance, but the day afterwards to not conflict with the planned TDOR events. The workshops always struck me as very low-key and not pushing a particular conversation. I think that's also what works so well with bringing in James. I mean we are sitting in like the Amsterdam Public Library, which is very much an institution. And IHLIA was also an institution. The workshop rooms were not very cozy: you were sitting behind desks in meeting rooms with swivel chairs, but somehow it always worked well. After James would briefly explain the zine idea, I would give a very brief instruction, but most importantly James would help to create an open vibe that people then build

upon. Once people are cutting and pasting, then you see that one-to-one people start having conversations.

I think most of the people who came to these workshops were just very excited to get access to these archival records. I think that was really the highlight of the program also for me, as I hadn't had so much experience with archives. What I learned through working for IHLIA is that an archive is almost more about the way in which records are kept than the actual records itself. In the end it's just a climate-controlled room with boxes that are only visited by the people that work there. Those people are intermediaries to get to the materials, and especially at IHLIA, these materials are actually there because of the same kind of people who are trying to get their hands on them. To have these workshops is a way that people can get these things back in their hands without having to ask difficult questions. Otherwise, you need to know how to look, what the correct search terms are, where to look and what questions to ask to get these things in your hand that you're maybe looking for. Which makes archives a lot less accessible than, for instance, a museum where you can just browse and experience the paintings on the walls. There's more of a mediating role that the institution takes when they store away materials. These workshops were really great ways to get these things back to the people, into their hands in a fun way that doesn't feel like 'here take this', you know. You could hear some conversations during the workshop that showed people were processing history, acknowledging that magazines from the eighties were expressing the same things people talk about today, but in a different language, that today does not sound right. On the one hand, some things change, and on the other hand things have not changed. Participants at the workshops were quite young as

compared to other IHLIA programs that we had, which was great for giving them some insight, and some shock!

James: Yeah, for sure I recognize what you are explaining, Jim. One of the most fun parts of the program was getting to look in the archive and seeing what people were talking about during these different time periods. We got to compare the conversations to the conversations we're having now. So many of them are really similar. The workshop wasn't so much about creating these very serious conversations, it was really more about creating a vibe or an energy where people can come together to have open discussions. Participants start to think about their particular story that they would want to share, and then in the end, we combine it into a collective zine that creates a quilt or collage of experience.

Eliza: I was also really struck by what Jim was explaining as the hands-on experience, that it's about getting history into other hands, that there's this history of passing hands. Which I think is a beautiful undercurrent of what is actually happening. In addition, there's a role of mediation: you're also trying to keep the institution out of the process. How did the past, or particular history, of the institution matter to you? Whether the institution had neglected people, or about the potential harm of what is, or is not, in the archive? Is zine making also an answer to that?

Jim: I think the first workshop that we ended up doing through Nos Tei very much related to this neglected history. But I would say, generally yes, while working at IHLIA, this was constantly on my mind. What IHLIA wanted and what they have done and not done and where they should be going. To return to what I highlighted before: these workshops had a younger demographic,

which also was like the hardest demographic for us to get in touch with otherwise. I think younger generations had a different political outlook than most of the people working at IHLIA, or at least to the expressed institutional politics, I would say. Even though staff from the archive were not at the workshop, they'd notice the zine on my desk and everyone would always look through it and ask: How did it go? It was seen as one of the highlights during my time there. Not just by me, but by others as well.

And then in terms of the question that you asked about harm that might have been done, I think with the workshop we did for the transgender day of remembrance brought in communities who historically were not as involved with IHLIA.

James: As a facilitator, I was dealing more with this topic, but I didn't see my role as negotiating the history of IHLIA. It was more playing with what we had and contextualizing it to the needs of the people today.

Eliza: What did you understand as the needs of the people today or was that just an open invitation for people to express them or explore them?

James: Well, it's interesting that Jim says that the demographic is young because you could also really feel that. Not only are people exploring their sexuality, they're exploring who they are as people, their gender and so on. People are also really trying to understand or contextualize their identity within a larger history of LGBT+. The younger participants are politicized in a very particular way through the Internet and access to media. However, they still have a lot of questions about the history

that they didn't have access to, especially primary sources, and people from the past who passed away as well. People are really trying to grapple with where to put themselves within this larger history. Through having access to the archival record at the workshops, it gave an opportunity for them to answer some questions.

Today people who write think pieces or make TikToks usually write from a particular history or perspective, but this is different from when you have in your hand a magazine from the eighties that you can just read through. Currently, young people have access to history with an added politicized layer based on who's writing about it. Having access to the archive allows people to have the information, to decipher the value system for themselves.

Eliza: I'm really loving this notion that by being able to have access to the original sources, there's a less filtered experience, and maybe people can check their own biases or assumptions about the way that it was in the eighties. Was this educational component baked in?

Jim: I think so. Some of them ask questions: "What is this?" or "Where does this come from?" I wanted to circle back to something James said before, about the younger demographic, which relates to one of the main values of these workshops for me. Within our community there's very little generational material being passed on in terms of history, so you only come to know 'the best of'. It seems like there's a small little thread of history that we all know, and they're pretty much all the same stories. But it's quite limiting. Within the IHLIA program I was always trying to make plays for this cross generational transfer.

Which didn't always work. It was quite hard to facilitate that space, especially because of what James also said: the younger generation has been politicized in a very different way and have a lot of very specific sensitivities, as they should. Older generations, especially those that were very politicized in their youth are very proud of that, but also, maybe aren't the most sensitive towards younger people today. It isn't even about politics necessarily, but a difference in how they wish to be treated. It was hard to build that space. But what struck me about James is how he during the workshops would start with creating a small little safe space with a few points: like, in a conversation no one needs an advocate of the devil.

Eliza: You're already speaking to the question I have about whether the creative activities have a kind of overt aim at being inclusive in some way. Do you mind saying more about the way that you would open the space or how you helped to generate a good vibe? And whether you understood that to be 'inclusive' in some sense?

James: Most importantly, I was trying to make a good vibe. When I first started doing the workshops I was much younger, in a way, I felt the need to be more strict. I had to learn how you can create a space by asking questions or also guiding things without people feeling policed. Was I trying to make an inclusive space? I don't think so. I was trying to do what I always try to do: create a space of curiosity and openness with a lot of respect. How can you respect the people who are in the space with you? How can we also respect our different experiences because we all have different experiences that deserve to be honored? My goal is to take every person's perspective seriously. If that's inclusive, sure. But I wouldn't say that that's my main goal.

Jim: From a space of curiosity with respect ... I think that's a great way of framing it. When you will go through these materials, then you need this attitude too, because you will also find things in there that maybe are wild. Like something from the seventies that is offensive, but if you come from this place of curiosity and respect and ask, "what does it say?" or, "why does it say this," you can start to contextualize things. Then these things can start to mean something. And then I think that you should also leave space for your emotion, which also deserves to be there. I think finding a place for the emotion and curiosity is always really important with these archival materials.

Eliza: One workshop was outside of the institutional building of the Amsterdam Public Library. How did that come about? Did it have a different aim?

Jim: We did one outside of IHLIA that was in collaboration with the Jewish Historical Museum. They have a bigger reach than IHLIA, and we had people that came in from different cities. I remember one very young person, aged 13, 14 who came with a friend. They were really figuring themselves out during the workshop, and who knows if we'd been able to reach them without this collaboration. That was really fantastic.

We also had a really special workshop during a corona lockdown. James and I basically made care packages for people; we sent out big envelopes with about 10-15 things from the archive and whatever people needed in terms of supplies (scissors and glue sticks), and a return envelope. Then we managed to do a workshop through Zoom. Normally people would make a one-page spread, but this time they kept working on it at home and some make eight pages each! I scanned them and then sent out a

collective hardcopy to all the participants. It was one of the best zines that we made, quite epic.

James: Zine-making workshops work well on Zoom because people are in a comfortable environment, you can be more emotional or unemotional or vulnerable, especially if you're working on your own independent thing. Plus they have extra time, compared to the workshop where people are a bit rushed with time because the zine should be finished after two or three hours. I felt really proud of that zine.

Eliza: Jim, can you speak more to the type of groups who were participating?

Jim: I wanted to bring in younger audiences and achieve generational transfer. What struck me is that programs that were really geared towards trans communities would attract a lot more different generations.

Eliza: What do you think that is?

Jim: I'm not part of the community, but I can imagine that people have and need to have a lot of care for each other just in terms of survival. There's more sharing of resources.

James: I would also say that the trans community is people of all ages, who are looking for other people to connect with, especially since it's not the biggest community. I noticed that people sometimes also come out later in life and are looking for connection because the Dutch medical system really separates trans people into individual trajectories.

Eliza: In the first workshop that Julian and Naomie had asked you for, was there also an intergenerational component, because of Julian and Naomie's work in the Black Queer Archives being focused on intergenerational archiving and exchange?

James: Yes, I remember one very charismatic older woman who was so into it and had so much energy and so many stories to share and was so excited to talk to people. Although there wasn't an equal balance of older to younger people, you definitely had more people who are older than normally.

Eliza: Beyond age being this a category of difference, what are other groups that had been formerly excluded were you thinking about how to bring them in, and to make them feel included?

Jim: We did workshops on archiving social media content for which I asked James to develop a methodology that we could use to gain a community standpoint on the ethics and the how to archive different constituencies. How does that work? How can you take things from social media or not? How do they think about this? We did two workshops, one in Dutch, one in English through Zoom. We paid people for their attendance as research participants, which was a good way to funnel resources to people. We had a lot of young people that were active on social media that could represent certain communities and profiles. And then later on, we applied a similar methodology to the trans heritage workshops with Alex Bakker. We fine-tuned the general question to: What type of heritage story should be told through IHLIA's collection and what type of objects will be needed?

James: What I started doing in this kind of workshop was collective gathering of information via a rapid fire of a brainstorming and then discussing personal experience. We also worked with sticky notes online, a Miro board. We had some questions where we collected everyone's answers. So then everybody who participated could see the diversity of experiences. I felt like my role was actually to gather information rather than lead people to a particular endpoint. For myself personally, I thought it was super fun because you can really be in the conversation as opposed to leading a conversation. I also learned new perspectives, for example someone talked about LinkedIn and also dating apps as a social media platform. That really stuck with me because I never thought about them in that way. Also, because we had a pretty diverse age group there was an exchange about the different ways that people were using the Internet.

Eliza: From your perspective of speaking to others, who might be facilitators or involved in public programming, what advice would you give, based on your experience and your own practice? Since neither of you had worked in the heritage sector before, how did you adapt your mindset, and what became workable practices for dealing with archival materials and the larger category of heritage?

Jim: A main takeaway from the workshops was, again, that people need to get into it with their hands, just cut and paste and tear and get messy with stuff. The room was a complete mess afterwards, thankfully. That's why I stopped having these two different tables of stuff, one that you could actually use and the other one was selected by the archive that was only for browsing, which felt very institutional. It just works so well that

people had all this freedom with the material and could tear and do anything. Obviously it's hard for this sector to make available material that people can use in such a way, when everything is seen as so ...

Eliza: Precious.

Jim: Yeah, so precious. Whereas maybe there are certain moments in which the benefit outweighs the negative if it gets into people's hands without acid-free gloves. You have to give people some kind of agency over your collection and the way that it's treated where possible.

James: My takeaway is that people want to have fun. My working method is about fun and curiosity, which can make an inclusive space. People want to have a good time with each other and if you as a facilitator can make something serious feel fun in a way that activates this curiosity, then you can have so many different types of conversations. You can even have challenging ones between people who don't know each because you're creating a space where people are willing to take the risk to connect with other people.

Eliza: Are these zines now available in the IHLIA collection?

Jim: Everything created is available as a digital copy, so they're endlessly reproducible. Every participant had one as a take away after the workshop, and multiple print copies are placed in the collection.

Eliza: Was that very important to you to work with the format, or the cultural form of a zine, that it should remain free floating?

James: To be honest, I didn't think about how the zines would go back to the archive, although I assumed that they would. The point of zines is that they are made together, then shared with other people, and that was enough. They're also often not text heavy, as they consist of imagery or questions that people have. It's more of a wandering experience. I think that anyone can make a zine and everybody should make a zine. Zine making is for everybody. Especially in the Netherlands, zine making can become a glossy art book, but it doesn't have to be that way. Zine making is a way for you to express yourself without having to think about how it will sell, a means to think outside of capitalism. I look forward to reading all the things that come out.

Eliza: And Jim, you've moved on, to the arts sector? What do you carry with you from the heritage world?

Jim: I'm still working in a design museum, still the heritage field, I would say, and also at the Rijksakademie. IHLIA is a special place in the sense that it is a community archive, that is its history, but still they had lost touch with parts of this larger community. Also, they never reached out to certain communities that should have been part of the archive. It was an interesting time to be there, as they were becoming conscious of this, making steps towards amending this, and my position was a new one within the team that was aiming to reach out and collaborate and bring people in. Not everything that we tried worked, however, that's also a lesson learned: not everything's always going to work. Finally, I learned to just get crafty! It is a way to facilitate conversations that go much beyond these tasks because it's rarely something that you do as an adult. It brings this playful kid energy where your belief system is more open.

- 1 This interview was conducted by Eliza Steinbock on March 15, 2023 between 10:00 am – 12:00 pm over Zoom.
- 2 See <https://raeparnell.hotglue.me/> for his work
- 3 See interview with Gianmaria Colpani, Julian Isenia & Naomie Pieter, "Archiving Queer of Color Politics in the Netherlands," *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 22, no. 2 (2019): 163-182.

polyphonic exhibition- making

Polyphonic Curation

Looking Back and Ahead to the Colonial
Past at the Amsterdam Museum

visitorship

diversity thinking

everyday racism

shadow stories

language

co-creation

colonialism

critical / -ity

Polyphonic Curation

Looking Back and Ahead to the Colonial Past at the Amsterdam Museum

Inez Blanca van der Scheer, Imara Limon,
Margriet Schavemaker, Vanessa Vroon-Najem,
Annemarie de Wildt, Gonca Yalçiner

Introduction

How can museums promote social equality, inclusiveness, and diversity in a relevant way with the exhibitions they develop and host? By not speaking as one (institutional) voice but telling stories with multiple voices in their collections and exhibitions. This allows visitors to identify with one of the many perspectives or realise that their own perspective is one of several different ones. But how do you go about this? How do you curate ‘polyphonic’ exhibitions and tell polyphonic stories about the objects on display?

The concept of ‘polyphony’ or multi-voicedness has been widely used in literature and by critics and activists questioning top-down power structures inside and outside (museum) institutions based on exclusion rather than inclusion. In *Alledaags Racisme* (Everyday Racism, 1984), Philomena Essed drew attention to the (ongoing) conscious and unconscious racism in the Netherlands and why we need to reflect on this.¹ Her book drew on the experiences of Black women, establishing a link between racism and sexism. Her work was critically acclaimed in the 1980s. For many decades, acknowledging that those who represent power and speak from a position of power are not neutral and that the time has come to make way for multiple perspectives and voices

that have long been excluded based on colour, gender, and class, among others, was far from evident. However, a discourse emerged, thanks in part to Essed's publications and the work of others, in which the term 'polyphony' is frequently used.²

The term polyphony, combined with the words "inclusive" and "democratising", also appeared in the first sentence of the new 2019 museum definition, developed through crowdsourcing. "Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures".³ Ultimately, this definition was not accepted by the international museum association ICOM. However, the emphasis on a "critical dialogue" indicates that museums increasingly strive to avoid being strongholds where heritage is displayed and knowledge about it is shared from a dominant perspective. Instead, they endeavour to become places where a conversation can start on how to break open this dominant perspective. In the updated definition adopted at the 2022 ICOM conference, the term polyphonic was dropped, although "embracing diversity" remains a central element.

In 2018, Guinevere Ras coined the term 'polyphony' as an umbrella term for "all processes and methodologies that give rise to layering and multiple perspectives (*multiperspectivity*) in museums and around museum products". In this description, the scope includes exhibitions, education, and other museum activities. She also states that collaborating "with a community" is essential.⁴ Polyphony and (audience) participation are closely linked. See also Nina Simon's 2010 publication *The Participatory Museum*, which is often cited by museums in this context. Simon describes in detail how choosing to collaborate with specific networks continually changes the shape of

the museum and its output, making it more relevant to a much wider audience.⁵

However, this does not just apply to the programming. Amsterdam Museum curator Imara Limon says, "polyphony and participation also imply expanding the networks around the museum, with intensive engagement and a more diverse workforce being the long-term goal. An inclusive museum that is relevant to a wide audience is only possible and evident when it reflects the society in which it exists."⁶

In short, the term 'polyphony' can be seen as a method and umbrella term for fundamental changes in terms of DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion). Polyphonic curation and putting together a programme from multiple perspectives is just one of the things you can do. This is, however, a decisive step that also influences many of the necessary changes in terms of audience, partners, and staff (*publiek, partners en personeel* being the other three in the Dutch Diversity and Inclusion Code, in addition to programming).

In this essay, we therefore want to take a closer look at how we can implement polyphonic curation. How does it work in practice and what can we learn from examples from the recent past?

Spotlight on (de)colonial exhibitions

Besides museum programmes around queering, migration, and the growing gap between the rich and the poor, where polyphony acts as the starting premise, the colonial past is increasingly serving as a case for creating polyphonic exhibitions at the Amsterdam Museum. This is an inevitable

theme for a museum that focuses on the capital of what was once a vast colonial empire and which holds a collection of approx. 108,000 objects, many of which came from wealthy citizens who owed their income in part to overseas trade and transatlantic slavery. In the collection, stories about the city of Amsterdam are mainly told from a perspective of pride in the city. And for a long time, that was precisely what the museum did. The city was showcased in various collection presentations and exhibitions as a unique place where everyone could come together and where art flourished based on core values such as tolerance, freethinking, and entrepreneurship.

However, if we look at several exhibitions and projects organised by the Amsterdam Museum over the past decade, it becomes abundantly clear that Amsterdam's wealth and affluence were founded on a cruel history that was explained in some instances and ignored in others. The museum reflected on this in its *Colonial Stories: Work in Progress* (2022) exhibition. In one of the museum's galleries, curators Imara Limon, Inez Blanca van der Scheer, and Maria Rey-Lamslag took a closer look at exhibitions relating to the seventeenth-century, organised by the Amsterdam Museum since its inception in 1926. The curators showed how these exhibitions often contributed to a one-sided view of the success story of this period while offering more critical perspectives in other instances.

Looking back, this definitely is not a linear process. For example, the *Sugar* (2005–2006) exhibition and its catalogue paid more attention to slavery than *The Golden Age: Gateway to our modern world* (2013) seven years later. In 2019, the museum decided to stop using the term 'Golden Age' as a synonym

for this seventeenth century period. At the time, however, the permanent exhibition *Amsterdam DNA* (2011–2022) still included a gallery painted entirely in gold, dedicated to this period, and titled 'The Centre of the World'.

This review of our institutional past is necessary as it forces us to remain alert. This essay is also written in this context: we need to take a (self)critical look at how we attempt, time and again, to acknowledge, define, revise, and supplement this dominant perspective through exhibitions and all kinds of other programming. At times, we succeed in our endeavour. Other times, we fail or only achieve part of our mission. In so doing, we are always keenly aware that the museum team is often insufficiently diverse and that the intended polyphony is often achieved through participation and co-creation with people and networks who are not (yet) represented on the museum team. These voices are invited. Other times, they (rightfully) claim a more polyphonic approach, compelling the museum to stop ignoring other perspectives.

Sometimes, our colleagues suggest or introduce multiple underexposed perspectives. In 2013, the lack of focus on the slavery past in the exhibition *The Golden Age: Gateway to our modern world* did not sit well with Annemarie de Wildt, one of the curators of the Amsterdam Museum. While she was not involved in the curation of this exhibition, she belonged to a group of colleagues, academics, and activists preparing exhibitions and programmes as part of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the formal abolition of slavery (also in 2013). She devised an intervention in the exhibition titled *The Black Page of the Golden Age*, which was added to the exhibition three months after its opening. This consisted

of reactions to the exhibition and reflections on the knock-on effects of slavery in the present by Marian Markelo, a Winti priestess and activist from The Hague, researcher Leo Balai, and Hellen Palmtak who works in the museum's canteen, among others. In addition, De Wildt collaborated with other researchers and activists to add another layer of information – in black – explaining the city's colonial and slavery past in the seventeenth century. The museum launched a marketing campaign to draw attention to the intervention. Posters were put up throughout the city featuring the title of the exhibition, a portrait of one of the commentators, and the following text positioned diagonally across the image: “Now including the black page”.⁷

Ten years later, Marian Markelo, who was one of the commentators at the time, hosted a New Narratives tour of the exhibition *Colonial Stories: Work in Progress*. In it, she reflected on her critical intervention in the 2013 exhibition, in addition to expressing her appreciation for the museum's new-found, more open, and transparent approach: “It fills me with hope that this is the right way to highlight the different layers of history, including heritage issues. The descendants of white and Black people will thus have an opportunity to learn about the story from their perspective.”⁸

New Narratives

This is an excellent statement by Marian Markelo. If we look back on this period, however, the need for a Black Page intervention in 2013 mainly serves to symbolise a lack of consideration for diversity and polyphony within the museum, at least in relation to the Dutch colonial past. At the time, the celebration of the 400th anniversary of Amsterdam's canals was a top urban marketing priority. Urban pride was the dominant sentiment, leaving

little margin for perspectives in which the colonial past and its spillover into the present played a role.⁹

During this time, major protests on the theme of *Black Pete is racism* also took place.¹⁰ The stencils and spray cans that people used to have T-shirts spray-painted with “*Zwarte Piet is racism*” (Black Pete is racism) to wear during the protests were included in the Amsterdam Museum's collection in 2012. In addition, the new partnerships in 2013, which were a direct consequence of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, provided the museum with an important new network. These included long-term collaborations with the *Keti Koti dialogue tables* and *Stichting Eer en Herstel* (responsible, among other things, for the annual commemoration of the slavery past at the mayor's official residence, the premises of slave trader Godin). Curator Annemarie de Wildt was also closely involved in the creation of *Mapping Slavery*, which resulted in the *Gids Slavernijverleden Amsterdam* (Guide to Amsterdam's Slavery Past, 2014), co-published by the Amsterdam Museum one year later. The project by artist Boris van Berkum and Winti priestess Marian Markelo is another unique output of this period.¹¹ A mask from the collection of the Wereldmuseum (formerly Afrikamuseum) was 3D scanned, enlarged, and printed so it could be used for Keti Koti commemorations and other occasions. It was included in the Amsterdam Museum's collection in 2014, as part of the ‘collection for use’ so that members of the Surinamese community can continue to use it for rituals rather than as a ‘static’ museum object to which the usual conservation rules apply. In so doing, the mask fills a need that museums are ordinarily unable or unwilling to meet.¹²



Boris van Berkum and Marian Markelo, Kabra ancestor mask, 2013.
Photo Amsterdam Museum, Erik Hesmerg

In the context of the major exhibition on *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck: Rembrandt's Master Pupils* (2018, in collaboration with the Rembrandt House Museum), Imara Limon, who was employed as a junior curator at time, created the art installation *A Seat at the Table* in the museum's *Regentenkamer* (Regents' Room), in collaboration with Jörgen Tjon A Fong, then artistic director of theatre company Urban Myth. Six artists created works inspired by a historical figure they would like to invite to dinner. Fashion designer Marga Weimans produced a tablecloth inspired by the sculptor Augusta Savage, who fought for a place at the table for African-American artists in this way. During this same period, Limon also started organising *New Narratives* tours of the museum's temporary and permanent exhibitions, in which people from outside the museum were asked to take a critical look at the collection presentations as guest tour guides. Journalist and historian Lotfi El Hamidi highlighted the prevalent Eurocentrism in the permanent collection, making several essential observations for which he drew on his knowledge of Middle Eastern history. Another example was the author Héléne Christelle Munganyende, who mentioned that she felt erased in the museum, mainly because of core values such as 'tolerance' and 'entrepreneurial spirit' that were linked to the city. In some cases, these external perspectives led to minor adjustments, such as the removal of an inappropriate icon that symbolised the trade value of an enslaved person or replacing on a timeline the year of the abolition of slavery following a change in legislation with a year when a major uprising by enslaved people took place.

However, the museum was not always able to respond immediately to criticism, especially in the permanent collection presentation. Simone Zeefuik (one of the founders of *Decolonising*

the Museum) had to reiterate her criticism of the depiction of enslaved people in ‘the Golden Age gallery’ several times before the curatorial team and the museum’s board decided to remove the image in response.¹³

The *New Narratives* programme also led to collaborative projects with interdisciplinary artists, such as Jörgen Tjon A Fong. He wanted to bring the research of Mark Ponte on Black people in Amsterdam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the attention of a wider audience. He thus partnered with the Amsterdam Museum to develop a first photo series, *Hollandse Meesters Herzien* (Dutch Masters Revisited). Tjon A Fong took an interdisciplinary approach, selecting the stories of various historical people of colour in Amsterdam, working with costume designers to put together outfits, and asking prominent Dutch people to pose as these historical figures. He then proceeded to photograph them in historically relevant locations. In 2018, the three works were displayed at the OSCAM art space in Amsterdam Zuidoost. The location was highly relevant as many descendants of people from formerly colonised territories live in this borough. These groups are usually never or rarely represented in the museums in the city centre.

In addition, Limon curated her first exhibition as an employee of the Amsterdam Museum in collaboration with The Black Archives, a historical archive and cultural centre, titled *Zwart en revolutionair: Het verhaal van Hermine en Otto Huiswoud* (2017–2018) (Black and revolutionary, the story of Hermine and Otto Huiswoud). This couple, from British Guiana and Suriname, fought against colonialism and capitalism in the early twentieth century. The exhibition was hosted in the monumental building on Zeeburgerdijk, from where they waged their fight

together with many intellectuals around the world and where *Vereniging Ons Suriname* been based since 1975 and in existence for 100 years.¹⁴ It is an essential but underexposed aspect of Amsterdam’s history that would not have been accessible to a wider audience without the research of The Black Archives.

During this period, various museum employees, who chose to open the door to critical voices from outside the museum by breaking out of the museum’s confines, programmed and introduced the colonial past into the museum. The partnerships with the networks with which relationships were maintained were not always smooth sailing. An excellent example of ongoing criticism of the Amsterdam Museum includes the daubing of a poster promoting the exhibition *Hollanders van de Gouden Eeuw* (Dutchmen of the Golden Age) in the summer of 2019. This permanent collection presentation was displayed in the Amsterdam Museum between 2014 and 2022 in a wing of the (then) Hermitage Amsterdam. The bulk of this exhibition consisted of the Amsterdam Museum’s vast collection of monumental group portraits from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, supplemented with works from the Rijksmuseum. There was very little focus on the colonial past in this annexe.¹⁵ This became painfully obvious when, in September 2019, the poster for promoting the exhibition on the city’s streets was vandalised. The white faces in the group portrait on the poster were smeared with white paint, and the title *Golden Age* was changed to *Bloody Age* with red paint. The poster happened to be on a wall next to the entrance to the Black Archives, so it was hardly surprising when the director of the Black Archives, Mitchell Esajas, ‘claimed’ responsibility for the intervention a few months later at the National Museum Congress (October 2019).

Words and art

That same year, in 2019, Jörgen Tjon A Fong developed a larger version of *Dutch Masters Revisited*.¹⁶ The three portraits presented at OSCAM in 2018 were supplemented with ten new portraits of Amsterdammers of colour from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The process was the same: well-known Amsterdammers of colour posed as historical figures of colour who had been identified through archival research. They included Christina van Geugten (1749 - 1780), born into slavery in Batavia (Jakarta) and famous for her escape and sentencing to imprisonment in the Spinhuis, a workhouse for women, after being brought to Amsterdam around 1754. Yosina Roemajauw, the winner of *The Voice Kids*, posed as van Geugten, seated at a table in the old Regents' Room at the Amsterdam Museum, finally giving her a face. Another example is the rapper Typhoon as Elieser, whose grave is in the Jewish cemetery in the town of Ouderkerk aan de Amstel. A man of colour, of whom we do not know whether he was free, a servant, or enslaved. Thanks to the concerted efforts of the activist Perez Jong Loy, he became an important symbol of the Black presence in the seventeenth century.¹⁷ This time around, the exhibition of the new works was installed in the museum, at the heart of the Dutch Portraits: The Age of Rembrandt and Frans Hals (*Hollanders van de Gouden Eeuw*) exhibition. Exhibition panels with viewing holes on which the photos were placed were among the more than twenty seventeenth- and eighteenth-century monumental group portraits by Dutch Masters such as Bartholomeus van der Helst, Govert Flinck and Nicolaes Pickenoy. Several group portraits were removed from the walls to make way for the photos. In addition, curator Tom van de Molen and Tjon A Fong wrote new gallery texts and audio tour stops for the rest of the exhibition, in which the colonial past played a central role.

The team discussed the relationship between *Dutch Masters Revisited* and *Dutch Masters of the Golden Age* at length while developing the exhibition. How should these exhibitions relate to each other? The Black presence on thirteen large portraits in the gallery contrasted sharply with the previous situation: a large room full of white people. The team decided that the new portraits could not be too small. They also discussed the title of the main exhibition, *Hollanders van de Gouden Eeuw*. The term 'Golden Age' was considered too one-sided, as several voices from the New Narratives programming had already pointed out in previous years. It left no margin for counter-stories, stories of people such as Christina van Geugten or Elieser, for whom the seventeenth century was anything but golden.

In early September 2019, the Amsterdam Museum decided to change the title of the main exhibition to *Portrait Gallery of the 17th Century* and to stop using the term 'Golden Age' as a synonym for this seventeenth-century period. In a letter to the *Volkscrant* newspaper, the directors and some of the curators involved explained why and how they had come to this decision.¹⁸ The response was very divided in the Netherlands. Later that day, Prime Minister Mark Rutte tweeted that he thought it was a nonsensical decision and that he took pride in the term Golden Age. Culture and Education Minister Ingrid Engelshoven noted that "history could not be rewritten". The result was a deluge of columns and discussions in talk shows and other (social) media, in which the museum received praise. However, it was also frequently accused of fuelling rather than countering societal polarisation with its actions. Some people opined that the museum should be neutral and avoid taking a political stance. Artistic director Margriet Schavemaker responded to the furore in her inaugural professor speech titled

Coloured Stories (*Gekleurde Verhalen*): “Our mission is to contribute to a society without exclusion in addition to constantly looking for ways to present and contextualise the history, present, and future of the city in the most relevant and diverse way possible while making (historical and contemporary) exclusion visible.”¹⁹

Rendering the often-ambiguous power structures in the city visible is part of this contextualisation, as evidenced in *The Monument of Regents: Natasja Kensmil (2020 - 2022)*, the successor to *Dutch Masters Revisited*. Kensmil is one of today’s leading Dutch artists, with an oeuvre of drawings and monumental paintings inspired by historical figures and events. She approached the Amsterdam Museum because she was working on a series of portraits, or archetypes, of regentesses. *The Monument of Regents: Natasja Kensmil (2019)* has been painted with pastuous layers of dark paint, sometimes smeared and sometimes very detailed. The regentesses’ hollow eyes and the white tones that accentuate the bone structure of their faces make them look like ghosts or zombies. This haunting image prompts an alternative reading of the seventeenth-century group portraits. Kensmil mainly wanted to highlight the position of the regentesses of these seventeenth-century institutions. Although women had no legal decision-making power in business in those days, they were allowed to run charitable institutions. Their families were affiliated with the East and West India Companies, meaning they derived their wealth from a colonial system based on inequality, violence, and exploitation of people in occupied territories. Kensmil’s powerful painting highlights the ambiguity of the regentesses’ charitable work and the people at whose expense they acquired their wealth.



Natasja Kensmil, *The Monument of Regents*, 2018-2019, Amsterdam Museum.
Photo Peter Cox

After we declared our intention to exhibit *The Monument of Regents*, Kensmil created several other works. A double portrait of Maria Munter and Isaac Jan Nijs depicts an Amsterdam couple of regents whose families were involved in Dutch colonial trading companies. Maria Munter was also a regentess of the Civil Orphanage on Kalverstraat, which became the main location of the Amsterdam Museum in 1975. *White Elephant* (2019), a large VOC ship at sea, and *Selva Amazon* (2020), a landscape, both refer to the trade and forced displacement of people and the looting of natural products that underpinned the colonial system. A system that went unseen and unreported for centuries. Like the earlier exhibition of Jörgen Tjon A Fong's works, all these works combined made a significant contribution, adding nuance to the classic narrative of pride about Amsterdam. In some cases, partnerships continued (Tjon A Fong served as a guest curator of two exhibitions in the following years), and the acquisition of almost all the works shown in *Dutch Masters Revisited* and by Kensmil for the museum's collection ensured their conservation for the long term. Kensmil also received national recognition when she was awarded the most prestigious Dutch art prize, the Johannes Vermeer Prize, by Minister van Engelshoven on November 1, 2021. In her laudation, the minister referred to her earlier comment that history could not be rewritten. Kensmil had made her see and understand that she was wrong and that this was indeed possible.

Polyphony at the heart of the museum's approach

During the same period in which the discussion was raging on the Golden Age, the team was working behind the scenes on an exhibition on the Golden Coach.²⁰ In recent years, a growing number of Dutch people from various backgrounds have come

to see the Golden Coach as historically laden heritage due to the panel of the 'Tribute from the Colonies' on its left side. The allegorical representation features people of colour representing the colonies in the west and east, bringing goods to a white woman symbolising the Dutch nation-state. The coach was built in 1898 and was gifted to Queen Wilhelmina by inhabitants of Amsterdam when she became the first woman to ascend the throne. Until 2015, the coach was used for royal occasions such as weddings and the annual Prince's Day on the third Tuesday of September, which marks the opening of the new parliamentary year and the presentation of the budget. It then underwent restoration for several years so it could be used again. But was this a good idea? Could the coach still take to the streets in light of this one panel? Perhaps it would be better off in a museum? Or should we accept that this kind of colonial heritage is part of our lives?

The museum's ambition was to present a thought-provoking exhibition on the Golden Coach that took different views and social tensions into account. We searched for known and lesser-known histories of the coach, its use, and the current social conversation on the significance and future of this historically laden object. In so doing, we started from the conviction that we can promote connection and understanding by combining different perspectives. Polyphony thus became the main starting point for the entire process: from the composition of the interdisciplinary research team – consisting of eleven curators, educators, researchers, programmers, and experts in communication and marketing who worked together on this project – to the audience research conducted through a travelling research installation.²¹ The museum was also supposed to host public dialogues before the exhibition. Six months before

the exhibition opened, a Golden Coach Study Room was set up as a public research centre. The plan was for the research team to work on the project here and encourage visitors to join in this reflection process. Due to the pandemic, the space was hardly used.

A sounding board group of more than twenty experts was also set up to put critical questions to the exhibition team. This included scholars of Dutch history such as James Kennedy and Anne Petterson and people like Susan Lammers (general director of the RCE, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands) and historian Wim Manuhutu. Other members were experts on Dutch literature and (counter)culture, such as Marita Mathijssen and Geert Buelens and pioneering thinkers on the decolonisation of heritage, such as Susan Legêne, Simone Zeefuik, and Jennifer Tosch. Finally, the group included experts on the rituals and collections of the royal family, such as Johan de Haan and Irene Stengs, activists, and equal rights advocates such as Simon(e) van Saarloos. Every month, an online session was organised in which the sounding board group commented on the (sub)plans. The emphasis was on such questions as: are we on the right course? Are we overlooking essential perspectives and voices? How should we present the many different perspectives and storylines? The discussions were always lively and critical.²²

Thirteen works of art were also commissioned from creators from diverse backgrounds for a more polyphonic perspective on the Golden Coach. These artists produced a broad-ranging series of critical and artistic perspectives on the coach. Their work and a selection of relevant existing works were presented in the museum's 12-metre-high Amsterdam Gallery, which had been completely cleared for the occasion.



Exhibition The Golden Coach, 18 June 2021 until 27 February 2022.
Photo Amsterdam Museum, Jan-Kees Steenman



In addition, some artworks were incorporated into the cultural history exhibition rooms, including Iswanto Hartono's *Colonies*, which has been in the Amsterdam Museum's collection since 2018. This large line drawing, executed in white wire steel, traces the contours of the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel. The wire sculpture is lit, causing a shadow of the drawing to appear in black on the wall. Hartono thus subtly reveals the tensions between white and Black, dominator and dominated.²³

As mentioned, the preparations were scuppered by the pandemic. All interviews with artists and sounding board sessions had to be organised digitally. The planned trips of the research installation around the country and the on-site work by the research team in the study room before the exhibition were only possible in part. Therefore, the decision was made to continue these activities for the exhibition's duration. A digital public outreach programme was launched before and during the lockdowns of 2020–2021.

The museum's biweekly online talk show, AM LIVE, included coverage of the exhibition preparations and all related research.²⁴ Curator Annemarie de Wildt thus took us on a journey back to when the coach was built and discussed why the court did not want this gift. In addition, fundamental discussions in the sounding board group were developed in more detail for the public, such as, for example, the issue of the coach's ownership. Pieter Verhoeve, the chairman of the national umbrella organisation of Orange associations, believed King Willem-Alexander was the rightful owner. Hans Ulrich Jessurun d'Oliveira, a member of the *Republikeins Genootschap* and legal scholar, argued that ultimately, the prime minister is its owner as he is responsible for everything the King does or

says. AM LIVE also covered the troubled relationship between the Netherlands and Indonesia, with an introduction by Jeffry Pondaag and a discussion between Lara Nuberg and Wim Manuhutu. We also reflected on the position of women at the end of the nineteenth century. Although Wilhelmina was the Netherlands' first queen in 1898, women would have to wait another two decades before they were granted suffrage. We used different perspectives like these to create a more polyphonic exhibition, from the choice of the themes and objects to the text production and audio tour stops (in many cases, the voice-overs were done by members of the sounding board group).

From June 15, 2021 until February 28, 2022, the newly restored coach was displayed at the Amsterdam Museum, standing resplendent in a glass pavilion in one of the courtyards. In six galleries around the coach, people could visit a polyphonic cultural-historical exhibition on the history and use of the vehicle and the societal conversation. When the exhibition opened, no decision had been made about the coach's future. Would it once again be used in processions as soon as the exhibition was over? One of the exhibition's objectives was to use various forms of public surveys to contribute to the decision to be made by King Willem-Alexander, the official owner of the coach who had loaned it to the museum. Six weeks before the end of the exhibition on January 13, 2022, the King informed the Dutch population that he thought the coach was no longer suited for its original purpose. He referred to the painful inequalities in today's society and stated that it would not be used "until the time is right again."²⁵ Public surveys before and after the exhibition showed that public opinion had also changed. Whereas in June 2021, 32% of respondents still

felt that the Golden Coach should be permanently displayed in a museum, this figure had increased to 43% by March 2022. We cannot attribute this change, and the King's decision, solely to our polyphonic exhibition. However, we think the exhibition contributed to the conversation about it.²⁶

Reciprocity and sustainability

As mentioned, the colonial past is just one perspective in which polyphony is relevant to the museum practice of creating exhibitions. However, other major urban issues such as gentrification, the role of religion in society, gender and sexuality are also in dire need of a polyphonic approach. Power inequality plays a fundamental role in these issues. As a powerful institution with clout, the museum will thus have to make a sustained effort if it wants to make a relevant contribution. Methods like the ones outlined above, in which being open to and collaborating with organisations both inside and outside the museum, magnifying artistic and (self-)critical statements at the heart of the organisation (such as the Golden Age discussion) and opening up the making process (as in the case of the Golden Coach exhibition) are crucial in this respect.²⁷

On a more fundamental level, however, this mainly relates to reciprocity and sustainability. Relationships can be built and facilitated with all the different voices involved in this polyphonic curation of exhibitions, with an emphasis on a give-and-take approach based on fairness during and after the exhibition. Because ultimately, the goal should be to establish a connection between the museum and 'other' voices from outside the museum beyond the temporary presentation. This tokenism can be countered with intervision sessions for (self-)critical reflection on the process, on the one hand, and with

the museum's commitment to remain as engaged as possible as a meaningful link in the various networks with which a relationship has been established on the other. If the museum is committed to listening and learning, it can become a production house where stories can take shape, be shared, magnified, and preserved for posterity. In other words, it is a place where you can repeatedly question the many omissions in the collection and presentations and add to them.

An open mindset, listening and learning, but also securing and preserving is perhaps the biggest challenge of polyphonic curation. Exhibitions are intrinsically temporary. They end, and museum teams are already working on the next production: new polyphonic, inclusive projects with networks that are often new to the institution. How can we best continue to monitor and engage with the networks of the previous projects? In addition, the suggestion has often been made to offer the talent in these networks a permanent position within the organisation so that they no longer speak from outside the museum on an ad hoc basis by invitation, thus giving them a mandate from within the museum to share their voice and (co-)set the museum agenda. Making this more permanent takes time, but the museum is working on this by, among other things, developing a more inclusive recruitment and selection procedure. At the same time, and in some instances, the new temporary (exhibition) projects also offer opportunities to take networks on board and link them.

A good example is the online exhibition *Corona in de stad* (Corona in the city), for which the Amsterdam Museum took the incentive, together with more than 40 existing and new

partners, during the first lockdown in the spring of 2020.²⁸ The more than 2,000 submissions and the many curated (online) galleries showcase tremendous diversity that could only be achieved by involving existing partners based on equality and, where possible, fair practice.²⁹ This project was part of a more comprehensive programme line called *Collecting the City*, which focuses on collecting with the city. This programme line, launched in 2019, provides space for the existing networks we know from previous projects or new networks to organise small exhibitions or a different programme with the museum. Every six months, a new *Collecting the City* exhibition opens to the public, until 2026, when the museum will celebrate its centenary. A kaleidoscope of small exhibitions will be presented in eight rooms as part of this initiative. Activities are also organised in related venues across the city in the run-up to or at the same time as the museum presentations. Here too, the conclusion is that ensuring these co-creation projects have a lasting impact remains a challenge.

At the time of writing, the Amsterdam Museum is in the process of relocating to a new museum. Its main location on Kalverstraat will be renovated over the next few years. In the meantime, the museum has taken down the group portraits exhibition in the Amstel annexe, installing of four exhibitions in its place. The permanent exhibition is called *Panorama Amsterdam: A living history of the city*. This will remain in place until the reopening of the main site in mid-2027. At the heart of this permanent exhibition, designed by Studio LA, is a central space in the gallery, which questions the city's chronological history on the gallery's outer wall, with objects and through archival documents and texts, adding new perspectives.

Parts of the projects above in which we raised questions about the colonial past are incorporated in these new presentations at various intervals. For example, Kensmil's *The Monument of Regents* hangs on the exterior wall of Panorama Amsterdam, combined with seventeenth-century group portraits of regents and regentesses. *Christina van Geugten* from the series *Dutch Masters Revisited* is once again on display. However, this time, she can be found in the central space along with Ken Doorson's *Manumission Pauline* (2016), in which a freed Pauline has been given a face, combined with a view on Rembrandt's *The Anatomical Lesson of Dr. Deijman*. The latter prompts a reflection on the theme of crime and punishment in the colonies and Amsterdam.

We explicitly present the entire trail as a place for experimentation for the new city museum we ideally *want to become*. Therefore, we will critically review all our presentations in years to come with various focus groups to see what works and create a more inclusive, polyphonic presentation. This includes commissions for interventions by makers. Above the central space is an empty space filled with several geometric shapes, providing a platform for all possible reflections on the histories we present.

One of the first interventions was produced by Jennifer Tosch, with whom, as we already mentioned, the museum has collaborated several times on projects that render Amsterdam's colonial past visible. In October 2022, her *Sites of Memory* collective presented a musical performance that started from Huis Willet-Holthuysen (which is also managed by the Amsterdam Museum, which is also responsible for the programming), with participants walking up Herengracht and down the Amstel to the museum's presentations in the Hermitage building. Black



Left Christina van Geugten from the series *Dutch Masters Revisited* with a view through to "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deijman" by Rembrandt van Rijn in the Panorama Amsterdam exhibition at the Amsterdam Museum. Photo Amsterdam Museum, Gert Jan van Rooij

women who worked for families in the canal belt that made their money from colonial trade took centre stage. For the final scene, the audience could take a seat overlooking the *Panorama Amsterdam* exhibition. The text of the last song consisted of a sharp critique of the works on display, as well as the texts and the exhibition design. Questions such as: Why do we mention the numbers of victims of the Second World War, but why do we never count the victims of transatlantic slavery? And why do we only showcase all these stunning luxurious objects, which ultimately only serve to illustrate pride about the city when they were produced or obtained because of exploitation in overseas territories? The pastel pink walls were also criticised as they render the suffering insignificant. “Paint the walls red and say you’re sorry (...) how long will we look left, how long will we forge?”³⁰

In short, polyphonic curation remains a work in progress, as the exhibition by Limon, van der Scheer, and Rey-Lamslag demonstrated. A polyphonic approach will have to be pursued time and again. With small and sometimes bigger gestures, with the museum taking the lead and making decisions on some occasions and taking the back seat at other times. And yes, truth be told, painting the walls of the future blood red after the golden walls of the past, and the pastel pink walls of the present would make a powerful statement. However, this is simply another step forward in this polyphonic process.



Theatre walk 'Returning the Gaze' by Sites of Memory,
23 September - 2 October 2022, from Huis Willet-Holthuysen to Amstel 51.
Photo Amsterdam Museum, Monique Vermeulen

- 1 Philomena Essed. *Alledaags Racisme*. Feministische Uitgeverij Sara, 1984.
- 2 On renouncing neutrality, see also: Margriet Schavemaker (with contributions by Imara Limon, Jörgen Tjon A Fong and Massih Hutak), "Gekleurde verhalen: Media en kunst in de museale praktijk," (Coloured Stories: media and art in museum practice), University of Amsterdam, September 29, 2019 <https://www.margrietschavemaker.nl/oratie-gekleurde-verhalen>.
- 3 See <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/>
- 4 Guinevere Ras, "Tussen museale- en community expertise: Een handreiking voor meerstemmigheid in musea," (Between museum and community expertise: towards polyphony in museums), 2018, 6, https://museumcontact.nl/system/files/field_attachments/publicatie_meerstemmigheid_-_guinevere_ras.pdf.
- 5 Nina Simon. *The Participatory Museum*. Museum 2.0, 2010.
- 6 Schavemaker, "Gekleurde verhalen", 10.
- 7 An extensive public programme was also organised, including a Ketu Koti/Freedom Dinner on May 5, a commission to Iris Kensmil for three paintings in collaboration with the CBK Zuid-Oost exhibition space, talks by Black authors during Book Week, and tours focussing on the city's slavery history. The museum did not organise the commemoration at the mayor's official residence. See blog post: <https://hart.amsterdam.nl/page/27664>
- 8 Marian Markelo, "New Narratives Tour," September 4, 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxWsyG-aUzk>.
- 9 The collaboration with the public broadcaster, with which the museum produced a documentary series about the exhibition, was also a major contributing factor to the lack of attention to the history of slavery. As the NTR had already produced a series on the history of slavery in 2011, the request was made to largely ignore this aspect of the Golden Age in the exhibition and accompanying publication.
- 10 The activism of *Nederland Wordt Beter*, among others, is not the first protest against Black Pete. For a longer history of activism against this racist tradition, see <https://kozwartepiet.nl/> and <https://hart.amsterdam.nl/collectie/object/amcollect/99296>
- 11 Annemarie de Wildt, "Negotiations around the kabra mask," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 11, no. 2 (2015): 256-259.
- 12 The Amsterdam Museum's AIDS memorial quilts are another example. See on this subject: Léontine Meijer-van Mensch and Annemarie de Wildt, "AIDS memorial quilts. From mourning and activism to heritage objects," in *Die Musealisierung der Gegenwart. Von Grenzen und Chancen des Sammelns in Kulturhistorischen Museen*, ed. Sophie Elpers and Anna Palm (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014), 87-106.
- 13 On the criticism by Simone Zeefuik, see Richard Kofi & Annemarie de Wildt, "Meer dan een zwarte bladzijde," *Beleid en Maatschappij* 46, no. 2 (2019): 269.
- 14 Ed: VOS is one of the oldest organisations of Surinamers in the Netherlands.
- 15 For dilemmas, see: The team only want to display authentic objects and are happy to have at least one room that is dedicated to the Dutch colonial past. Activists are of the opinion that if that is all you intend to do, you might as well do nothing: see Annemarie de Wildt's blog post on conversations at the opening: <https://hart.amsterdam.nl/page/46118>
- 16 In collaboration with photographers Ahmet Polat, Milette Raats, Stacii Samidin and Humberto Tan.
- 17 See among others: <https://stadscuratorium.nl/collectie/elieser/>
- 18 Judikje Kiers, Imara Limon, Margriet Schavemaker and Jörgen Tjon A Fong, "Waarom het Amsterdam Museum de term 'Gouden Eeuw' niet langer zal gebruiken," *De Volkskrant*, 12 September 2019: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/waarom-het-amsterdam-museum-de-term-gouden-eeuw-niet-langer-zal-gebruiken-b2711957/?referrer=https://www.google.com/>.
- 19 Schavemaker, "Gekleurde verhalen."
- 20 The text of this paragraph is largely taken from the introduction to the catalogue to *The Golden Coach* (WBooks, 2020) and see also <https://www.goudenkoets.nl/verdieping/inleiding-op-de-tentoonstelling-de-gouden-koets-in-het-amsterdam-museum>
- 21 See <https://www.goudenkoets.nl/en/about-the-research>
- 22 For an analysis of the exhibition, also see Annemarie de Wildt, "The power of the museum, the Golden Coach at the Amsterdam Museum," *Camoc Review* (2023): 5-12.
- 23 For more information on the art in the Golden Coach exhibition, see: <https://www.goudenkoets.nl/verdieping/een-rituele-dans-met-het-verleden-kunstenaars-over-de-gouden-koets>
- 24 For the recordings, see www.goudenkoets.nl
- 25 See YouTube video from= January 13, 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4X-19aZZG64>
- 26 See <https://assets.amsterdammuseum.nl/downloads/Onderzoeksverslag-Gouden-Koets-online.pdf>
- 27 The approach to queer culture in particular has been at the centre of polyphonic curation for decades. Reflections on this took place in 2016 in the first *Queering the collections* symposium organised by the Amsterdam Museum together with the Reinwardt Academie and IHLIA LGBTI Heritage. Also see publications that discuss older examples of a polyphonic approach and working with different communities in this context. See also Annemarie de Wildt, "The City Museum as an Empathic Space," *Museum International* 70, no. 3-4 (2018). And Annemarie de Wildt, "From Multiculturalism to (Super)diversity: examples from the Amsterdam Museum," in *Museums, Migration and Identity in Europe*, ed. Christopher Whitehead, Katherine Lloyd, Susannah Eckersley and Rhiannon Mason. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Miia Ernst (head of education and outreach) developed an outreach/participation policy focused on urban diversity. Educator Miriam Sneeuwloper has played a key role in events and exhibitions organised together with the LGBTQ+ community.
- 28 See <https://www.coronaindestad.nl/>
- 29 For a more detailed analysis of this project, see Margriet Schavemaker, Esmee Schoutens, and Rowan Stol, "(Un)Curating COVID: Lessons from Corona in the City," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 11, no. 1 (2022): 72-92. Fair practice refers to paying creators according to the standards set out in the fair practice code, see <https://fairpracticecode.nl/>
- 30 Sites of Memory, "Returning the Gaze", tekst #759, De Nieuwe Toneelbibliotheek (Amsterdam, 2023), 42.

uncomfortable dialogues

Diary of a Diversity Researcher at the Bondefanten

emotions

everyday racism

diversity thinking

gender and sexuality

white innocence

power relations

language

Diary of a Diversity Researcher at the Bonnefanten

Arent Boon

1 December 14, 2022: Starting My Diary

Today, I have a meeting with a museum director.

A couple of weeks ago, I received an invitation to contribute to a volume dedicated to inclusivity practices in the cultural sector.¹ I received this particular invitation to write an essay based on my professional experiences as a diversity researcher, currently employed by the Bonnefanten, a museum in Maastricht. At the time of receiving this invitation, I am pursuing a research project concerning the question whether this museum's policies concerning diversity have translated to equitable acquisition and exhibition practices in the last ten years.

Before I set this meeting, I already decided I wanted to accept this offer. Still, I wanted to speak to the director of the Bonnefanten as well. I tell him that this is a great opportunity for me to reflect on the possibilities that diversity research creates within museums and the setbacks that may be on the horizon.

He gives me his blessing.

In the context of my work, such instances of negotiation are inseparable from the research itself. It is just one example of how concerns surrounding social justice and equity

within institutions devolve into a management object. More concretely, in this contribution I aim to expose how diversity within the institutional context of the museum operates as a non-performative. This concept was developed by Sara Ahmed in her *On Being Included* (2012). In this book, Ahmed asks whether the ease of the incorporation of diversity by institutions is “a sign of the loss of its critical edge.”² She specifically develops the concept of the non-performative to identify “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse does not produce the effects that it names.”³ In other words, for Ahmed, when diversity is invoked, this concept does not necessarily produce the desired effect.

After my meeting with the director, I return to my desk and make notes in my diary. I have kept this diary as my work progresses at the Bonnefanten to reflect on events such as this meeting. In this contribution, I will use this diaristic approach to reflect on diversity within the museum context. As a diversity researcher, my work is to expose the gap between diversity discourse and its effects. To write this diary, I have, to use Ahmed’s words, “followed diversity around.”⁴ In the museum, I hold office, work independently, but occasionally participate in meetings. In my diary, I collect my daily observations from my work. In what follows, I connect observations from my diary to concepts as they have been developed by scholars such as Sara Ahmed. In what follows, I trace some aspects of my work in progress, from its inception, to conducting the research, culminating in a presentation held during an internal meeting. I choose this diary approach to lay bare how diversity workers in the context of museums oscillate between the roles of observer and participant, critic and colleague.

2 March 2, 2022: The First Day at my Job

Today is the first day on my job at the Bonnefanten. I feel nervous, as anyone would be in my shoes. In the morning, I walk along the river Maas as the museum’s imposing brick walls and large, grey tower approach me.

In anticipation of my first day, my mind often returned to seeing the vacancy for my job for the first time. The vacancy for which I applied called for a young researcher who would map out the past ten years of the Bonnefanten’s policy and programming from the perspective of diversity. The position, akin to a work placement, had become available because of financial support from the Mondriaan Fund and was intended for only sixteen months. The vacancy for this position used a statement drawn from the museum’s diversity plan from 2021:

[It is] important that we look at our own collection and acquisition history and research in which ways with regards to gender, ethnic/cultural/religious background, age, sexual preference and/or LGBTQ context, the museum has built this special oeuvre of exhibitions and presentations.⁵

Here, the Bonnefanten identifies ways in which people can be diverse, so to speak, with regards to “gender, ethnic/cultural/religious background, age, sexual preference and/or LGBTQ context,” and suggests the representation of these groups in their collections and exhibitions needs to be researched further. At the same time, and perhaps in contrast to the above, the museum refers to its own oeuvre as “special”.

Such statements allude that museums are not neutral. Histories of colonialism, capitalism, nationalism and identity have

intrinsically and structurally shaped what objects are considered worthy of being collected and exhibited in museums.⁶ Such dynamics are obviously at play in the Bonnefanten’s institutional history as well. The Bonnefanten was founded in the nineteenth century as a provincial museum housing archeological and historical objects.⁷ The museum was eventually named after the Bonnefanten monastery in Maastricht where it was housed in the mid-twentieth century.⁸ The museum’s present building, designed by Italian architect Aldo Rossi, was opened in 1995.⁹ On my first day, I received a tour of the Bonnefanten’s depot, held in its basement. I was shown the museum’s eclectic collections, ranging from medieval sculpture to contemporary art installations.

The above statement from the diversity plan points to the museum perceiving itself as having become more diverse in the years leading up to my hiring. For instance, the museum’s current artistic director, Stijn Huijts, revised the Bonnefanten Award for Contemporary Art (BACA) to have a stated global scope. He also curated the group exhibition *SAY IT LOUD* (2020–2021), dedicated to contemporary artists reflecting on colonial histories.¹⁰ Moreover, Paula van den Bosch, conservator of contemporary art at the Bonnefanten, has focused for decades on female artists and artists dealing with gender identities.¹¹

Such intentions and initiatives have become commonplace in the museum sector, as testified by the International Council of Museums’ revised 2022 museum definition proposing that museums “foster diversity.”¹² In the Code Diversity and Inclusion, a Dutch policy instrument launched in 2019, the concept of diversity is used to describe differences between

individuals across different axes, such as race, gender and class, that influence the various positions these individuals hold within society and that cultural institutions must seek to represent.¹³ Such definitions of diversity are slippery, as often has been pointed out, because they risk reducing intersectional analyses of institutions and structural inequalities to the identification of individuals who are diverse.¹⁴ For instance, Quinsy Gario, in his interventions in the exhibition catalogue for *SAY IT LOUD*, points out to the Bonnefanten that diversity might become a “hollow concept.”¹⁵

To be more precise, by referring to its own oeuvre as “special,” this museum is struggling to acknowledge why researching its own collection with regards to “gender, ethnic/cultural/religious background, age, sexual preference and/or LGBTQ context” is so urgent. For Sara Ahmed, this kind of language risks operating as “happy talk” that creates a “positive, shiny image of the organization that allows inequalities to be concealed and thus reproduced.”¹⁶ In the academic context, Sophie Withaecx has identified the tendency to create the image of the institution as already diverse while leaving structural racism and sexism unaddressed.¹⁷ What needs to be acknowledged clearly and concretely are the power relations that have allowed mechanisms of exclusion to persist.

3 July 20, 2022: A Day in the Office

Almost five months have passed since I started my work as a diversity researcher at the Bonnefanten. I have entered through this office entrance most every day. By now, I feel I have settled in this work environment. I work in the office, but I also join meetings, such as those organized by the internal Diversity and

Inclusion working group. I also attend the museum's events and openings.

In this environment, diversity research remains my main focus. I operate as what some colleagues jokingly refer to as a "one-person department."¹⁸ I spend most of my days reading, tabulating data, writing up notes, sometimes reflecting in my diary. In my daily work, I have mapped out the Bonnefanten's institutional history, as well as traced how diversity as a term has been addressed in the museum's annual reports or collection plans. Moreover, I was asked to pursue a manual quantitative count of the gender and background of each artist whose work was acquired and exhibited in the last ten years by the Bonnefanten.¹⁹ My project revolves around the research question: To what extent have the Bonnefanten's policies surrounding diversity, as they have been developed in the last ten years, translated to sustainable acquisition and exhibition practices?

This can be discomfoting work. Discomfoting, because this method of counting enforces categorization: male, female, or non-binary, for instance. This contrasts sharply to how concepts such as intersectionality, as it originates with Black feminist thought, helps us to understand that various axes of difference, such as race, gender, class and sexuality, operate in tandem with each other.²⁰ At the same time, if I show some of my work to my colleagues, they are shocked and tell me they did not expect it to be this way. This discomfort also points to the potential of such methods to expose the racism and sexism inherent within institutional collection and exhibition policies and practices.²¹

Crucially, my research also confronts me with my own discomfort. As a queer person, I am diverse to the Bonnefanten.

I feel a personal urgency to critique normative structures in museums. After all, my aim is to hold up a mirror and raise awareness within this institution of its own historically shaped biases. At the same time, I should address my positionality: I am a cis-gender man, I have white privilege and I hold a university degree. I have become a Bonnefanten employee. Due to my privileges, I am granted access to this museum's archive and the knowledge of my colleagues in ways that other researchers are unable to. My discomfort also makes me aware of how mechanisms of "white innocence," as they have been mapped out by Gloria Wekker in her landmark eponymous study, inhabit me.²² In sum, the critical potential of this research bleeds together with my complicity in institutional practices. As Sara Ahmed indicates, diversity workers work for and against the institution.²³

4 July 26, 2022: Presenting my Research

I have a presentation about my project. I feel as nervous as I did for my first day at my job. My presentation is scheduled during a staff meeting where the director, curators and some of the department heads get together. We are given a large meeting room, where all attendees are seated around a long rectangular table. I take a seat at the front. In my presentation, I sketch the questions around which my work revolves. With respect to diversity, has the Bonnefanten practiced what it has been preaching? What transpires from my presentation is that mechanisms of inequality within museums must be addressed clearly.

As soon as I finish, an intense discussion erupts. Ideas and responses bounce from one side of the table to another. At one point, two colleagues have a tense debate with each other, disagreeing over whether art should be acquired by a museum

based on its merit or whether the identity of the artist should play a part. Clearly, diversity remains a controversial issue.

One explanation for this tension could be that within the Bonnefanten, a shift to a pressure cooker-like project-based mentality, not to mention my colleagues' varied and conflicting interests, has limited the time for them to consider the potential biases that are baked into their daily practices. Keeping this in mind, even organizing this discussion that might give a pause to reflect on their daily practices feels like an achievement in and of itself.

However, more convincing seems the argument that the notion that artists operate autonomously makes a case against diversity. Within the so-called "quality debate," the premise that museums collect or display art on the basis of its supposed inherent aesthetic merit serves to obscure biases and power relations that continue to shape how such institutions operate.²⁴ It is telling, then, that this controversy only comes to the surface once diversity is enacted within the institution. The Bonnefanten wrote about diversity in a policy plan, they secured the space for it, but once diversity is enacted, it becomes hard. Once again, a commitment made to diversity does not have to connect to what is done. As Sara Ahmed spelled out, "we have to work on [commitments] to make them work."²⁵

Gloria Wekker in the abovementioned *White Innocence* (2016), develops similar arguments. Herein, she observes that "discussions [about diversity] often substitute real actions that break through power relations, that really ensure more diversity."²⁶ In my understanding, this illustrates that discussions surrounding diversity within institutions are not necessarily transformative,

yet neither are they entirely pointless. Even though discussions about diversity create the opportunity to critique or resist "white innocence," the risk remains that entrenched mechanisms of power persist.

5 January 10, 2023: My First Draft

A couple of weeks have passed since my meeting with my director. By now, a first draft of my contribution is taking shape. I am wondering if I should send it to my colleagues before publishing it.

This doubt illustrates the negotiations involved in conducting diversity research within the Bonnefanten. I am pursuing a research project in which I map out whether the museum's diversity policies have translated to equitable collection and exhibition practices. The common thread running through this process, and this contribution in particular, is that diversity operates within museums as a non-performative. Sara Ahmed develops this concept to illustrate how commitments made with regards to diversity within institutions do not necessarily correspond to what is done. I choose the method of the diary to expose the gap between what is said and what is done within the context of the Bonnefanten.

Before this research was initiated, the Bonnefanten made a commitment to research how diverse their collection and exhibition practices had been. Such commitments often avoid addressing why diversity is a necessity in the first place. In turn, when I conduct my research, using a quantitative, manual count, for instance, I trigger discomfort. In being employed by a museum, yet exposing their positionality, I find myself working

for and against the institution. These tensions rise to the surface especially when I present my work. In spite of the commitment made to diversity, diversity here becomes controversial and contentious. The risk remains that the power dynamics within institutions remain uncontested.

It is crucial to point out that I, in writing this diary, become aware of my own complicity as a diversity researcher within these institutional dynamics. However, I have not entirely abolished the belief that diversity research carries the potential to confront explicitly mechanisms of exclusion, for instance with regards to racism and sexism. One first step, following Gloria Wekker, is for institutions and actors in powerful positions to resist “white innocence” by explicitly positioning oneself as white, as occupying a powerful racial and ethnic position.²⁷ Such steps could take place within “uncomfortable dialogues,” as Sophie Withaecx has articulated them.²⁸

At the time of writing, my current objectives are to present my research to my colleagues at the Bonnefanten and to stage such “uncomfortable dialogues.” Only time will tell what those dialogues will bring about.

- 1 I thank the editors of this volume for inviting me to contribute and for their insights and feedback on this article. I extend this gratitude to my colleagues at the Bonnefanten and to everyone else from whom I have learned. I hope they know who they are. All translations are my own.
- 2 Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012), 1.
- 3 Ibidem, 117.
- 4 Ibidem, 12.
- 5 Bonnefanten, *Diversiteit & inclusie* (Bonnefanten, 2021), 11.
- 6 A comprehensive discussion of the relationship between coloniality, modernity and museums extends beyond the contribution at hand. For one recent example, see Rolando Vásquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary*, Mondriaan Fonds, 2020.
- 7 Ton Quik, Bonnefantenmuseum: *De geschiedenis* (Bonnefanten, 2007), 9 – 28.
- 8 Ibidem, 28 – 45.
- 9 Ibidem, 81 – 85. See also Guido Goossens, *Bonnefantenmuseum: Het gebouw*, Bonnefanten, 2007.
- 10 Stijn Huijts, “The Proof of the Pudding is in the Eating,” in *Mix & Stir: New Outlooks on Contemporary Art from Global Perspectives*, ed. Helen Westgeest and Kitty Zijlmans (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021), 225, 226, and Stijn Huijts, Roxy Jongewaard and Quinsy Gario, “*Tracking the Changes: the Bonnefanten as a Learning Museum*,” in *Tracking the Changes*, ed. Stijn Huijts and Roxy Jongewaard (Maastricht: Bonnefanten, 2021), 16 – 25.
- 11 For example, see *A Posthumous Collaboration: Ine Schröder and her Archive* (Bonnefanten, 2019), exhibition catalogue.
- 12 See <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/>.
- 13 See <https://codedi.nl/>.
- 14 For a more extensive discussion and critique of intersectionality, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw amongst others, see the Introduction to this volume. For some critiques of diversity language, see op. cit. note 2, 51 – 54.
- 15 Op. cit. note 11, 21.
- 16 Op. cit. note 2, 72.
- 17 Sophie Withaecx, “Decolonizing the University: From Happy Diversity to Uncomfortable Dialogues,” in *Migration, Equality & Racism: 44 Opinions*, ed. Ilke Adam, Tundé Adefioye, Serena D’Agostino, Nick Schuermans and Florian Trauner (Brussels: VUBPress), 106 – 110.
- 18 The Bonnefanten’s other departments include the directors, curators, education, collection and documentations, marketing, amongst others.
- 19 See “De Collectie Nederland in cijfers,” *Metropolis M* no. 6 (2021): 60 – 63.
- 20 Gloria Wekker, *Witte onschuld: paradoxen van kolonialisme en ras* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017, 2nd ed.), 36 – 41.
- 21 Jasmijn Rana and Anouk de Koning, “Diversiteit in de culturele sector: over het ongerief en belang van meten,” *Boekman. Tijdschrift voor kunst, cultuur en beleid*, no. 133 (2022).
- 22 Op. cit. note 21, 29 – 33.
- 23 Op. cit. note 2, 15.
- 24 Pauline Salet, “Count Me In: Taking the Guerrilla Girls to Dutch Museums,” *MOED: Museum of Equality and Difference*, February 19, 2019: <https://moed.online/nl/count-me-in-taking-the-guerrilla-girls-to-dutch-museums/>.
- 25 Op. cit. note 2, 119.
- 26 Wekker, *Witte onschuld*, 249.
- 27 Op. cit. note 21, 263.
- 28 Op. cit. note 18, 110.

democratic
heritage

With an Eye on Power:
Doing Deep Democracy
and Deep Listening at
Imagine IC

everyday racism

listening

institutionality

ethical principles

co-creation

power relations

language

With an Eye on Power: Doing Deep Democracy and Deep Listening at Imagine IC

Jules Rijssen and Danielle Kuijten,
interviewed by Hester Dibbits

Jules Rijssen and Danielle Kuijten are long-time colleagues at Imagine IC.

Jules has a background in Cultural Anthropology, more specifically Demographic Anthropology and Caribbean Studies. He studied at the Universities of Leiden and Amsterdam and has spent several years working in the field of cultural heritage research. In 2014, he joined Imagine IC as a *network collector*. As such, he coordinates collection meetings based on the participatory method, conducts interviews for the archive, and is responsible for the artistic realisation of the programme together with the director and co-curator. His motto is “I collect people rather than stories!”. Jules is very passionate about oral history research. Combined with his amazing interview skills, this makes him just the right person to work at Imagine IC. His other passion is writing books. One of his most important publications is *Teken en zie de wereld (Join - the army/navy - and see the world)*, an oral history of Surinamese war veterans during the Second World War and the Korean War (2012). Together with Lucia Nankoe he also wrote *De slaaf vliegt weg (The slave flies off)*, an anthology of articles, interviews, and poems about the role of the arts in the imaging of Dutch slavery (2013). His most recent publication is *Op zoek naar Papa Koenders (Looking for Papa Koenders)*, which he wrote

with Andre Reeder and Roy Wijks (2019). Jules is currently working on a new book focussing on Suriname and the Second World War. He is also affiliated with NL-Lab as a guest researcher on heritage and inclusion.

Danielle Kuijten holds a Master of Museology from the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam University of the Arts). She started her career in the museum field as a freelancer in the heritage field under the name *Heritage Concepting*. Her main focus in projects is on co-creation, contemporary collecting, action curating, and transformation of museum praxis. That is also how she came to work at Imagine IC: a pioneer in the field of discussing and identifying heritage of contemporary society. Here she has dedicated her time to building a participative neighbourhood archive on and in the Amsterdam-Zuidoost district. Together with Jules and other participants, she has developed exhibitions on such topics as Black Resistance, Queering Zuidoost, and the Amsterdam 1992 Plane Crash. In 2022, she was the guest-curator of the first DOMiDLabs, Making Museum Design Participatory in Cologne, Germany. The labs aim to help DOMiD create a multifaceted and engaging migration museum. In March of 2023, she was appointed director & co-curator at Imagine IC. Danielle has been an active member of ICOM and, in particular, of COMCOL, ICOM's international committee for collecting, serving as the chair of this committee in recent years. In 2023, she was invited to join the jury of the European Museum of the Year Awards.

Hester: Jules, what is your take on the Critical Visitor project?

Jules: To me, this project is all about power and relations of power. I find that this is an important theme when talking about

heritage and institutionality. It's a big topic but its importance is immediately clear when I look at the work that we are doing at Imagine IC and the network with which we are working. Take the mapping of archives. This inevitably gives rise to certain expectations. A partner with whom we wanted to work said, "If you want to do this, great, but you will have to do it. Make a list, you know exactly what you want." I replied: "No, I want to look at this with you. I want to see what you have through your eyes." This is a very good example of how power works. This person obviously thinks I'm an expert. This same dynamic also manifests itself in conversations about decolonisation, the restitution of objects, and provenance research.

Danielle: Publications on decolonization tend to address matters of power. But talking about power and doing something with it are two very different things. What we've noticed is that people who have the power start to figure out for *themselves* how they might adapt it, instead of deriving this power from others, from those who do not have this power. Take repatriation for example. Those who have power (both in the political and legal sense as well as those who 'have' it during the conversation) often determine which pathway to follow instead of engaging in a conversation about this pathway first with the various stakeholders. So what will it take to achieve this initial rapprochement, to ensure that violence is not constantly reproduced? If you look at how this thinking should be rooted in practices, this implies that we need to focus on ways of becoming better listeners.

Jules: It's all about 'the power of the word'. Our 'expert' role raises expectations. And when I use specific words in conversation with the people in our network, they adopt those words.

Which is fine, but you obviously want to know whether you are referring to the same thing. We need to be mindful of this. As a researcher at NL-Lab I have attended several conferences and I find that the words I use are often at odds with the diverse expectations of the people at these conferences. In some cases, they may be further ahead of the curve and think that I have some catching up to do. But in other cases, my work in this field may influence my reasoning and thinking. Perhaps this also is the issue with theoretical concepts. Theoretical concepts are important, we also use them at Imagine IC, but sometimes the distance between you and the other is such that there can be no rapprochement. This isn't always necessary, but I ask people to reflect on the influence of power and on work ethics together. Do we want to answer the following question together: this is where we're at, but where do we want to go from here?

Danielle: I find it interesting what you just said, perhaps they need to catch up, maybe I need to. In a sense, this means we also fall into the trap of linear thinking about knowledge. It shouldn't be about who has made the most progress. A person's expertise shouldn't depend on the language they use, because here too language is the corruptive factor.

Jules: I like that you added this. We also observed this linear thinking in the exhibition we made on the topic of trauma. The question was: how long are you allowed to grieve and how long are you allowed to harbour this pain? Grief is linked to time, again starting from a linear way of thinking. We often lack the margin for a more circular approach to time. People write about it, but in conversation we find that it is still a bridge too far in many cases. It all seems too abstract, too woolly. Whereas we have concluded that this insight can be very helpful when



Recitation from the book *Be invisible* by Murat Isik in the Kempering parking garage during the final of the heritage series *Urban Emotions (or City Feelings)*, which was realized in collaboration with the Reinwardt Academy (2018).

dealing with pain and trauma: for some people, pain and trauma are part of their daily lives, they have become a part of their identity. This insight requires a different way of thinking, a different approach.

Danielle: Museum presentations often tend to be linear too.

Hester: How do you organise this conversation about this with each other as an organisation?

Jules: Often it's a spontaneous process. We don't organise a special meeting to discuss this. It's part of our daily conversations at work. It's not that we don't have a framework for action. I recently mentioned to Danielle that we should think about compiling a reader. So many people, students and PhD students, and other researchers, have all published papers on this. We are a knowledge organisation, but we don't tout the fact that we have all this knowledge. We experiment, of course, including with emotion networks for example. We get our knowledge from everywhere. But how can we pool this knowledge, how can we give the people who work with it and students in the future access to it? It will take time, but it's important that we do this. Because then you also know where you stand, both in practice but also theoretically.

Danielle: Conversations are an organic, internal process, with stimuli from all around us. When we read something interesting, we share it and this informs our gaze, our critical reflection. We are constantly redefining it, as part of a critical reflection. Looking at where and how we can move forward. This is also the ambition behind our Arts Plan: how can we develop listening techniques? We are always eager to talk to each other. This is

something we really missed during the pandemic. We value this continuous critical reflection with each other tremendously.

Hester: So how does this work in practice?

Jules: It's all very organic. Large institutions have an R&D department, where you can follow continuous training or where knowledge can be shared, but we share knowledge very organically. We come into contact very easily with each other.

Danielle: We always give updates during our weekly team meetings. Everyone attends these meetings, including the employee who is in charge of operations. People don't automatically start from their role or ambitions to put things into practice, but we do pick things up from each other. We try to listen to each other: to learn what inspires them?

Hester: Could these different voices also be the voices of 'critical friends'? How is the notion of the 'critical visitor' implemented within the organisation?

Jules: We value every voice we hear. Sometimes it's worth visiting the neighbourhood, being on the ground. Establishing that connection with people is crucial. We share the building with the library, and I try to take advantage of this by engaging with people. On one occasion a visitor said to me: "I'd really prefer it if you filmed everything." I had never given it much thought. Power also plays a role on this level: the power of habit, the power of the order of things. The request made me realise that there is a group of people with reading difficulties.



Panel discussion with makers and wearers about the meaning of traditional clothing during the opening of the exhibition *Saya & Koto: layers of fabric and time* (2019).

Hester: That’s interesting: because the reader that you mentioned earlier is a language-based output, aimed at a specific audience.

Jules: But that’s the challenge we face. You have to constantly ask yourself what you’re doing. Emotion networking, for example, is another, very language-based process. But this language can be a barrier for people.

Hester: Danielle, you joined Imagine IC in 2012. How do you think attention to the role of power and relations of power has developed since then? Has this become a more explicit priority? What are your thoughts on this?

Danielle: The common theme was always heritage democracy – although it was not always explicitly defined as such – and the questions were always the same: who may speak, who will be heard, and who won’t? There is an obvious link with power. Our use of the term ‘democratic’ has been informed and inspired by the method, theory, and vision of ‘deep democracy,’ where the meanings and emotions of minorities also have a voice. So it’s not about providing a platform for the voice of the majority but rather about making these minority voices visible. Instead of always giving the like-minded a voice, we aim to strike a balance between different voices. At what level is there a clash? And how can these clashes add to the conversation, without settling for a consensus, trying to please everyone?

The evolution within our organisation and elsewhere is visible, but it’s a slow-moving process.

At Imagine IC, we soon realised that it shouldn't always be the institution that interviews people because it means that we are still in the driver's seat, taking the lead. The idea that it is better to give space to people so that they can do it themselves has always been our priority, and this has also allowed us to move forward in our reflection. We have become increasingly aware that if we do this like this, we are still in a position of power. It's a learning curve. Which is why we now ask ourselves: are we really listening? I'm currently reading Eva Meijer's book *Verwar het niet met afwezigheid* (2022). It's about political silences. It demonstrates that even when everyone has a seat at the table, often the same people are still doing all the talking.

After meetings, I sometimes think, hmm, I talked quite a lot. This kind of awareness, however minor, also in relation to your own role within your team, is important. Because other people can tell who you are as a team, how you work as a team. That is why we find it important to examine this together. Because we want to move forward, including on the external level. What about reciprocity? We've noticed that people can be very generous when it comes to sharing things with us so we feel that it is our duty to make sure that we also share things. But sometimes there is that niggling doubt. We have a mission, we are given funding to implement this mission and, consequently, we have power. Even if we share things, the power structure always remains intact. Perhaps we can organise this in another way in the future?

Hester: Ten years ago, the mission was "Imagine IC collects and presents the heritage of the future." Is this still the case today?

Danielle: We identify what urgencies there are for the neighborhood, at the same time "we also have a voice amidst all the voices and those determine what we ultimately call heritage." 'Collecting and presenting heritage' sounds a bit too simple to me. I think we've evolved. Now we are looking at how we can have a conversation about this with each other and what we think is important in this conversation.

Hester: How do you deal with your own voice in exhibitions?

Danielle: We were never solely a presentation institution, we are a development institution. Presentation is one of the instruments we have used over the years, but never as a goal in itself. We do not develop exhibitions. We use them. And yes, we have our own vision on this, which we question continuously. If you read the introductory text, you will see that Jules and I signed it. You can hear our voice in it, we wanted to be transparent about this.

When we share things that we have collected, whether they are objects or personal meanings, you hear the people to whom they belong or matter in these texts. It's their voice you hear. We also don't think we should rewrite what they said because it might sound better. We want you to engage with these people when you read the texts. We also discuss this with them.

In the exhibition about the 30th anniversary of the Bijlmer Plane Crash, we specifically chose not to present objects, but use audio so you could hear people's voices. This is known as an exhibition that is largely devoid of objects. The emphasis is on listening: you hear fragments from the various interviews in which people explain how they deal with this past. It was a



Collecting radio listening behaviour with networks
in Amsterdam Southeast for the *Tune In Fade Out*
project: local radio in the Bijlmer (2021).

test. By contrast, we showed a lot of stuff when we marked the 25th anniversary of the plane crash. During our conversations, we discovered that many people still feel the need to be heard. And that is how we conveyed this need.

Jules: This requires a different way of looking, of being present. The object also feels your presence: every object intervenes with our past and with our presence. But people feel compelled to listen in a presentation with fewer objects. You then have to deal with your ‘being’ in a different way.

Danielle: For us, listening involves so much more than simply listening with your ears. Listening is also about the silences, and about observing the body or about what the body expresses. Even if you listen without paying attention to all these cues, this still involves language. How do you engage with people who express themselves in a different way? And how can you corroborate your observations with someone else, and share them in an exhibition?

Hester: How does this approach relate to the collective?

Danielle: Ultimately, the idea is not to compile a fanfare of individual stories. I’m also opposed to the idea that our main focus is collecting stories. Because the implication is that it’s all about the individual. We want to show the variety of meanings/positions in society.

Jules: The theme selects the participant.

Danielle: So we do not select by target group or community.

Hester: Would you consider your approach intersectional because you start from the theme?

Jules: Yes I think so. By working from metropolitan themes, different factors always come together. Topics that our network has addressed itself include parking garage Kempering, or the 40th anniversary of the Krater theater project, about the history of the puppet theater founded by parents in Ganzenhoef which later became the Bijlmer Parktheater.

Danielle: In the case of the exhibition about local media, a number of radio producers submitted requests themselves as did people who listen to the radio all the time, and find it important.

Danielle: We thought the airplane disaster of 1992 in the Bijlmer was an important issue, but the sense of urgency came from those who were directly involved.

Hester: So in the case of the airplane crash, people wondered, “why are we not being seen, not being heard at the national level?.” How does Imagine IC deal with that tension?

Jules: The exhibition on the airplane crash is a good example. Initially, the National Archives only wanted to provide a copy of the minutes of the meeting of the Council of Ministers the day after the disaster, but Danielle wanted the original records. Because you hope that this will reveal a blind spot, which spreads like an oil slick and so people can discuss this type of issue.

Hester: Is Imagine IC a critical visitor with respect to the big players?

Danielle: Yes, on two levels. There is the conversation about different interests, which we are trying to put on the agenda through the co-collection lab. With this conversation, we are also trying to raise awareness among those big institutions beyond all the procedures of which they have claimed ownership. Some procedures are still necessary, of course, and they are in place for a reason. But since then, we have made progress together and we also need to (dare to) take another look at what has already been collected. There needs to be a new balance, and this also relates to power. If a major institution responds to a loan request with ‘yes, but only if it’s climate-neutral, that’s really important,’ then I often think: “What does this say about your relationship with the people here, for whom this is very important?” We try to start a conversation. In some instances, this works better than others.

Another important aspect is chain responsibility. I recently attended a presentation of the study *Dit is ons publiek* (This is our audience) by Moker PO-i.¹ These are all presentation institutions and small development institutions. They include the CBK and Framer Framed but also Artists in residence organisations, for example. Like us, these small institutions invest in and experiment with projects, artists, and developments. This is then later reflected on bigger stages, which often present this as new discoveries.

How do we handle the chain responsibility of those small and medium-sized institutions that have to prove themselves again

and again to get the necessary funding? Take the Maasdamme Collection and the family's question about its future, which we took up with our network to investigate. How do we remain visible when something that we address garners widespread support? People often knock on our door because they like to learn from methods or want access to our network. Admittedly, some things have changed in recent years. We have many partners out there who really appreciate what we do and who really think about reciprocity with us. Not just about "how can we do this with you?" but also, how do we do that with your supporters and what can we do for you? This is always the first question we ask when institutions ask us whether they may tap into our network: What are you offering the network in return? Because no, sorry, we are not an address book.

There needs to be accountability and solidarity.

It's not that we want to keep what we develop here to ourselves, we want to share it. We also see that this is our role in the field, we are not a museum that delivers presentations, takes care of collections. Our main mission is to develop conversations and, using our experiences in Amsterdam-Zuidoost, show how you can shape those conversations. In doing so, we want to inspire our field both nationally and internationally, to develop new practices, striking a new balance that takes a different approach to these relations of power.

Did you notice by the way that we refrained from using the word 'participatory'? I try not to use it any more. The concept has lost its meaning. At some point, terms lose their value in our field. We start using new terms that do not necessarily refer to new

things, because we are still dealing with the same issues, but we always try to use the right terminology, in that endless limitation of language.

We are aware that our way of working requires different things from us and that we need to constantly redefine things. We need to ask ourselves which competencies we need in-house and monitor which ones we find important but where we hit a limit. It may mean hiring someone in some cases, like a trauma expert. We don't need to be trained to do this ourselves.

But not having it doesn't mean that we can not use these competences or that our participants can not benefit from it when sharing their personal stories with us. We have the responsibility to provide aftercare. Ourselves or through us by someone else. So not "Okay, thanks." And "we're going to do something amazing with this." No, we ask people things. Not just in the case of a plane crash, but also in terms of the legacy of slavery. You're asking quite a lot from the people who participate in the project, and of the project team, on the emotional level. Which brings you back to the subject of ethics: what are the ethics of our practice? What are the ethical values and ethical standards we apply?

1 See <https://ditisonspubliek.nl/>

thinking with
failure

Musing on a Queer Museum of Failure

critical / -ity

listening

institutionality

gender and sexuality

social norms

colonialism

power relations

shadow stories

Musing on a Queer Museum of Failure¹

Liang-Kai Yu

What does it mean to think about the museum in relation to failure? Or what does it mean for a museum to fail? Failure seems to be the very opposite of what a museum tends to be. From its birth, a public museum seemed to be assigned to celebrate the triumph of a nation, a golden age, and great artistic/technological achievements. With increasing financial pressures since the financial crisis of 2008 and perhaps constant anxiety to maintain their institutional reputation, museums are compelled to perform indicators of success: visitor numbers, media exposure, architectural expansion, public satisfaction, and others. Within such a regime overwhelmed with neoliberal success, how does the notion of failure help us to rethink the museum? This article is an invitation to think about and with failures in museums. Thinking with failure, museums might be able to imagine a more complex history that moves beyond historical glory, the cultural canon, and progressive narratives. A history tells not only a story of pride and victory but also shame, losses, and invisibility.

The House of Pride

Although it claims to welcome everyone, this is a museum that dedicates itself to 'victors.' Walking through the Gallery of Honour (*Eregalerij*) in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, visitors are orientated to adore the greatest achievement of the 'Dutch Golden Age'. Frans Hals, Jan Steen, Johannes Vermeer, and others pave the way towards the hallmark of civic

pride: Rembrandt's *Night Watch*. What about the rest of the stories under the shadows of the Golden Age? The slave trade which sustained national wealth? Cultural historians Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff have argued that Dutch colonial history has been marginalized in favour of art-historical connoisseurship at the Rijksmuseum.² They argue that this anaesthetization has led to a rather simplified image of a national history, despite the historical complexity. In 2021, for the very first time, the Rijksmuseum presented the exhibition 'Slavery' in ten personal stories that addressed the historical impact of the Dutch colonial enterprise. While personal stories might indeed diversify the conventional way the national collection has been displayed, in what ways the permanent presentation of the Gallery of Honour will be reformulated remains to be addressed.³

If, to quote Audre Lorde, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," is it possible to redesign the house? The Tropenmuseum, for example, redesigned its entrance in 1973. Today, the original monumental building, designed in 1913, has become an embarrassment of colonial power display. Its function was to celebrate the colonial achievement of the Dutch empire in the early twentieth century. Therefore, the redesign of the entrance lowering it down to ground level in 1973 was to 'humble' the grandeur of the colonial architecture. Still, after the modest entrance to the first floor, visitors are welcomed, or overwhelmed, with this gigantic, wide-open, spacious hall. Are there alternative solutions? Do we redesign or 'cancel' this dark heritage? By doing so would we not erase the colonial history and its marker of violence as well? Thinking with failure, I propose, is not to look for the opposite of victory. It is not to look for the absolute judgement of right or wrong. Rather, it



Opening of the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam, in the Hall of Light of the current Wereldmuseum Amsterdam (former Tropenmuseum and Royal Institute for the Tropics) by Her Majesty Queen Wilhelmina, 9 October 1926, Wereldmuseum Amsterdam.

is to rethink victory and loss through a grey zone beyond the binary of winners and losers.

Play to Lose

What do queer people have to do with failure? I learned to think with failure from the queer thinker Jack Halberstam, who wrote: “Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers, failure can be a style...”⁴ Failure to become a straight adult, failure to build an affluent family, and failure to lead a successful career, to name just a few examples. Halberstam also pinpoints how feminism draws much more energy from failure than success.⁵ Indeed, among the art history of great white men, American art historian Linda Nochlin asks: “Why have there been no great female artists?” in 1971.⁶ More recently, cultural theorist Eliza Steinbock raises the question: “Why are there no great *trans** artists?”⁷ Their answers, however, are not to follow the rhetoric of these questions as they locate the problem of failure within these women or trans people. To do so is to reproduce the romantic myth of neoliberalism, where success can be directly attributed to personal ability and efforts. The real problem lies in the social norms (sexism, racism, Euro-centrism, ableism, etc.) and cultural institutions which prevent minority people from fitting into the masculine frame of ‘greatness.’ In light of this, failure teaches us more than successful stories by revealing systematic exclusions and social suppressions.

Can failure be an artistic strategy which refuses the tyranny of greatness? Not only are there talents who fail to become a great artist, but also objects which flounder to become great artwork. German-American sculptor Eva Hesse’s ephemeral installation *Contingent* (1969) embodies a failure as such. The work unfolds

eight mixed scrolls made of latex and fibreglass hanging from the ceiling. As time goes by, *Contingent* decays and discolours. It fails to sustain the victor’s myth of lasting forever. My favourite quote from Hesse is: “Art doesn’t last, life doesn’t last; it doesn’t matter.”⁸ The dematerialization demonstrates its resistance to the masculine myth of being long-lasting, monumental, and substantial. As Halberstam has argued: “If success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards.”⁹ Whereas the cost of showing success has been too great, it might be better to withdraw or disappear from the visual economy.

Invisible Labours

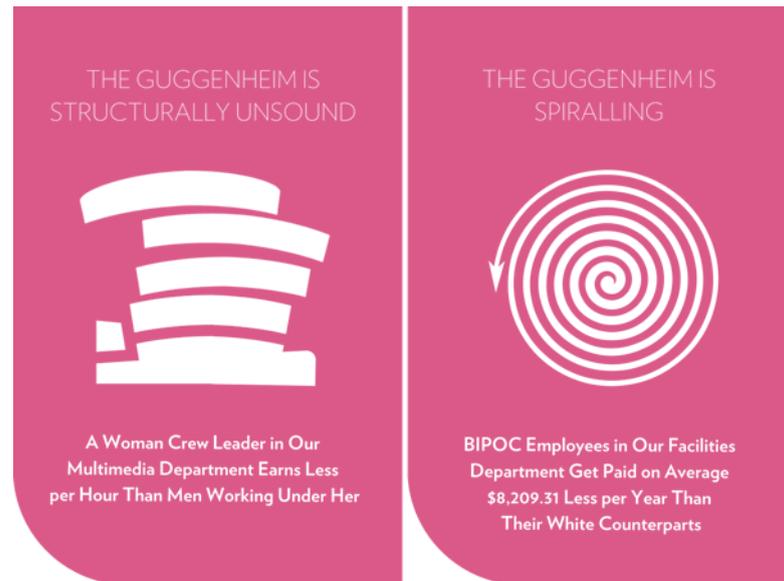
To display a great artist’s work or a great nation in a museum, tremendous labour is carried out but recedes from the spectacle. Combining his working experience in American museums, artist Fred Wilson brilliantly performed his piece *My Life as a Dog* (1992), in which he masqueraded as a museum guard during a gathering with museum docents at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The ironic success of this performance lies in uncovering the whiteness of the museum staff who failed to recognize Wilson dressed as a guard.¹⁰ This performance shows that what lies behind the great narrative of a museum is, more than untold histories, people, often with marginal social backgrounds, working under precarious conditions. Intense and invisible care has been paid to realise an ideal image of a great museum.

While recently there has been a trend in showcasing a sense of institutional transparency and unveiling what is behind the curtain of museum work such as the restoration of Rembrandt’s *Night Watch* or the open storage depot of the Museum

Boijmans Van Beuningen collection, some other invisible hands remain unrecognised and underpaid. Initiating a digital form of activism, a group of New York-based and international artists named Artists for Workers (AFW) produces masquerade museum websites which parody institutional languages, fonts, and aesthetics, demanding museums change the racial inequality in the institutions. On its mock web page of the Guggenheim Transparency Initiative (2020), AFW reveals that ‘BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) in our department get paid on average \$8,209.31 less per year than their white counterparts’.¹¹ The website also archives the incident of Chaédria LaBouvier, the first black curator to curate the 2019 exhibition *Basquiat’s ‘Defacement’: The Untold Story* at the Guggenheim Museum. Despite the honour to devote her research to the show, LaBouvier was excluded from the decision-making in the exhibition presentation and uninvited to a discussion panel of Basquiat while other museum curators were present.¹² While nowadays a great black artist’s ‘untold story’ can be told, the role of a black curator seems to be diminished if not completely invisible. If the museum ethic is to demand a curator be an invisible hand, does it make the greatness greater or more visible? Does it make success seemingly effortless? Whose labour is made invisible to make the success possible?

Performing Failures

The social expectation to succeed is exhausting. Just as one of the normative definitions of failure, the ‘inability’ to perform or participate, leaves little room for rest and recovery. In her monograph *Artificial Hell*, art historian Claire Bishop concludes that the predominant narrative of participation presupposes the binary between passive visitors and active participants.¹³



Artist for Workers, Guggenheim Transparency Initiative, 2020, poster templates, in support of the Guggenheim Museum union. Courtesy of Grayson Earle, Shobun Baile, Miranda Samuels & collaborators

Such contempt towards passiveness is problematic. Not only for those who have been considered passive socially and historically (many might identify themselves as women, queer, trans, people of colour, among others), but also the demand to be active presupposes an ideal able-bodied and energetic subject. Artist Shannon Finnegan's *Do You Want Us Here or Not* (2020), an installation series of wooden benches, chairs, and cushions, mostly in blue, brilliantly reveals the ableism in museum space. One chair writes: "This exhibition has asked me to stand for too long. Sit if you agree." Museum fatigue should not be only taken as an issue of generalized visitor studies. It points to the very ableist nature of the museum's accessibility.

In light of queer failure that refuses to confirm the normative success, some small-scale projects might have managed to do so (even though they tend to persist temporarily and leave little archival trace within the institutional memory). Initiated by museum educator Daniel Neugebauer and facilitated by Alice Venir and Olle Lundin, *Queering the Collection* since 2015 at the Van Abbemuseum is a project that takes failure as their reflection point. They recognize the impossibility for a museum as a norm-making institution to be 'queer enough'.¹⁴ From DIY workshops, drag up events, informative garments, to a Dutch glossary of queer sign languages, these small-scale initiatives take educational tools as their entry point to unlearn and relearn embodied ways of queer and feminist knowledge making. The Qwearing garments conducted by Lundin and Venir, for instance, offers visitors to drag themselves in versatile and colourful clothes walking through the museum collection building. Such an accessible tool could prompt the visitor to be more mindful of their own bodies and relearn their body movement and playful performativity. In 2018, reflecting on their

working experience with queering the Van Abbe, Venir together with artistic researcher Julius Thissen co-curated the trans artist residency programme *Why Am I Here?* at the Van Abbemuseum. By asking the question, they interrogated the institutional desire for diverse, especially trans bodies, pointing to a failure to initiate more sustainable involvement rather than temporary interests in seeing and capturing trans bodies. Through a year of on-site, archival, and collection research resulting in a day of multi-media and body performances by Olave Nduwanje, Geo Wyeth, and Mavi Veloso, this project proposed multiple ways of engaging with the selected museum collection and the museum space exposing the colonial and racist history beneath the collection and institution (rather than looking at a trans body).

Sometimes exhibiting a failure is more insightful than a flawless presentation. In a similar radical gesture like *Why Am I Here?*, *Queer Is Not a Manifesto* (2019) at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, curated by Carly Rose Bedford and Aynouk Tan, adapted a radical door policy. It gave free access to "people who identify as queer, trans, refugee, sex worker or a person of colour to participate in this evening." Yet, despite its radical inclusivity, the programme recognizes its 'failure' that their work "should, in fact, be long-lasting labour from the institution to make it a more inclusive space in terms of representation, collection, language and down to its language and down to its board members." Refusing to participate in the museum as another great object or a document of diversity, *Queer Is Not a Manifesto* positions itself as a 'failing' yet temporary caring space of queer performances and story-telling from wide-ranging perspectives. Both *Why Am I Here?* and *Queer Is Not a Manifesto* demand a more engaging listening to bodies that fail to enter the mainstream institution. From the exclusive cultural



'Queer is Not a Manifesto,' Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam,
1 February 2019, view of the audience at the event.
Photo Prins de Vos

institution, they demand more systematic transformation, an unfulfilled queer utopia.

To rethink the museum in relation to failure is to open space for unpredictable experiments and radical futurity. For queer scholar José Esteban Muñoz, 'Utopia's rejection of pragmatism is often associated with failure. And, indeed, most profoundly, utopianism represents a failure to be normal'.¹⁵ As the norm is often shaped by the powerful, queer failure enables alternative rooms for fantasy without necessarily renouncing its entanglement with practical matters. Small-scale queer projects, performances, and exhibits do not only allow alternative experiments but also embody fruitful failures for art workers from minority backgrounds to navigate through the master's house. They will never dismantle the master's house. But they may temporarily sneak in queer desires and unrealized fantasies. Their ephemeral traces, noises, and whispers require attentive listening and care.¹⁶

Importantly, I consider that failure helps us to ask more critical questions in the realm of museum thinking and practice. Failure makes us more aware of the systematic deficiency such as institutional exclusion and employment policy rather than a personal problem. Failure disrupts the progression of the museum narrative, revealing what is hidden from the glorious panorama sustained in the permanent exhibition. Failure compels us to rethink not only what a museum shows but also how a museum represents, how a great artist is made, how a great artwork is formulated, how institutional and individual labours are visualized and invisibilized, and how accessibility might be problematized.

- 1 This article has been published earlier in another version under the title “Programma” at *Baseline. Een nulmeting van queerness in Nederlandse musea* (2020), an experimental online publication by STUDIO i in Dutch. I appreciate the generous support of the editorial team of STUDIO i, especially critical feedback from Inez Blanca van der Scheer and Mariëlle Smith. It was revised for publication in Bas Hendriks’s edited volume *Queer Exhibition Histories* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2023).
- 2 Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff, “Een klein land dat de wereld bestormt. Het nieuwe Rijksmuseum en het Nederlandse koloniale verleden,” *BMGN: Low Countries Historical Review* 129, no. 1 (2014): 156–169.
- 3 Pao-Yi Yang observes that in addition to the slavery exhibition, seventy-seven display objects have had labels added that address a hidden connection with Dutch enslavement, including Pieter Claesz’s painting *Still Life with a Turkey Pie* (1627). See Pao-Yi Yang, “The Rijksmuseum’s Slavery Exhibition, 5 June–29 August 2021,” *Visual Communication*, 8 March, 2022. See <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14703572211063561>.
- 4 Jack Halberstam (published under Judith Halberstam), *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011, 3.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 4–5.
- 6 Linda Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?,” *Art News* 69 (January 1971), reprinted in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 145–178.
- 7 Eliza Steinbock, “Collecting Creative Transcestors: Trans* Portraiture Hirstory, from Snapshots to Sculpture,” in *A Companion to Feminist Art*, ed. Hilary Robinson and Maria E. Buszek (Hoboken, NJ, USA: Wiley, 2019), 225–242.
- 8 Cindy Nemser interview with Eva Hesse, 20 January 1970, Getty Research Institute: <https://www.getty.edu/recordingartists/season-1/hesse/>.
- 9 Halberstam, 3.
- 10 Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*. MIT Press, 2011.
- 11 Artists for Workers (AFW), “Guggenheim Transparency Initiative,” <https://www.guggenheim.net/>.
- 12 Siddhartha Mitter, “Behind Basquiat’s ‘Defacement’: Reframing a Tragedy,” *New York Times*, 30 July 2019. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/arts/design/basquiat-defacement-guggenheim-curator.html?searchResultPosition=1/>.
- 13 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso, 2012.
- 14 Anne Rensma, Daniel Neugebauer, and Olle Lundin, “‘A Museum Can Never Be Queer Enough’: The Van Abbemuseum as a Testing Ground for Institutional Queering” in *Museums, Sexuality, and Museum Activism*, eds. Joshua G. Adair and Amy K. Levin (New York: Routledge, 2020), 278–287.
- 15 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and Future of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2019, 172.
- 16 I am indebted to Tao Leigh Goffe’s creative presentation at the Inward Outward Symposium in 2020 and her exploration of the potentiality of black feminist listening in the British Imperial Archive through remixing black visual, popular music, and archival materials.

Method

**group process
with object**

Emotion Networking: A Heritage Practice

colonialism

emotions

heritage wisdom

language

hands-on

safety

Emotion Networking: A Heritage Practice

Hester Dibbits

What happens when a diverse group shares feelings about a cultural practice, building, place, archival document or museum object and explores the ensuing interaction together? Over the past five years, dozens of ‘emotion networking sessions’ were organised starting from this premise.

The Reinwardt Academy’s research group and Imagine IC jointly developed emotion networking as a method.¹ It was inspired by a shared feeling of discomfort about the lack of critical reflection in the discourse, both in the media but also of some professionals working in museums, archives and (other) heritage organisations: as if heritage were a given, crucial for establishing a group’s identity, becoming something that must, by definition, be preserved. But things are not that simple. On the contrary, when we talk about heritage, there is something else going on: it feels as if there is something at stake, and, apart from advocates of preservation, there are also often people who do not care about it at all.

In an emotion networking session, people are invited to share their feelings on a specific object or theme and discuss any changes that occur in these feelings during the exchange. Changes may occur because of something a participant says, or in response to information introduced during the conversation, in the form of a text, image, or recording. Such an ‘introduced

voice' can shed a whole new light on the object or theme, moving the entire constellation. But it could also be that nothing or almost nothing changes.

Emotion networking was originally conceived as an educational tool, as an exercise, aimed at making people more knowledgeable about heritage, or rather making them aware of the complex dynamics surrounding heritage. The idea is that this exercise provides people with the tools they need to take a meta-perspective when engaging with the past. In a world where things are constantly being labelled as 'heritage,' it is important to understand why this is happening, in which context, and what this means. The format has evolved from the start: a growing interested network raises new questions and provides new insights. Understanding heritage development processes is important for professionals working with heritage such as heritage conservationists, the staff of NGOs in the field of intangible heritage, educators in museums and archives, but also, for example, primary and secondary school teachers. Discussions in their classrooms centre on a wide range of cultural practices. But they may also take their students on a visit to a monument or museum.² Emotion networking was developed to provide people with new perspectives for action, enabling them to actively participate in heritage negotiations.

The idea of emotion networking is based on network thinking. The work of Bruno Latour, whose Actor Network Theory (ANT) draws attention to the agency of objects, for the material, and the tactile, was a major source of inspiration.³ But we were also inspired by other advocates of network approaches and systems thinking. One of them is Ulf Hannerz, who in his 1980 book, *Exploring The City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology*,

devotes an entire chapter to network approaches, titled *Thinking with Networks*. Hannerz writes among others: "[...] network notions seem particularly useful as we concern ourselves with individuals using roles rather than with roles using individuals, and with the crossing and manipulation rather than the acceptance of institutional boundaries. It is in this light we see the connection of network analysis both to what may be termed anthropological action theory and to the study of urban and other complex societies."⁴

The starting point for the conversation is not a specific community but a phenomenon: a practice, place or object, and the unpredictable network to which it belongs. Much attention is paid to the dynamics between individual actors and factors, agency and appropriation, the crossing of boundaries, relationships, and complex interrelationships. The idea is that thinking in terms of a networked constellation can contribute to getting a grip on heritage development processes. The assumption is that this may foster a sense of guidance or insight, based on shared skills, such as being able to listen to each other and working and living together without having to agree or being the same.

One thing that is sometimes missing here is that the role of the community, the collective, is underexposed, even though this is crucial in the context of heritage: people have strong feelings about heritage objects, precisely because of their significance for the collective. This issue came up several times in The Critical Visitor project in the context of intersectionality: what if we are willing to take the fact that thinking in terms of unambiguously defined (target) groups does not work into account? In so doing, do we wilfully ignore the power of the

collective, which is so important in the struggle for social justice? This issue will continue to be the subject of much debate and arises time and again at different times, both during and after emotion networking sessions.

Below, I start by briefly explaining the structure of an emotion networking session. Next, I address a number of other questions that arise when working with this method and call for more, and for more systematic, research.

Formats

Currently, we – the Reinwardt Academy and Imagine IC – distinguish between two different formats: a paper-based one and a format in a space. The former is widely used by the Reinwardt Academy for sessions with professionals from the heritage and other sectors, the latter by Imagine IC in their educational offering for schoolchildren. In both cases, a brief introduction to the method is always given. This usually involves discussing the concepts of ‘heritage’ and ‘heritage wisdom’ and walking the participants through the different steps. Before the exercise starts, a check-in always takes place. Participants are invited to share how they are ‘standing or sitting’ and what they feel is needed for the session to go smoothly. Sometimes, agreements are made beforehand. For the paper-based exercise, the following steps are then followed:

- 1 Participants are invited to gather in a circle around a large sheet of paper with an emotion networking grid either standing or sitting, with the item in the middle of the circle.⁵ The facilitator then asks the participants to silently choose a position on the grid that best describes the feelings that the item evokes in them by writing down their initials and the



Emotion networking, paper-based format at a study day for museum and heritage professionals, Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam University of the Arts), Amsterdam 2023. Photo Rosa Mul.

Emotion networking, in a space format, with pupils from Praktijkcollege De Dreef at Imagine IC, Amsterdam 2018. Photo Imagine IC.

- number 1 (for the first round). Participants are then invited to explain their position and feelings if they wish to do so.
- 2 The next step is to ask participants to redefine their position on the grid after the exchange, again using their initials and the number 2, and to trace a line from their first position through the person who caused them to change their position. Here, too, everyone is invited to elaborate on their new position.
 - 3 In the next step, additional voices are brought in. This can be done in various ways: by handing out text fragments to the participants, or reading them out loud (or having someone read them out loud). Another option is to show a video. The question that can then be asked is which feelings does the text fragment or video evoke? The text fragments or video can be considered as introduced voices. It may be interesting in that case to discuss where the voice could be positioned on the grid.
 - 4 Once again, the participants are asked to choose a position, which may possibly have changed due to the position of the introduced voices, as determined by the participants.
 - 5 Finally, participants are invited to think of as many other stakeholders as possible and assign them a position on the grid. Which voices have not yet been heard? Whose voice is lacking in the conversation? Where can we give them a voice?
 - 6 This is followed by an important phase in the exercise: how did the participants experience the conversation? What does the emotion network look like on paper, and how does this relate to the conversation that they had? Which changes occurred? Why were people prompted to change their positions? Can the participants define important incidents in the conversation? How did the input of the new voice(s)

affect the dynamics? And the positioning of other stakeholders? Which new insights did this yield? What might be the next step? Can we repeat the exercise, and if yes, who else should we invite?

In the ‘in a space’ variant, everyone stands in a large circle near or around the object and participants are invited to share their feelings using emoticons: depending on the intensity of the feeling, they can place the emoticon further away or closer to the object. At each subsequent step, different emoticons and a different location can be chosen if necessary.

Developing a network

Besides being a ‘heritage wisdom’ exercise, both formats are also used by museums, archives, and other heritage institutions as a tool for discussing a specific sensitive topic and understanding the emotions and interests involved. The insights gained from the exercise are then fed back into thinking about further interactions with the subject. Sometimes, the method is also used as a public activity, as a stand-alone activity, or to prepare or conclude a guided tour. Interest in the method is growing both in the cultural sector and beyond. The method is currently being applied in a study on art in public spaces in Gouda and a study on the scale model of refugee centre Klompjan in Markelo, made by former resident Karen from Abchazia, among others.⁶ An example of an application outside the cultural sector is a project by Saxion University of Applied Sciences, where the method was applied in a meeting with various stakeholders on the introduction of the district heating network in Almelo.⁷

Participants are recruited in various ways, always in consultation with us – meaning a lecturer or an employee of the Heritage Lab of the Reinwardt Academy or an employee of Imagine IC. Sometimes, participants are given prior information about the format and session. In the context of a European project, some of the teams that were intending to use the method themselves decided to forgo the term ‘emotion networking’ because of the connotations this might have for potential participants. Participants were sometimes asked why they chose to participate (after the session). For professionals, an important consideration is that these sessions facilitate a conversation about difficult topics and introduce them to other – unexpected – perspectives. Gaining (historical) knowledge is also often cited as a reason by professionals and others.

Emotion networking was developed in, for, and with practitioners and is still evolving. The method is reflected upon after each session. Those involved are invited to give input as critical visitors on what took place, what felt good, and what did not. There thus was and is also an exchange in the field of research into – and experiences with – themes and practices discussed in forums such as the Critical Visitor *Field Labs*. Developers, facilitators and participants learn from each other.

Physical and emotional involvement

One issue that needs to be decided again in every session is whether participants will stand or sit during the session, or whether everyone can choose for themselves. What are the implications for interaction if everyone is invited to sit on a cushion on the floor? Some find this very pleasant, others not.

The grid used in paper-based sessions is taken from James Russell’s Circumplex model of Affect.⁸ We experimented with this for the first time in March 2019, as part of the *Pronkstukken* (Showpieces) exhibition at the National Archives. Six groups of mainly educators participated in the session. The grid proved helpful and has been used as standard ever since. One consideration that needs to be made every time is whether the emotions should be written on the grid beforehand, in the form of words. Some people find this disturbing, while others look to the words for guidance. The method’s linguistic dimension is sometimes seen as a limitation, combined with the fact that not everyone is used to ‘talking about their feelings’. How to avoid exclusion in this instance?

Another point of attention is the fact that participants are asked to share feelings, while neither the developers nor the majority of the facilitators are professionally trained therapists or psychologists. In some cases, we involve an additional facilitator who does have this expertise. We also started to pay more attention to training session facilitators in conversation techniques. The facilitators from the Reinwardt Academy or Imagine IC are familiar with such notions as ‘safe space’ and ‘brave space’ and in most cases discuss them with participants before a session begins. Most of them are also familiar with similar formats, such as the Socratic Conversation. We have thus learned that distinguishing between ‘controlling’ and ‘managing’ emotions is useful. And that the idea is not to eliminate emotions, but rather to acknowledge them and use them as a starting point for a broader perspective.⁹

The question remains whether this is sufficient. To which extent do heritage curricula need to be adapted? Psychology is one of

the basic subjects in the Social Work education programme. Perhaps it should also be included in heritage programmes. Or might an introduction to conversation skills suffice? It is worth noting that these sessions rarely give rise to very intense emotions. This is probably due to the research setting and the fact that participants realise that several steps must be completed quickly. After an initial introduction to the format, one participant observed: “To be fair, you don’t REALLY engage with each other anyway. The set-up does not lend itself to this.” Whether a conversation occurs within the framework of the phased approach during the session, how long it lasts, how it develops, and who participates in it, depends on the facilitator. However, the format is more of a ‘conversation starter’ and less of a ‘conversation format’.

Different sorts of knowledge

Emotion networking as an exercise invites participants to reflect on the relationship between ‘knowledge’ and ‘feeling’ and the notion of ‘experiential knowledge’. How are different types of specialist knowledge weighted in negotiations on complex (heritage) issues? In sessions with ‘heritage professionals’ from the world of historic conservation, some participants seemingly struggled with the idea that anything can, at least in theory, be or become heritage. At the end of an emotion networking session on Soesterberg airbase, one participant said: “And yet there is heritage that is in a category of its own, the kind of heritage that simply does not need to be discussed.”

By drawing attention to the existence of different types of knowledge, the question regularly arises whether the method also provides tools for weighting knowledge. How to deal with

demonstrably false information? Or with different views on whether information is (in)correct?

The need to reflect on the quality of facilitators grew in step with the demand for workshops. A core team of stakeholders from Imagine IC and the Reinwardt Academy drew up a reflection form which focussed on the application of the method (did the facilitator add clear structure to the session?), on the degree of sensitivity to the context (did the facilitator have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the client, the participants, and the issues at hand), and on conversational skills (e.g. did the facilitator check in and out with care and attention?). The facilitator’s professional development is also discussed in this document. We also started to pay more attention to the choice: which facilitator should work with which group? In so doing, we take into account the subject matter and the participants. Initially, we worked with relatively young facilitators – recent graduates of the Reinwardt Academy. They sometimes felt that they were not taken seriously. We can now better anticipate this issue. By organising study days and feedback sessions, we hope to build a solid network of people who use this method. A recurring question is how exactly ‘solid’ should be interpreted in this instance. And, whether it is a problem that people who have participated in a working session once and then enthusiastically use the format in their own practice without ever providing feedback.

What is the object in the exercise?

The strength of emotion networking as a method is that it focuses on a specific object. But this immediately raises meta-questions: what is the object? Is it even an object? Aren’t we dealing with an infinite number of objects? Here

too the principle is that everything hinges on the individual's perspective ('It's in the eye of the beholder'). Participants are (or become) aware of this during a session, usually at the very beginning. This may prompt a facilitator to remark that this is exactly what makes heritage so complex, and that the exercise is successful when everyone acknowledges this. At the same time, discussing this unintentionally complicates the interaction as we have regularly observed.

In a session with museum employees about a statue that had been doused with red paint, the question arose: which statue are we talking about now, the one with or without paint? We saw the same thing during a session where the object in question was 'a BBQ with meat': Are we talking about lots of meat or just a little bit? Organic meat or bio-industry meat? How the facilitator refers to an object also matters. During a session on museums at the Art & History Museum in Brussels, one participant remarked: "We are talking about dead people here." Someone else added: "We are talking about looted art." The exchange had thus already started well before the participants had adopted a position. So how does such a start have an impact on the interaction and the feelings of the different participants? How and at which stage should you address this?

As a format, emotion networking can incentivise people to consider the role our senses play in our approach to heritage objects. The properties of an object also matter: is it a practice or ritual, something tangible, or something digital? What does it look, feel, sound, smell or taste like? When we started working with this method in 2018, a political debate was going on about whether singing the national anthem should be made compulsory. I selected this issue as an item on several occasions, and

would sing the Dutch national anthem. I would never do this today. The experience proved too immersive, for me, but especially for the participants, who were overwhelmed by it. There was no escape: it was too direct.

Another thing we learned along the way is that giving people the opportunity to practise the method with a relatively easy theme or object at the start of the session can also make a difference. Distinguish between the purpose of the exercise: emotion networking aimed at increasing 'heritage wisdom' is different from emotion networking to explore different and changing feelings about a particular phenomenon as a group. In tense situations, it may be better to avoid trying to engage a very diverse group from the outset. A better choice would be to organise several sessions and provide after-care for the facilitators and participants.

Follow-up

A frequently asked question is: what happens after the session? Experiences and feelings were shared, some of us found that our positions changed, but at some point, we all go home and tomorrow it's business as usual. The emotion networking method is designed to promote a very focused exchange of feelings but also experiences, knowledge, and information. Different perspectives are combined, which may potentially give rise to new insights. Often our response to this is that this already gives us something to work with.

It would be interesting to explore what this interaction might mean in practice for how we deal with the objection in question. Might this inspire participants to work towards joint conservation and management, access or classification of an archive

or collection? Or to distance themselves from a controversial practice? After having heard how important an item is to someone, would participants be willing to care for a specific item? Are they willing to adopt that building, artwork, book, archive, or story?

Developing possible scenarios for the future – with or without others – is another possible next step. The idea for the “New Black Pete”, which was suggested by the Netherlands Centre for Folk Culture and Intangible Heritage (Volkscultuur en Immaterieel Erfgoed, VIE), is a good example of why repeated meetings during the design process are vital for gauging people’s very different feelings. This was a failed intervention: the VIE had adjusted some stereotypical features, but not the colour.¹⁰

Theoretically, it should be possible to systematically process the information we collect during emotion networking sessions. Which patterns would then become visible? The idea that mapping and analysing interactions around contested heritage might yield insights came up several times when working on a proposal for a large-scale study on the impact of the colonial past in the present in 2019 with a group of academics and professionals for the National Science Agenda. We considered using the emotion networking method and developing a barometer that would quantitatively incorporate data: a tool that would make patterns in interactions around colonial heritage visible and analysable. The plan was well received, but some participants voiced fears that such an instrument might have an undesirable effect and potentially lead to an unwanted increase in polarisation. We never followed through on this plan.

Since then, I also have wondered about the relevance of such a quantitative study. I think it would be more relevant to invest energy into qualitative research on the exact context in which this method is used, which adjustments are needed, and possible next steps. The great diversity revealed during these sessions is most fascinating, something that participants were quick to point out when they worked simultaneously, in different groups, on the same theme or object. Only then does the impact that one voice can have within a network become clear.

Why Am I Here? Why Not?

On Minoritized Publics in Residence

Method

artistic
research

emotions

institutionality

gender and sexuality

accessibility

ethical principles

everyday racism

diversity thinking

Why Am I Here? Why Not?

On Minoritized Publics in Residence

Julius Thissen, interviewed by Eliza Steinbock¹

In this interview, Julius Thissen reflects on his/their practices of being a visual artist and consulting, developing, and managing public and artistic residences at modern and contemporary art museums. The prompts from the interviewer, Eliza Steinbock, have been removed and integrated for smoother reading.

I graduated in 2015 in Fine Art from ArtEZ Arnhem. At the time, I was doing performance work that often resulted in videos. Following my graduation show, I received a lot of positive feedback, including nominations for prizes, so I could start showing my work quite quickly after graduation. And I just freshly started identifying as trans. This was around 2015, when a lot of museums were hopping on the gender and diversity train. Right away I noticed that I was only getting invited for thematic shows: the yearly gender show or the panel talk. One of the biggest issues that I encountered was that there was little to no space to have a critical say in my contribution. They would dictate: we want that work, this is the framework we have created, this is the concept that we wrote. I noticed that when I wanted to be critical about that, or wanted to think along with a curator or producer about the showing or framing of the work, there was no space to enter. At times, I would be asked hyper personal questions about transitioning, specifically about my body or genitalia. Questions that had nothing to do with the work. They would often put this very problematic, pathologizing narrative over my work, while

that is not something I discuss in or connect to my work. This is all to say, I was feeling the effects of tokenistic politics in my encounters with the art world, with those actors from the institutions. The message and power dynamic were clear. Come and be grateful for the spot you have been granted. Participate quietly or go home.

WHY AM I HERE? at the Van Abbemuseum

I started talking to other artists to see if they encountered the same dynamic. A lot of peers from marginalized backgrounds shared the same experience. This was the moment that *WHY AM I HERE* came to be: the artist in residence program that I co-created in collaboration with Ali Venir, which took place in September 2018 at the Van Abbemuseum (VAM) Eindhoven, where you [Eliza] were also present.² It was about this frustration, and a chance to be critical towards the motivation of institutions to invite transgender artists. I often felt that by including me, or other marginalized artists, institutions such as museums were aiming for an easy quick fix for a lack of diversity. It seemed like a temporary problem for them, something that would pass; diverse gender inclusion might be just a phase or theme. *WHY AM I HERE* translated directly to this question: am I just here to look good on your funding application for the next year? Or, are we here because you actually really value our work, our political ideas and needs? Or is it just a symbolic appreciation?

Doing this project together with Ali Venir at the VAM was a great opportunity to reshape and expand my practice. From that point on I started receiving requests from museums wanting to have advice and inviting me to think along with them on policy, programming, training, and language. I have long been interested

in how museums and institutions operate and now I was suddenly able to be in this interesting position of doing artistic research and consultancy as an artist. I envision my facilitation work between different discourses and groups as having a hatch function, in that I try to bring in people who were shut out, and to give direction to the flow of resources. For the residencies that I (co-)organize, the aim is to provide a communal critical space for queer and transgender people, to prevent us from being reduced to a simple gender or sexuality issue or framed by an institutional language. We could work towards a structural say, and for them (artists) to make work outside of the focus on gender, or on being trans, if they desire. And, very important, to get paid fairly. In short: to have room to talk and make work about whatever they want to, as a person and as a professional.

Why Are We Not Here? Ontgrenzen at Museum Arnhem

In 2021 I received an invitation from Museum Arnhem to create a public residency for the transgender and queer community. Starting in early 2022 and lasting until the opening in December 2022 through its closure in May 2023, the exhibition *How Dare You Make Me Feel This Way* is the result of one of four residency projects that was created with collaborating institutions of Museum Arnhem and the Valkhof Museum in Nijmegen. They created the project titled “Ontgrenzen” (debordering) to investigate why specific audiences were not finding their way into the museum. Each public-in-residence subproject targets particular groups. For the queer and trans residency, they selected me to become their project leader.

Such an invitation comes with a lot of ethical questions. Luckily, I had collaborated with the museum for a few years through



Image of the Museum Arnhem's exhibition
How Dare You Make Me Feel This Way.
Photo Eva Broekema



Image of public in residence in front
of the exhibition's welcome wall.
Photo Theodoor Adriaans

smaller projects, so I had a good sense of their position. Museum Arnhem's core feminist mission is well-established and firmly on the agenda. The invite came with full freedom in how I wanted to organize the subproject. As a working method it was very unique to have a wide-open invitation. That freedom and openness goes against how institutions are usually structured. Another green flag was the amount of money the museum allocated for this project. This was telling of their commitment and the space they wanted to create. It gave me a sense of trust, and assurance that what they asked would be feasible. Money is political. Transgender people are amongst the most discriminated against on the job market. When it comes to cultural work, often we are not compensated fairly or not at all. We are invited for 'coffee' with cultural workers, where they extract knowledge and ideas and never call you back, or pay you for that time. The director of Museum Arnhem, Saskia Bak, stressed that this project is part of a structural effort and not just a temporary or thematic endeavor.

Open Call and Selection

The project timeline was 26 months. I started by researching the museum's history and its collection that the residency might connect to, and then wrote a project proposal. With the proposal's general outline in mind, I invited Simon(e) van Saarloos and Nagaré Willemsen to co-write an open call for the public in residency. We had discussions about what it means to extend an invitation, and to invite a 'target group.' We considered how to make the open call appealing, accessible, critical and also clear about what the museum has to offer applicants. We had a rather poetic and philosophical opening, written by Simon(e). What if the museum was a sandbox: would you remove the sand, take away the borders, put in or take out the toys, and so on. We liked

this idea of the museum being something you could play with, but the borders of the sandbox of course symbolize the institutional barriers that we face. Many applicants commented on this opening as making sense to them, and also how it helped to establish trust with the project's intentions to bring a public into the museum space. That this could be a critical space. Applicants wrote about how they were suspicious about institutional intentions and about their past harmful experiences with cultural institutions in general. In response, we received many amazing contributions from an incredibly diverse pool of applicants, 135 in total from all across the Netherlands from which we selected 7 residents in total. Applicants didn't have to send in a CV, or a curatorial statement, or have completed studies in art. No one had to have a background in the arts, to the contrary, we were most interested in those who didn't. For a good reason: the types of conversations that take place about power and representation in art, happen among those of us already active in the arts. We aimed to create an opportunity to go beyond that bubble.

The residents were Sarjon, Larisa van Rijn, Jip Merijn Meertens, Storm Vogel, Dexter Boldewijn, Zacquel Phipps, and Alara Adilow. The initial preference was to aim mostly for a local group of residents. We had mostly residents from the city and region at first, but some moved away in the time it was running. This is a recurring issue when it comes to queer representation in the more provincial regions of the Netherlands. Many people move out of Arnhem and the smaller regions to the Randstad because there is simply little critical infrastructure for trans and queer people, let alone artists. They tend to see Arnhem as this bare land and frankly, rightfully so. This is why it is so important to me to stay and make an effort to create artistic queer infrastructures locally.

Residency Ethos

The residency itself lasted for six months, with two meetings per month, and a summer break in between. The time we spent together was often non-performative, which does not mean that it was non-productive. Especially in the beginning we prioritized eating together, talking freely, laughing and getting to know each other. We quickly became a close-knit group. First and foremost, we had a lot of fun and built trust. We talked very critically amongst each other, without any staff of the museum present. After we established this trust and sense of community, we connected to the museum team. This group-focused process is political for me. Often, projects are centered around deliverables and monitoring. An endless back and forth in which the ‘invited party’ has to prove their worth and ‘earn their stay.’ The focus often lies on the outcome of a project, rather than the process of it, where the wellbeing and growth of those involved is at the center. This is why it was important to challenge ideals of professionalism during the residency. Especially from a Dutch perspective, you are expected to be, for instance, always on time, to be present at all times, and to perform. This is very counterproductive to being able to talk about personal and political needs and formulate shared artistic visions. Especially in a trans space this freedom is essential, also from a practical perspective. It is essential to be able to take a break or to schedule necessary care such as therapy or surgery, for instance. Next to that, the opportunity for personal growth also showed in how residents helped each other develop confidence. They facilitated each other to speak their minds and with learning it is okay if they hit a boundary. We wanted to create space for people to stay home and take care of themselves so that they’d be able to come in rested and in a more confident zone the next time. I think this is what this work is about: being

confident and healthy. The commitment to a project comes from an internal motivation and should not be based on the amount of time present. First, the public in residency was a space where we could heal, and second, it was a space where we could work.

The Concept for Trans and Queer Joy

The group quickly came to the conclusion that they wanted to create an exhibition that focused on trans and queer joy. This followed a set of workshops and our conversations about why they think transgender and queer people did not find their way into museums. One is the financial reason – it is too expensive. A museum ticket is typically 15–25 euros. Another reason is how transgender people see themselves pictured in museums, and by whom. They stated that the work on show is often about trans people, and not by them. Residents said that *if* they saw themselves ‘represented’, the trans body was often presented as an object being looked at, or pitied, or showing very personal and intimate medical history, their body, or their transition. This particular set of power relations being repeatedly on display created skepticism in them. Those of us that do medically transition often have horrible experiences with those medical institutions as well, so anything that smells a little bit like medicalizing discourse or the medical gaze is a big turn-off. On a daily basis we already have to work hard to keep our own heads up, to be respected, to be called by the right pronouns. We even have to fight for our human rights. So small wonder that there is no energy or interest to go to a museum to see that same narrative again. They stated that this type of work entertains the cis gaze, and that with this show, they wanted to shift that focus towards the community first and foremost.

They selected beautiful works that mostly spoke to two key issues: generating queer joy and pleasure through art, and also seeing work that represented intersectional experiences. Within the scarce representations that we do have they also wanted to point to the experiences that tend to be hidden, or missing. The selection focused on both work from the museum's collection and contemporary artists from the community. The participating artists were Ada M. Patterson, Angèle Etoundi Essamba, Anto López Espinosa, Carly Rose Bedford, Dean Hutton, Hansel Tai, Leo Xander Foo, Mavi Veloso, Pepe Espaliú, PINK de Thierry, Risk Hazekamp, Samantha Nye, Sinéad O'Dwyer, Yinzk, Anya Janssen, Diana Blok, Zanele Muholi, Kinke Kooi, and Kliment Nikolaevich Redko. In the exhibition's writing, they stressed how the selection was subjective, that it was defined by what they (individual people in the group) decided to show, which was expressed by using personal quotes instead of formal wall texts. They did not want to have a scientific or objective voice or mode of display that is often used as a weapon and framed as neutrality. They wanted to go personal, which goes against tradition and the formalities of a museum. We also talked about accessibility as much as queering tradition. We hung the work 10 cm lower than the normal baseline so that people using a wheelchair could also see the work without the problem of a reflection. This entire process was such a pleasure since everyone was extremely interested in and respectful towards everyone else's choices and needs.

Throughout the process the residents shared their thoughts and needs with the staff. Together we explored how those desires and concepts could be best facilitated. The design team Studio met and Studio Dana Dijkgraaf made a proposal based on the group's wishes, which we all fine-tuned together during multiple

sessions. It brought everybody involved much pleasure to see it come to fruition. Funnily enough, the working method of the residency turned out to be incredibly effective. The group has been in residence for six months in total, and they created the concept for this amazing exhibition that normally would take two years. Part of this is due to the fact that they openly worked from a subjective standpoint – they said: “Alright, we want to show this work, we just do it. We don't have to put it in a framework, or further justify why.” And the museum facilitated them. When the *Volkskrant* newspaper wrote a review of the show, it was overall very positive, but it did remark that the relationship between works in some cases was not considered in a well-thought out curatorial manner. I smiled and thought: good, the only note of criticism was the one thing that the group did not care about at all.

Inclusivity Practices: A Note to the Reader

When it comes to inclusivity practices we usually focus on tools for the institution first, and then the community. But I want to address the reader from the community first: do not be afraid to set standards. If you are not feeling artistically, emotionally, spiritually, and especially financially supported – LEAVE. If you have the possibility, go elsewhere, seek your peers. I know it is a brash statement because, of course, sometimes our personal situations are too precarious. It is very important to remember that museums can be violent, that classically they are extractive spaces and that we personally pay the price. For us to be able to interact with these spaces, we need to have a clear personal baseline and the strength and confidence to act upon it. If it is not being met, leave. For me, working together and in a community is a necessity. If you work together, you can spread out the effects of histories of violence and exclusion, and try to

share the burden. It is safer too, also when it comes to collective bargaining. That is also why I started the artistic research practice of residencies. I strongly believed that community work would be able to achieve greater transformation. So my role as the facilitator is to find a way in, an access point, which is connected to my privileges of course of being a white, educated, able-bodied person. It is a bit of a Trojan horse situation; once one of us is in, we all spread out.

One of my bigger takeaways: you work with people before you work with an institution. Over the course of the last eight years, I have learned how vital it is to connect with the right actor in these institutions, at the right time, to be able to get in. For instance, at the Van Abbemuseum, it was Daniel Neugebauer who alerted Ali Venir about the Schorer Foundation's funding towards a project to emancipate the trans and intersex communities. He created this window within the VAM for us to write a proposal, and also guided us how to best make our case. It often is one specific actor who has the slightest bit of power who opens up this window and says: "Hey do you want to come in?" We come in through the nooks and crannies because we are not a part of the structure, yet. However, this is also a very vulnerable position. I've seen what happens when you develop wonderful goals and make agreements with one person, and then they go out of the door and everything just disappears with them. This is also why I don't take institutions too seriously. You have to see which people are in which positions at one point in time, and then see how you can solidify initiatives and agreements. Even if it is an inch of creating room, see how you can make it structural. Figure out how to bypass the rigidity in the system, to make spaces available that otherwise don't exist.

Sometimes you have to put on a naïve face and just ask the simple question: Why not?

For the institutions, I can repeat: give space and let people freely experiment without having to focus on your own incentives or the deliverable first. That is a lot to ask for because then museums have to operate truly ethically and not just inclusively. I always ask: "Why don't you want to be ethical first?" Because if you act ethically, then the inclusivity follows from that, it is a natural by-product from that practice. First, though, institutions have to be self-critical. Money is also a key issue. An application can be written to create a budget, and it is important that the museum starts the conversation there. I would advise, even insist, that museums start at the drawing table with people from the community. The golden rule is a project should not be about us, but with us! Don't start working until somebody from the community is at the table so that they have a say about the foundation of the plans being laid. Then, you let them name their price. You should not value their labor or that person beforehand. A main ethical principle for me is that you cannot determine the value of someone else. Finally, trust in our recommendations and expertise. Some things might be hard to hear, but if you are committed to doing critical work then you need to let go of your fragility.

**cross-cutting
exhibition
design**

Queer Scenographies: From the 'Obscene' to Care and Repair

visitorship

critical / -ity

gender and sexuality

professional learning community

collection presentation

queer space theory

Queer Scenographies: From the 'Obscene' to Care and Repair

Dirk van den Heuvel

Exhibition design stages the encounter between the visitor and that what is on display. The most effective designs are those that remain unnoticed by the visitor, yet discreetly naturalise this encounter, frame both the visitor and what's on display.¹ Today, the white cube and black box typologies are the most familiar ones to the visitor of contemporary museum spaces. They take the visitor away from their conventional ways of experiencing their everyday world, just as they decontextualise what is on display, while making them both part of what you might call a larger museological complex, in which a preferred set of cultural values are produced and circulated to become a hegemonic, dominant system that favours certain voices and approaches, while silencing others.

When looking for an escape out of this normalising system, to allow for a richer approach, one that is more open and abundant in offering room for digressions and deviancies, could a different approach to exhibition design help? Can exhibition design help in bringing out unheard or marginalised voices, while not immediately neutralising them by institutionalisation? Can a change in exhibition design make queer visitors feel welcome? Or even more pronounced, as Aaron Betsky put it in his recent reflection on architecture exhibitions and queer space theory: can the 'obscene' – or what is assessed as such – be brought to the 'scene' of the museum?² He himself responds negatively

to this rhetorical question, positing that queer architects and designers have now become part of mainstream explorations, and the queer space discourse is trapped in nostalgia, thus eliminating its formerly disruptive potential.

Queer space theory goes back to the 1980s and 90s, in direct response to the oppression of gay persons during the AIDS crisis. It must be noted queer space theory in its early years was mostly written from the perspective of the white, gay males, even when 'gay' and also 'queer' were then much broader, more general terms of sexual denomination than they are today.³ Today, the discourse has expanded with new exciting authors, also including trans studies, intersectional approaches, and moving beyond the western discourse, even though admittedly, it still very much remains within the confines of western academia. In terms of space and exhibition design, one observes a strong interest in performance and installation art.⁴

A clear signal of this trend concerns the French pavilion at the 2023 edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale, which was devoted to ballroom culture including live drag performances. The silver, metallic disco club installation was something of a breath of fresh air to queer visitors. At the same time, it also made clear there is still a very palpable difference between the extremely coded discipline of architecture and the presentation of ballroom and drag culture as something 'other' outside of architecture, yet now brought into the very centre of the global architectural discourse. Such awkwardness emerged earlier with the exhibition *Queer British Art 1861-1967* at Tate Britain, in 2017. Undeniably, the show was a landmark to long overdue queer representation in British institutions, yet visiting the exhibition also felt as if witnessing an act of mainstreaming,

obfuscating the 'obscene' of a traumatic history of repression and marginalisation. The design and display of art works was organised in a quite linear and chronological manner, with little surprises to be found for the queer 'insiders' to this deviantly creative production of queer artists and writers – the result was more like commemoration than abundant celebration.

Queering Collections

Are there alternatives for such well-meaning, unintended acts of 'othering' as part of a practice of mainstreaming? They were discussed within the context of The Critical Visitor project, especially during the various field trips to some of the institutions of the project's collaborative network, especially the Amsterdam Museum and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. The field trips were modelled on and overlapped with similar exchanges within the network of Queering the Collections. Queering the Collections brings together LGBTQI+ professionals in the heritage sector, which is nationally oriented but largely Amsterdam based. It meets irregularly since the eponymous symposium of 2015, and subsequent publication of 2016, which was compiled by Riemer Knoop, then lector at the Reinwardt Academy, and Lonneke van den Hoonard, director of IHLIA LGBTI Heritage, the Dutch queer heritage organization with the largest collection in Europe.⁵ In the symposium publication which is also a manual for heritage professionals, the emancipatory goals of the network exchanges are clearly stated: they are to be reached using the included 'tools' for curators and archivists to open up the collections and bring out unknown queer and trans histories. Riemer Knoop refers to Richard Sandell, professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, to define three queering strategies: making queer histories visible; presenting

them as equal to and not separate from mainstream histories as part of a policy of inclusion; and creating awareness through so-called playful and poetical interventions by artists that deconstruct 'normal' and 'everyday' assumptions around gender and sexuality.⁶

Exhibition design is not a part of the 'tips and tricks' in the *Queering the Collections* book, rather, the focus is very much on language, audiences, curators, and their agency within the institutional framework of museums and archives. Exhibition design only became a topic during the field trips of the last three years when we collectively visited new exhibition projects, of which the scenography was an important ingredient to achieve a more diverse and inclusive approach towards collection presentations. What struck me as a common denominator during those visits is not so much a desire to restage the obscene dimensions from early queer space theory as mentioned by Aaron Betsky, but an approach that seeks to move beyond the shock and anti-institutional, avant-gardist attitudes towards practices of care, repair, and healing. This refocus has already been in the making in the various discourses, from feminisms to indigenous and Black activist movements, but the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have acted as an accelerator for this agenda.

The other striking aspect concerns a notion of recontextualising, to counter the decontextualisation, autonomy and abstraction strategies of the white cube and black box typologies. This recontextualisation is not so much a new fixing of canons and historical narratives, but rather a recognition of the relationalities at stake. It helps explain why research has become such a paramount element of artistic and curatorial practices.

Recognition and understanding of the specific relationalities – of archival objects, art works, collections, institutions – enable artists and curators to retell familiar stories in new ways, and moreover, to bring out suppressed and forgotten stories. This recontextualisation or resituating also comes with a strong spatial component: the visitor too, is literally reframed, in relation to the materials on display, the curatorial narrative, the scenography, and even the architecture of the museum building itself.

Relinking and Cross Connections

The new collection presentation of the Van Abbemuseum took this new understanding of relationalities as an obvious starting point, as immediately communicated through its title *Delinking and Relinking*.⁷ The design by Diogo Passarinho Studio and The Rodina studio makes clever use of the architecture of the museum building, which is a combination of the traditionalist main building in brick of 1936, designed by Alexander Kropholler, and an imposing new modernist wing and tower by the Amsterdam architect Abel Cahen, which opened in 2003. Cahen's addition defies a rationalist ordering of the museum spaces thus creating a slightly labyrinthian experience of surprises, which is embraced by the curators and designers to present a multivocal and multisensory assemblage of stories.

The Amsterdam Museum is temporarily rehoused to the seventeenth century Amstelhof, because its own location in the medieval city centre is undergoing a profound renovation. The museum uses this moment to experiment with new exhibition formats and scenographies. The collection presentation *Panorama Amsterdam: A Living History of the City* designed by Studio L A involves a layered visitor experience by creating an open interior room inside the main room.⁸ Along the walls

of the main room visitors can view a linear chronology of main historical events. The interior room offers space for critical microhistories to achieve a multivocal experience to expand the received city history toward a more inclusive overview, including the little-known persecution of homosexuals in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Gay Games of 1998, and the Black Pride movement of today. Randomly placed door openings and windows between the interior room and main room invite visitors to explore the space in a non-linear way, thus creating their own cross connections between the very different city histories on display.

Doing the Queering

With the Queering the Collections network three exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum were visited, each dedicated to a queer artist.⁹ According to Charl Landvreugd, head of Research and Curatorial Practice of the Stedelijk, the exhibitions are a demonstration of how you can 'do' queering of the institution without too much 'talking' about it. The exhibitions concern a retrospective presentation of the Canadian artists collective General Idea, a tribute to the work of Keith Haring and a monographic overview of the Dutch Afro-Caribbean artist Felix de Rooy.

General Idea, formed by AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, became famous in 1987 for the appropriation of Robert Indiana's pop art painting of the word *LOVE* (1966), which General Idea provokingly transformed into *AIDS* using the same colourful graphics. A very personal statement too, since two of the three group members, Partz and Zontal, died of the illness in 1994. For their show in the Stedelijk, the existing scenography for Stedelijk BASE of 2017, designed by Dutch architect Rem

Koolhaas together with then director Beatrix Ruf, was quite naturally and convincingly appropriated in a similar act of transformation. Only after a couple of moments did it dawn upon me that the whole basement room and its obliquely placed series of steel plate walls was hacked, as it were, and turned around into an homage to the group's history and art works. While the original Stedelijk BASE presentation was a most dense experience of a selection of disparate objects from the Stedelijk collection to create unexpected and surprising encounters, in the General Idea exhibition there is a much calmer pace with space to breathe and room to pause and reflect on the events of the AIDS epidemic and their lasting devastating impact. This notion of reflection and homage returned in the Hall of Honour of the museum, temporarily devoted to a restored piece created by Keith Haring, who also died of AIDS in 1990. Haring made *Amsterdam Notes* in 1986, at the occasion of his first solo exhibition at the Stedelijk. The 38-meter-long drawing was hung high up in the room almost against the ceiling, not eye level, thus forming a classic frieze telling Haring's tale of mythical creatures engaged in acts of love, death, sexuality, and desire.

Finally, Felix de Rooy's *Apocalypse* and its scenography presented similar acts of bending space towards queer experiences. The white room tradition of the Stedelijk, famously introduced by Willem Sandberg, made way for vibrant and colourful arrangements of room dividers, platforms and pedestals that reference familiar western museum typologies, in particular the nineteenth century museum, such as the original Stedelijk itself. The nineteenth century museum type stems directly from the enlightenment discourse in architecture, with a focus on rationalisation of space and disciplinary knowledge production through classical ordering principles

of symmetry and repetition. This association with rationalism is immediately crushed by the exuberance and sheer eclecticism – if I may use this modernist term here – by which Felix de Rooy overwhelmed the space, the displays, and the visitor. No abstraction here, no less-is-more restraint, but big dramatic gestures cutting across mythical and religious iconographic traditions and their geographies, nothing less than “a multi-cultural orgasm” as one of the captions read.

Here, the strategy of surrealist contrast undercuts any assumed objectivity and classification. References to that other typology of western curiosity come to mind: the *wunderkammer*, or *rareiteenkabinet*. Especially the notion of ‘rareiteiten’ is a slippery, yet productive link, since its meaning in Dutch is very close to the old usage of queer in English. In conversation with Landvreugd I suggested the show was a dismissal of white modernism on the very holy site of western avant-gardism that the Stedelijk still is. He was quick to point out that De Rooy represents another kind of modernity, namely Caribbean modernity. Tellingly, a portrait of De Rooy by Diana Blok, which depicts him as Frida Kahlo, dominated the central space. In that sense, we are looking at simultaneous acts of decentering and recentering.

Overall, in these recent Dutch exhibitions at large historical as well as modern and contemporary art museums we are looking at modernism being pluralised, and modernisms in transition, by cross cutting and cross connecting, in search of spaces of care and repair.

- 1 For further reading: Penelope Curtis, Dirk van den Heuvel (eds.), *Art on Display 1949-69*, (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, 2019), and Julia Noordegraaf, *Strategies of Display, Museum Presentation in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Visual Culture* (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans Van Beuningen and nai010 Publishers, 2012).
- 2 Aaron Betsky, “The Scene of the Obscene. How Queer Space Helped Change Architecture Exhibitions (But Not Really),” in Bas Hendriks (ed.), *Queer Exhibition Histories* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2023), 79-91.
- 3 The two foundational publications are Joel Sanders (ed.), *Stud, Architectures of Masculinity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996); and Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space. Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997).
- 4 Olivier Vallerand, *Unplanned Visitors. Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).
- 5 Riemer Knoop, Lonneke van den Hoonaard (eds.), *Queering the Collections. Tips & tricks voor het nog zichtbaarder maken van gender- & seksuele diversiteit in musea en collecties*, (Amsterdam: IHLIA and Reinwardt Academie, 2016).
- 6 Riemer Knoop, “Queering the Collections,” Anders (Laten) Kijken’, in Knoop, Van den Hoonaard, *Queering the Collections*, 2016, 17.
- 7 Visited 20 November 2021, with conversations with the Van Abbemuseum staff and its director Charles Esche.
- 8 Visited 25 March 2022, with tours and conversations with curators.
- 9 Visited 27 June 2023, at the occasion of informal community updates around the renewed initiative for a queer museum in Amsterdam.

Method

**embedded
research**

Visibility and Vulnerability in the Physical Space of the LGBTI+ Archive

safety

accessibility

gender and sexuality

community archives

visitorship

hands-on

Visibility and Vulnerability in the Physical Space of the LGBTI+ Archive

Noah Littel

Visiting archives is a central step in the research process of many historians. Doing archival research often starts with scouting the archive's catalogues, and is followed by making an appointment to see that material, culminating in one or multiple visits. This process might differ per archive, depending for instance on how easily searchable the archive catalogue is, how approachable the archive is for questions, the amount of regulation during the visit, or on the physical shape of the archive.

The physical space of an archive determines the way the archive can be interpreted, experienced and accessed. Physicality is one of the factors that impacts accessibility, as it determines, for instance, whether disabled people and/or trans people are able to enter the archive, and make use of facilities such as accessible and inclusive bathrooms. Archival scholar K.J. Rawson illustrates the ways transgender visitors are seriously impacted by the absence of gender neutral bathrooms:

[T]he gender-segregated bathrooms at the National Transgender Library and Archive at the University of Michigan were a difficult barrier to my research, in part because they were highly policed. I was forced to argue for my right to use the bathroom on the special collections floor (and as an out-of-town researcher, the only one I knew to find), which obviously made me feel



Screenshot of the IHLIA LGBT Heritage.

unwelcome in that space. In turn, these bathroom interactions increased my anxiety while doing research, and may have even changed the amount of time I was willing (or physically able) to research in the archives.¹

The physical space of the archive also shapes visitor's experiences and imaginations in other ways. Archival scholars Gracen Brilmyer, Joyce Gabiola, Jimmy Zavala and Michelle Caswell discuss how the physicality of community archives determines "what people and stories one encounters and therefore how one imagines others."² When community archives are housed in community centres that are also used for community gatherings and events, this influences how archive users understand these communities. Moreover, the associations archival users have with the archive, based on their individual memories of and experiences with that space, profoundly impacts the way these users will relate to the community archive, and the community itself.³ For instance, someone who has lived in Amsterdam for their entire life will relate differently to an archive of the history of Amsterdam than a visitor to the city. Likewise, visitors who have experience with the events hosted in a community archive will relate differently to the archive than those unfamiliar with the space.

I personally experienced the impact physical space can have on research during my visits to IHLIA LGBTI Heritage, in Amsterdam, and the Spinnboden Lesbenarchiv und Bibliothek, in Berlin.

IHLIA LGBTI Heritage is located in the Amsterdam Public Library, a ten-minute walk from the Central Station. IHLIA's information desk is on the third floor, in the back, near the windows. While



Screenshot Spinnboden Lesbenarchiv und Bibliothek.



IHLIA's pink cabinet.
Photo Hansmuller

Exhibition "The archive in development"
at IHLIA LGBTI Heritage.
Photo LNDWstudio

accessibility information could be improved, IHLIA is reachable for wheelchair users, and there is an accessible bathroom on the third floor. There are currently no gender neutral bathrooms, which can impact trans and non-binary visitor experiences. While the format of IHLIA's information desk and visitor space has changed a lot over the years, it remains located in a very open space. Visitors are essentially among other 'regular' library visitors, seemingly mainly high school and college students. IHLIA is visible; the visitor space holds exhibitions with large images, accessible to anyone in the library. Their book collection is shelved in the regular white cabinets of the library, but IHLIA also has their own large pink cabinet, encouraging visibility. Any library visitor could come in and browse their open-shelves LGBTI+ books, or stroll through the open exhibition, without appointment.

The openness of IHLIA to any users of the library, rather than to just the LGBTI+ community, has several meanings. It is easy to stumble across them, even if (not yet) actively involved in the LGBTI+ community. This makes LGBTI+ stories and history open for anyone, also for those who are questioning or not out of the closet, and anyone who is curious and wants to learn more. Feminist and queer literary scholar Valerie Rohy points out the importance of this, arguing that "the public library gives access to an identity outside the norm. To those who can risk so public an arena, this archive offers a very private meaning."⁴

However, visitors may also find themselves exposed while visiting IHLIA. When I visited IHLIA in 2018, the visitor desk was being used by another IHLIA visitor, and I was asked to find a regular study place on the third floor of the library. During this particular visit, I looked into archival material of the Eindhoven-

based radical gay group De Roze Driehoek (The Pink Triangle), most notably their magazine *De Verkeerde K(r)ant*.⁵

Behind its colourful covers, *De Verkeerde K(r)ant* published, amongst many other things, photographs of nudity and drag. I also looked at De Roze Driehoek's membership-only bulletin, *De Sodomieter* ('The Sodomite'), which also included small cheerful drawings of genitalia and male nudity.

De Verkeerde K(r)ant also published deliberately controversial articles, making parody of the way gay men were perceived in mainstream society. At one instance, they published a ludic response to accusations of paedophilia, in the form of a mockery advertisement, 'Baby Dump', which showed supposedly 'on-sale' pictures of babies.

Sitting at a small table in the regular library space, surrounded by young, giggling students with their school textbooks, admittedly changed the way I was able to interact with this material. I felt nervous and rushed, and it made me feel anxious to linger on a page with explicit or deliberately controversial material. I scanned the material quickly, without taking time to read it in detail, and avoided making more high quality pictures of the material, as I usually do. Even though I am comfortably and proudly queer, and also present myself as such, accessing this material so publicly still made me feel visibly 'queered', and visibly nonnormative in a normative space. Moreover, I felt protective of the material, afraid to leave it even for a toilet break, in case someone around me might do something to it. Had I had my usual seat at the IHLIA visitor desk, I would have likely felt more comfortable in the already queered space of this part of the library, with the material protected by the archivist on desk-duty.



Verkeerde K(r)ant 31 (13 June 1987).
From the collections of IHLIA LGBTI Heritage.

De Verkeerde K(r)ant 7 (spring 1981).
From the collections of IHLIA LGBTI Heritage.



Verkeerde K(r)ant 3 (spring 1980).
From the collections of IHLIA LGBTI Heritage.

...vrouwen; wat feministische vrouwen... is hun gemeenschappelijke... En hoeveel vormen van on... hebben, op in... punten heb... mannen zijn geon... krijgen geen ongewone... vrouwen, enz.

...wie zich feminis... moeten... En... mannen, flikkers of niet... is b... de idee... worden ontwikkeld.

...er herverings... vrouwen zijn kort... Amsterdamse flikker... Zonder ruzie, maar... dat het

...vrouwen solidair zijn met de... strijd, niet die van de vrouwen. Het heeft dus weinig zin de de R.V. zich feministisch noemen, ze kunnen hoogstens solidair met het feminisme zijn."

...dat zet de R.V. aan het denken; hieronder citaten uit het artikel: de strijd

"Het mag dan al waar zijn dat "homoseksueel en heteroseksueel" etiketten zijn die door de buitenwereld op ons zijn geplakt, maar dat betekent nog niet dat ze niet op ons inwerken, dat ze ons niet zouden be... ken. Homoseksuelen hebben inderdaar slechts een andere seksuele voorkeur dan hetero's, maar spot, onderdrukking en "tolerantie" hebben hen tot "anderszamen" ge...



...bestaande ideologische strijd... complexiteit aan... te verwerken. Krij... dan we tot hiertoe gewend wa...

DE SEKSUELE INVALSHOEK

...die seksu... behoeven aan cliënte... ommecht en kreativi... hoort tot de onderdrukking... de bevrijding van de mens, ook... waarop we met onszelf in... omgaan en hoe we onze lusten... hoort tot het geheel van... onderdrukking en bevr...



...komen? En dat was dan nog maar een klein gedeelte van het artikel wat echt de moeite waard is om in zijn geheel gelezen te worden; nr. 4 dus!

In no 5 spreekt de R.V. zich uit tegen de onderlinge diskriminatie van homoseksuelen/homoseksuele bedrags. "Homoseksualiteit past niet in een "harmonisch" en vooral statisch maatschappijbeeld, waarin alles netjes zijn plaats heeft. En homo's die niet verzeten worden keer op keer gekonfronteerd met de alsacht van een moed in vraag gestelde normaliteit; overal wordt, bewust en onbewust een heteroseksuele vanzelfsprekendheid vooropgesteld. Elke homo, hoe verborgen hij ook nog leven en hoezeer hij ook zijn seksualiteit verdringt, heeft te maken met een realiteit waarin voor hem geen plaats is; een automatische kon...

...gemaakt voor een lustvolle... Als dat seksueel te r... wordt genoemd, betekent dat... dat we de zwakke plekken in... dat ons onderdrukt, hebben... Laat de r... en zich heen grijpen!

...de politiek van de dagelijkse leven... uit dit artikel (uit... als ontzettend laag:... veld voor de 24-urendag... hoe kent de geslachten... situatie waarin zij lange... kant zijn homoseksuele ver... heeft, en aan de andere... een heteroseksueel bedrag van... wordt. Dat betekent... die homoseksuele verlangens... terugdrongen tot ons pri... leven. Of dat we daar althans... toe doen. En dat we voor... die verla...



...dustrieel kapitalisme. Want toen werd het arbeidslaan de economisch grondslag van het gezin. Het gezin is geen productie-eenheid meer. De productie gebeurt in de fabrieken, zij die "vermaatschappelijkt". En het gezin wordt daar buitengesloten en komt in de sfeer van het privéleven terecht.

Dit alles heeft ideologische gevolgen gehad, die ook voor ons, homo's belangrijk zijn. Met de scheiding privé/maatschappelijk is er ook de illusie van twee soorten ideologieën ontstaan; we hebben een maatschappelijke ideologie die in het kapitalisme uitspraak een ideologie van presteren, concurrentie en macht is. En we hebben een privé-ideologie; het privé-leven is de instelling die in terenstelling staat met het maatschappelijk leven. Hier spreekt...

BABY DUMP

Deur een onverwacht geannuleerde order zit onze BABY-MARKET met een surplus aan baby's. Vandaar deze baby-dump. Voor de duidelijkheid: Het gaat hierbij niet om kneusjes of afgekeurde exemplaren, maar om eerste klas baby's.

De procedure: U kunt per nummer inschrijven. (Voor minimum inschrijf bedragen zie foto's). De vijf hoogste bieders worden daarna uitgenodigd voor onze kijkdagen, waarna wordt overgegaan tot de eigenlijke veiling.

Inschrijven: stuurt u ons een kopieetje van giro- of bankafschrift i.v.m. uw kredietwaardigheid en het bedrag dat u voor één of meer baby's wilt betalen. Dit alles in gefrankeerde enveloppe opsturen naar: Babydump
postbus 7665
5601 JK Eindhoven

Indien u tot de vijf hoogste bidders behoort, ontvangt u van ons (in neutrale enveloppe) nadere informatie.



model 300T 11.475,-




model 410 NGT 12.500,-



model 300 AK 13.375,-

De Sodomieter; Intern Bulletin 1 (1979).
From the collections of IHLIA LGBTI Heritage.

'Baby Dump', Verkeerde K(r)ant 23 (15 June 1985).
From the collections of IHLIA LGBTI Heritage.

Since this moment in 2018, I have visited IHLIA many more times, for various research projects. Moreover, I have seen behind the scenes extensively, first as intern during my Master and then briefly as embedded researcher as part of my PhD-trajectory. Speaking, a few years later, with one of the archival staff members about this feeling of discomfort I experienced during this one visit, she rightly noted that I could have approached the staff on desk-duty, and ask to be seated elsewhere. IHLIA does offer ways to engage with their collection that are less exposed. Even then, however, the space influences how the visitor engages with the material – I would likely not even have considered any feelings of possible discomfort around the materials and the people around me, had I been in a different sort of space.

An earlier visit to the lesbian archive in Berlin, Spinnboden Lesbenarchiv und Bibliothek, in 2017, illustrates how the physicality of that archival space evokes very different questions. Spinnboden is not housed in a public library, but is accessible only to visitors with an appointment. On their website, Spinnboden gives accessibility information: they explain how to reach the archive with public transport, and that there are cobblestones in front of the entrance. The site lists information on the presence and the size of the elevator, the height of the threshold and the availability of a ramp. The toilet in the building is not accessible, but there is a city toilet 700 metres from the archive. Additionally, there are several short videos in German Sign Language about Spinnboden on the website.⁶

Inside, Spinnboden is like a living room that is filled from floor to wall with books and maps of archival material. Back when I visited, the Spinnboden website read ‘nur für frauen’,

(‘only for women’), which has been removed for a while now. Upon entry, an archivist approached me, looking gravely worried, and explained that there was a male visitor present, but that, if I wanted her to, she would send him on his way. During my visit, the other visitor, the archivist and me were the only ones in the archive. I could take all the time I wanted with the material. In this explicitly queer living room-like space, I felt at home with the material I was accessing.

The stark regulation of visitors, however, could also have prevented easy access for closeted people, such as closeted trans women. At the time, I did not yet identify as nonbinary and presented (sort of) feminine, and I was accepted in the space as someone who had more right to be there than the male visitor, who would have been sent out on my request. I wonder now how I, as a transmasc nonbinary person, would have felt in that moment, and whether a femininely presenting visitor would have gotten the chance to send me out.

Another contrast is that there is no possibility to stumble across this material, as the Spinnboden archive is only accessible through appointment. While IHLIA makes LGBTI+ heritage more visible, Spinnboden does this, at least in its physical space, less so.

Not all LGBTI+ archives aim for increased LGBTI+ visibility. Cultural and film scholar Dagmar Brunow refers to Johanna Schaffer’s concept of this ‘ambivalence of visibility’; while visibility may empower marginalised groups, there are also increased risks of vulnerability that come with visibility and recognition.⁷ This is also what is on the balance for the visitor of IHLIA and Spinnboden: a visitor could feel empowered or



exposed by IHLIA's visibility in the public library, just as they might feel comfortable or hidden away in the Spinnboden archive. Different modes of physicality bring up different advantages and disadvantages, which impact the visitor and the way visitors relate to the material, the community, and the space around them.

These very different archival research experiences have been inspirational in envisioning my PhD research project, on the history and development of LGBTI+ archives in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, inclusivity and exclusivity in the LGBTI+ archive, and the ways the visitor can relate to and shape the LGBTI+ archive.

Spinnboden Lesbenarchiv und Bibliothek, Berlin.
Photo Noah Littel

emancipatory method

Learning through Art

Joseph Grigely and Art as a Perspective for
an Accessible, Representative Museum

language

accessibility

lived experience

artists with disabilities

art history

institutionality

visitorship

systemic injustices

Learning through Art

Joseph Grigely and Art as a Perspective for an Accessible, Representative Museum

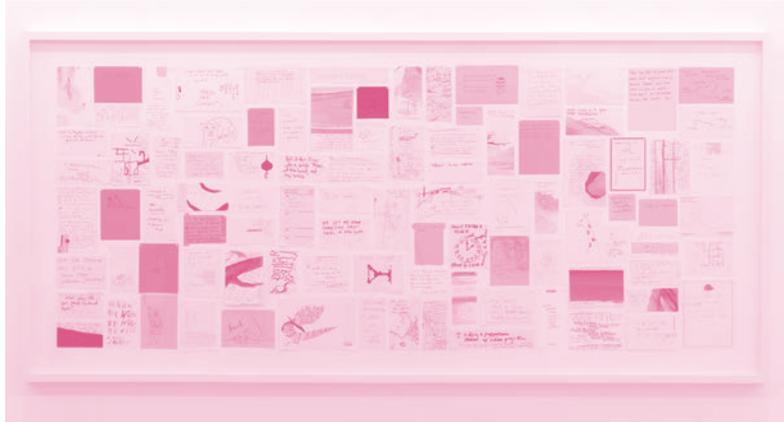
Nynke Feenstra

“Recognize that disabled people aren’t just audiences – they are artists, too.”¹

Introduction

In February 2020, I attended a lecture by researcher Eliza Chandler (disability studies) at the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam.² In addition to working as a curator, Chandler is also the founder of the Tangled Art Gallery, a gallery in Toronto, Canada, showcasing the work of Deaf artists and artists with disabilities.³ The gallery is also dedicated to increasing accessibility among art presenters for artists and visitors with disabilities.⁴ According to Chandler, artists with disabilities are eager to participate in the art world and stretch its boundaries.⁵ Chandler’s lecture inspired me to conduct more research into the contribution of artists with disabilities to the development of an accessible museum.

In recent years, making museums accessible to people with disabilities has become a key issue in Dutch museums.⁶ The (narrow) scope of accessibility as physical access has been broadened, with increased attention to the social and intrinsic dimensions of accessibility.⁷ Moreover, museums are increasingly focusing on the representation of people with disabilities. Disability representation refers to the representation of people with disabilities in all aspects of the museum experience, i.e., from the museum employees down to the themes, perspectives,



Joseph Grigely, "Somebody Talks About the Desert, The Wet Drips Down from Tropical Eaves," 2017
96 typewritten sheets, pins, frame 93 x 202 cm /
97,5 x 206,5 x 6 cm Courtesy of Air de Paris, Paris 2007.

and artists chosen by the museum.⁸ Due to the length of this article, I have decided to limit my discussion to the representation of people with disabilities. However, representation is also crucial for visitors who identify with other marginalised groups in the museum.⁹

An accessible museum experience implies that visitors with disabilities feel represented in the chosen perspectives and historical and contemporary stories. To achieve this, (museum) education officer and researcher Heather Hollins argues in favour of an 'emancipatory way of working', in which museums also prioritise accessibility and representation within the museum organisation. This means that knowledge, competencies, and ownership are shared equally between the museum and cooperation partners, including visitors with disabilities.¹⁰ In her framework, Hollins refers in general terms to working with people with disabilities, refraining from discussing the contribution of artists with disabilities. In this article, I have therefore chosen to specifically examine their contribution with the aim of exploring and developing the meaning of the term 'accessibility'. At the same time, this article strives to explain to museums which (follow-up) steps they can take towards becoming accessible, representative museums. I start from the work of the American artist, writer, and literary scholar Joseph Grigely (1956) to understand how the work of artists with disabilities contributes to the representation of people with disabilities in the museum and how, from the perspective of an emancipatory practice, this also increases the museum's accessibility.

Joseph Grigely

Grigely's work deals with 'human communication' and the 'dissemination of the cultural text'.¹¹ However, (academic) art

criticism, particularly in the United States, often tends to stress that Grigely is deaf¹² following an accident at the age of ten.^{13 14} In an interview with Ian Berry in 2007, Grigely mentions that he was known as a ‘deaf artist’ in the United States in the late 1990s, which contrasted with his reputation in Europe as an artist whose work centred on human communication. Grigely acknowledges that a work of art can have multiple interpretations, in line with “The Death of the Author” (1967) by French literary critic Roland Barthes (1915–1980). In this essay, Barthes argued that traditional Western literary criticism’s practice placed too much emphasis on the author’s intention and biography (e.g., a painting by Van Gogh interpreted in the context of his mental health) to explain the ultimate meaning of a text. Instead, Barthes posits that the author cannot decide the meaning of the work because this task falls to the reader of a text or the spectator when contemplating an artwork.¹⁵ Given Barthes’s ideas, it is easy to see how Grigely would be annoyed by the emphasis on his ‘body’ or the biographical detail that he has been deaf since childhood.¹⁶ In the essay “Beautiful Progress to Nowhere” (2011), he explains why, arguing that disseminating art is not just about the work’s physical manifestation before an audience but also about how the artist’s body becomes part of the work – whether intended or unintended. Contacts with curators and gallery owners and the attendance of talks and openings are an essential part of being an artist.¹⁷ In Grigely’s experience, however, he runs up against barriers, in particular when arranging for assistance and the fee of a sign language interpreter.¹⁸ Grigely thus (unintentionally) draws attention to his deafness because he is forced to address these obstacles.

The personal experiences that Grigely describes in “Beautiful Progress to Nowhere,” among others, touch on two issues that

are relevant for exploring the contribution of artists with disabilities to an accessible museum: (1) infrastructural barriers in the art world and (2) an active focus on the artist’s ‘body’. As Chandler pointed out in her lecture, artists with disabilities want to participate in the art world, which is why removing any infrastructural barriers in the art world is so important. Due to the limited scope of this article, I will not elaborate on this any further, focusing on the second topic instead. In this article, I explore how the artist’s *work* instead of his/her/their representation ‘in person’ contributes to accessibility. The starting premise of this article is the assumption that *the work* of artists with disabilities contributes to ‘representation’ because the work originated in the artist’s *lived experience*. I reference the concept of ‘lived experience’ because it is a key theme in current (academic) discussions on society’s accessibility.

Building Access (2017) by interdisciplinary researcher Aimi Hamraie builds on this discussion.¹⁹ In their book, Hamraie charts the historical evolution of the discourse of accessibility and its influence on the current debate. The discourse of accessibility emerged in the wake of the Second World War, with a view to the reintegration of rehabilitating soldiers. The starting premise was to develop a ‘barrier-free’ environment so people could (re-)enter the job market. In the 1970s, this economic approach met with criticism from the emancipatory movement of people with disabilities. Activists and rehabilitation experts argued that the (built) environment was not tailored to the needs of people with disabilities, creating ‘limitations’. At the same time, they were opposed to ‘productivity’ as a reason for improved accessibility. These views led to the development of a ‘social model of disability,’ the theoretical premise of disability studies.²⁰ In the early 21st century, however, this social model

faced increased criticism, following new critical approaches to disability, including *crip theory*.²¹ The main critique was that there was too much emphasis on environmental factors and insufficient attention to the individual and lived experiences of people with disabilities.²²

The term ‘lived’ refers to a person’s first-person point of view or direct experiences and is typical of phenomenology. This philosophical movement emerged in the first half of the 20th century.²³ Phenomenology studies the nature of things, observing how we experience them or, more specifically, how personal experiences are constructed. An experience occurs because you are aware of *something*, e.g., I remember my first museum visit, or I think of my brother.²⁴ To better understand the relationship between Grigely’s lived experience and his work, I introduce some concepts in the thought of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). Merleau-Ponty argues that personal experiences are neither physical (sensory perception), nor mental (our thinking) but originate in the interaction between the two. His work therefore provides a starting point for exploring the relationship between representation and Grigely’s lived experience, without running the risk of an overly reductive analysis of ‘the body’.

Lived experience

In 1999, Joseph Grigely and the artist Anne Walsh performed *Suprasegmental* at the Cranbrook Art Museum (Bloomfield Hills, Michigan). The performance consisted of a telephone conversation between Grigely (deaf) and Walsh (hearing) using a *telephone device for the deaf* (TDD). This communication device for the deaf and hard of hearing consisted of a remote operator who translated speech into text, and vice versa. During



Joseph Grigely, “You,” 2001. Audio (produced in collaboration with Amy Vogel) & 8 pigment prints. Installation view, “St. Cecilia,” Baltimore Contemporary Museum, 2007.

the 60-minute performance, the operator typed out Walsh's 'spoken response', passing it to Grigely, followed by Grigely's 'typed response' in speech to Walsh. The audience followed the conversation, reading the messages on Grigely's TDD on a screen and listening in on Walsh's phone, which was amplified with a microphone. As such, they witnessed the contributions of the performers (Grigely, Walsh, and the operator) to the conversation, and the miscommunications, interruptions, and adjustments as a result of the operator's actions. The performance demonstrated that meaning is conveyed not just by words but also by the person pronouncing them and the specific way in which they are pronounced.²⁵

The personality of language was also apparent in the two-part installation *You* that Grigely created with the artist Amy Vogel²⁶ for the Yokohama Triennial (Yokohama, Japan) in 1999. One part of the installation consisted of enlarged prints on the walls of the space featuring names that had been hand-written by different people (Hilke, Kelly, Wolfgang Winkler, among others). The other part consisted of several speakers in the centre of the room, through which the name "Ed Ruscha" resonated, as recorded by several people. The installation emphasised the uniqueness of language through the visible and audible differences between the written and spoken names. The personal aspect was accentuated in the use of first and last names, a reference to our individuality. As Grigely explained to Berry, language use is universal and, at the same time, influenced by individual traces. Instead of being interested in language as a formal system, Grigely wants to understand how "language is embodied" (how we visually express language) and how people use language in communication with others.²⁷

According to Merleau-Ponty, language, the articulation of things in sentences or concepts, plays an essential part in the refining and deepening of our experiences.²⁸ This reminds me of the writing process of an article, which starts with 'seeing' or spotting an intuitive connection or contradiction between different sources, which I only understand when I start to discuss it or write about it in an effort to explain this (intuitive) connection or contradiction. When I replace the relationship between 'I' and the sources with the relationship between 'I' and my environment, the world, I also experience an emotional connection between the things that surround me. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls intuitive coherence. We (unconsciously) enhance this intuitive coherence with previous experiences, acquired knowledge, and learned concepts we express through language. The fact that we enhance this experience means we always perceive our environment from a specific perspective: in the most literal sense, because our field of vision is unable to contain all of our surroundings, and figuratively, because we create a pattern of expectation through acquired experiences. Based on this pattern, we unconsciously start to filter our surroundings, narrowing our field of vision. This interaction between the senses and mind situates us in the world. That is why Merleau-Ponty does not speak of the body or mind but of the lived body. Put simply, how we use language is thus eminently personal because this is an expression of an embodied experience that is the outcome of an interaction between our sensory perception and mind.²⁹

The lived experience thus relates to personal experiences and their origin in the interaction between the body and mind. This brings us to the question of how the artist's lived experience relates to his work. Merleau-Ponty has published several essays

on art.³⁰ An artist's style is both personal, says Merleau-Ponty, and lived as "a historical process" of creative expression.³¹ Creative expression thus is an expression of the artist's lived experience, which is enhanced and further influenced by the artist's experiences. Based on this reasoning, a work of art is always an expression of the artist's lived experience. How can Grigely's work contribute to an accessible and representative museum? I develop the answer to this question below using Hollins's emancipatory approach.

Learning through art

Several practical guidelines for accessible museum visits have been formulated in recent years, according to Hollins. Despite this, museums still pay insufficient attention to the perspectives of people with disabilities.³² A shift in their thinking about accessibility is therefore necessary, with accessibility and representation also becoming a priority 'behind the scenes'. An emancipatory approach can be beneficial in this context.³³ Hollins describes the evolution of an emancipatory approach based on four stages:

- 1 **Building and services:** access to the museum (building and services) without involving people with disabilities in the decision-making process;
- 2 **Exchange:** the museum identifies areas in which it exchanges views with people with disabilities;
- 3 **Discourse:** people with disabilities are structurally involved in reciprocal dialogue, and both parties suggest topics for the agenda;
- 4 **Decision-making:** people with disabilities gain access to senior-level/higher-level decision-making processes and can directly influence decisions. People with disabilities

benefit from the knowledge, skills, and experiences provided by the museum, and vice versa. The dialogue aims to challenge institutional practices. (Hollins, 235)³⁴

In the Netherlands, a growing number of museums have advanced to the second or even third stage.³⁵ Increasingly, people with disabilities are involved as experience experts to help improve the accessibility of several aspects of museum visits (website accessibility, guided tours, use of language, emergency escape routes, etc.). A critical difference between the second and third stages is the shift towards reciprocal dialogue: the frameworks are not pre-determined by the museum but are established in consultation with the various partners. The third stage offers people with disabilities a platform to put their ideas – which stem from their lived experience – on the museum agenda. In this instance, the work of Grigely (or other artists with disabilities) can trigger a dialogue between the museum and people with disabilities. However, a dialogue can also occur between a curator and Grigely, or between Grigely's work and the work of other artists in an exhibition. The evolution from the second to the third stage consists of a broadening of the scope, from representation as a representation of the interests of people with disabilities to including under-represented perspectives (in the museum), providing them with a platform.

The question remains whether this analysis does not place (too) much emphasis on the 'limitation' (or impairment) as part of the artist's lived experience. The fact that Grigely is deaf adds context to his work, but there are other contexts you can use to interpret his work. Referencing Grigely's deafness is not an issue as long as you don't limit the framework for interpreting his work to this. Grigely sees it as his job to ensure that there are

several points of reference in his work for spectators: formal, theoretical, and biographical.³⁶ The references in his work are the result of the artist's creative expression and are derived from his lived experience. One thing I take away from Grigely's work is that it does not matter whether you mention his disability. Instead, we must continue to question the normative ideas about disability in the art and museum world that give rise to such reductive analyses. This brings me to Hollins's fourth stage. Artists' work can help challenge institutional practices, offering insights into ways in which the museum (unconsciously) constructs and perpetuates normative ideas of disability. In her lecture, Chandler also referred to the ability of artists to extend boundaries. Art holds up a mirror; it can be confronting and enriching. This is what it does for me, you, and others. Therein lies the value of art. And that is precisely why it is so vital that a platform is provided for the work of artists with disabilities so they can speak freely without the constraints of existing frameworks.

Conclusion

Accessibility has become a priority for Dutch museums. As a result, there is a growing body of (practical) knowledge on how to develop an accessible experience for museum visitors with disabilities, e.g., with a focus on the social and substantive dimensions of accessibility. Given this positive evolution, we can look ahead to the next steps museums can take towards becoming accessible. Representation is an underexposed aspect of accessibility. To create an accessible museum experience, you need to ensure that visitors can identify with different aspects of the museum visit, from the museum employees to the themes, perspectives, and artists that the museum chooses to highlight. This article discusses the potential contribution

of artists with disabilities to this representation based on the work of American artist Joseph Grigely and the 'emancipatory practice' of researcher Heather Hollins.

The analysis of Grigely's work starting from some of Merleau-Ponty's concepts has shown that the artist's lived experience is expressed through his creative expression in a work of art. A lived experience is created because we are aware of something. This awareness arises from the interaction between our sensory perception and mind and is always influenced by our pattern of expectation, i.e., our point of view, our experience of the world. Merleau-Ponty therefore speaks of the lived body that *situates* us in the world. Based on this reasoning, each work of art is a unique expression of the artist's personal experience and expectations. By collecting and presenting the work of artists with disabilities, museums can explore new perspectives contained in this work. To this end, it is important that existing frameworks are abandoned, and new ones formed in cooperation, on equal footing with the artist. Hollins's emancipatory approach shows that working with people with disabilities implies representing interests and being open to new approaches and perspectives. The resulting reciprocal dialogue challenges normative ideas about disability, paving the way for new stories and perspectives with which visitors with disabilities can identify.

Learning through art means you observe someone to see how they do things and then copy what they do. My intention with this article about learning through art is to draw attention to the perspectives that are contained in the work of artists with disabilities and starting from this, to take a fresh, new look at the representation of people with disabilities in the museum. This representation is not limited to visitors. It also encompasses

colleagues, collaborative partners, and artists. To create an accessible museum experience, it is crucial that visitors with disabilities feel represented in the chosen perspectives and historical and contemporary stories. Museums must therefore also work on accessibility behind the scenes by taking the following steps: (1) engage in equal and reciprocal collaboration with artists with disabilities; (2) allow their work to inspire mutual dialogue; and (3) let the works interact with works by other artists, whether established or unknown, with or without disabilities. The resulting new stories will inspire recognition in some visitors and challenge the normative frameworks of others. As such, the museum becomes the operator in Grigely and Welsh's performance, the third 'person' who facilitates communication between the artwork and the visitor. The museum must ensure this communication is as accessible as possible, always starting from an open mindset.

- 1 Eliza Chandler. "8 Things Everyone Needs to Know About Art and Disability." *Canadian Art* (2016). See <https://canadianart.ca/features/7-things-everyone-needs-to-know-about-art-disability/>.
- 2 The lecture was part of a research project titled *The Critical Visitor: Intersectional Approaches for Rethinking & Retooling Accessibility and Inclusivity in Heritage Spaces*: www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/research-projects/i/28/34328.html.
- 3 On its website, the Tangled Art Gallery refers to 'Deaf and disabled artists'. Deaf with a capital D refers to a culturally Deaf identity whose core is the use of sign language. In general, (culturally) Deaf people do not identify as disabled. In Deaf studies and disability studies, the practice is therefore to distinguish between Deaf and disabled.
- 4 See <https://tangledarts.org/about-us/who-we-are/>
- 5 Eliza Chandler. "Disability Arts, Critical Inclusions (lecture)." *Critical Visitor Field Lab 1*. Tropenmuseum Amsterdam, 7 February 2020.
- 6 Nynke Feenstra. "Bezoekersreis of reisorganisatie: Het belang van (ver)houdingen binnen de museumorganisatie voor een toegankelijk en inclusief museumbezoek." (Visitor's journey or tour operator. The importance of relations and attitudes within the museum organisation for an accessible, inclusive museum visit) STUDIO i. (Zwolle: Drukkerij Zalsman, 2019), 14-15.
- 7 The social dimension relates to the extent to which people with disabilities feel welcome in the museum and to their experiences in their contacts with museum employees. The intrinsic dimension looks at how appealing and relevant the collection (stories) are, both in terms of their format and content.
- 8 A Dutch example is *Musea in Gebaren* or a museum tour in Dutch Sign Language (NGT) by a deaf guide. The tours are organised by several Dutch museums in cooperation with Stichting IN Gebaren. Deaf visitors find the tour guide and the fact that this person talks about the collection from the perspective of the deaf relatable. More information: <https://ingebaren.nl/doe-mee-in-gebaren/musea-in-gebaren/>.
- 9 E.g., marginalised groups based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or socio-economic position.
- 10 Heather Hollins. "Reciprocity, Accountability, Empowerment: Emancipatory principles and practices in the museum", in *Re-presenting disability: activism and agency in the museum*, ed. Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 232-235.
- 11 The cultural 'text' refers to an object, speech act, or custom that takes on a specific meaning within the culture that produced it. Grigely is interested in the myriad of ways in which a 'text' manifests itself within different reference frameworks, establishing new relations with other texts (Grigely 2020).
- 12 Grigely does not (explicitly) identify as Deaf or with the Deaf community, which is why I write deaf in lowercase here.
- 13 Before writing this article, I reached out to Joseph Grigely by e-mail, and he answered some (interview) questions by e-mail on 8 June 2020.
- 14 Joseph Grigely (e-mail conversation between the author and Grigely), 8 June 2020; Susannah B. Mintz. "The Art of Joseph Grigely: Deafness, Conversation, Noise." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 6:1 (2012): 1.
- 15 Roland Barthes. *Image, music, text*. London: Fontana, 1977: 143,148.

- 16 Ian Berry. "Nudist Plays: A Dialogue with Joseph Grigely by Ian Berry." in *Joseph Grigely: St. Cecilia exh. cat.* ed. Ian Berry and Irene Hofmann. (Saratoga Springs: The Francis Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery a Skidmore College, 2007), 10,11; Grigely (e-mail conversation), 2020.
- 17 Joseph Grigely. "Beautiful Progress to Nowhere." *Parallel lines journal* (2011). See <https://web.archive.org/web/20171227234105/http://www.parallellinesjournal.com/articles.html>.
- 18 Joseph Grigely. "Thank You: On What it Means to Care, Joseph Grigely." *Hold Me Now – Feel and Touch in an Unreal World*. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 21 March 2018. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vG_cZ-JUP088; Grigely (e-mail conversation), 2020.
- 19 Including *critical race, disability studies and feminist studies*.
- 20 The social model of disability emerged in the 1980s as the counterpart of the medical model of disability, which approaches disability as a 'physical defect'. The social model, meanwhile, situates disability in the environment (context), saying that people are disabled by barriers in society rather than by their body. The social model provided a theoretical foundation for the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (see the work of Mike Oliver, Tom Shakespeare, and Vic Finkelstein, among others).
- 21 *Crip theory* is a subset of *critical disability studies* grounded in both disability and queer theory, characterised by an intersectional approach and the positioning of 'disability' as an identity. Further reading: McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- 22 Aimi Hamraie. *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017: 5,12.
- 23 Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, among others. The exact definition of 'phenomenology' is subject to debate. Smith therefore distinguishes between historical and contemporary phenomenology. The main difference between the two is that the latter has a broader range of topics and research methods and also focuses, for example, on the neurological aspects of personal experiences (Smith 2018, 1,2).
- 24 Taylor Carman. "Foreword" in *Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), viii.; David Woodruff Smith. "Phenomenology", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018. See <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.
- 25 See <http://annewalshjr.org/sp/suprasegmental.html>; Irene Hofmann. "Cheese and salad are here," in Joseph Grigely: *St. Cecilia exh. cat.* ed. Ian Berry and Irene Hofmann. (Saratoga Springs: The Francis Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery a Skidmore College, 2007), 86-7.
- 26 Grigely and Vogel are married and regularly collaborate on art projects.
- 27 Ian Berry. "Nudist Plays: A Dialogue with Joseph Grigely by Ian Berry." in *Joseph Grigely: St. Cecilia exh. cat.* ed. Ian Berry and Irene Hofmann. (Saratoga Springs: The Francis Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery a Skidmore College, 2007), 11,20.
- 28 Taylor Carman. "Foreword" in *Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), x.
- 29 Carman, x-xi; Ted Toadvine. "Maurice Merleau-Ponty," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019. See <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/merleau-ponty/>; Hugh J. Silverman. "Art and Aesthetics," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Jack Reynolds and Rosalyn Diprose. (Stocksfield: Routledge, 2008), 103; A.A. van den Braembussche. *Denken over Kunst: Een Inleiding in De Kunstfilosofie*. (Thinking about Art. An introduction to art philosophy) Bussum: Coutinho, 2000: 262.
- 30 among others, "Eye and Mind" (1964)
- 31 Toadvine. See <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/merleau-ponty/>.
- 32 Hollins bases her findings on the situation in the UK, but the same conclusion can also be drawn based on the situation in the Netherlands.
- 33 Hollins, 235.
- 34 Hollins, 235.
- 35 Examples include: In 2017, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam appointed an accessibility manager (Cathelijne Denekamp), who implements structural accessibility improvements in the museum's organisation in collaboration with people with disabilities, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/visit/accessibility>; Marleen Hartjes of the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven) has been working with people with disabilities and two architects since 2016 to design an accessible, multi-sensory exhibition space, <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/multisensory-museum>.
- 26 Berry, 11.

Method

expanding
multisensory
museum

A Hold on Art: Crippling the Van Abbemuseum

hands-on

accessibility

lived experience

people with sensory limitations

co-creation

critical / -ity

visitorship

A Hold on Art: Crippling the Van Abbemuseum

Barbara Strating

Lean in to take a closer look at one of Charley Toorop's self-portraits. That is precisely what you can do in one of the galleries of Eindhoven's Van Abbemuseum, where the artist gazes right back at you with her penetrating stare. What is going on inside her head, you wonder? Toorop only paints what she sees in an almost matter-of-fact way, devoid of any sentiment.¹ As a visitor, you nonetheless feel that you are looking at someone who is suffering. The concentrated, probing gaze, the tight lips, the tense forehead and ears, and the background noise. I think, like me, Toorop was constantly plagued by phantom sounds, that she had tinnitus. But have you ever seen someone with tinnitus in a museum?

Obviously, I have no way of proving that Charley Toorop had tinnitus, nor is this fact relevant in the context of this essay as its subject is not Toorop. Instead, it focuses on the person who is gazing at and interpreting her self-portrait. Museums play a prominent role in the collection and conservation of visual art, but their collections also exist by virtue of their audience. And here at this intersection, the greatest revolution is currently taking place, in the relationship between the collection and this audience. The processes of decolonisation have already raised critical questions about representation and the ownership of artworks. At the Van Abbemuseum, however, another layer has been added by exploring how exhibitions can be made more



Charley Toorop, *Self-portrait with Winter Branches*, 1944–1945.

accessible for people with disabilities. It should be noted that accessibility should not be understood in the merely practical sense in this instance. Obviously, removing accessibility barriers for people with mobility issues makes the museum accessible. At the same time, the museum is also working on a more radical approach, making the visual arts accessible for people with sensory disabilities.

Transforming the museum into an accessible space for people who are blind or partially sighted takes years and requires a different interaction with the public, but also between the public and the museum. I have been involved in this process at the Van Abbemuseum since 2015. I initially joined the team as a research intern on the Special Guests Programme, which organised guided tours for people with vision and hearing impairments. Later on, I was involved as a consultant in the development of the multi-sensory museum in 2017 and of *Delinking and Relinking*, the Van Abbemuseum's new collection presentation in 2021. As a philosophy student, I specialised in aesthetics and was thus able to contribute my expertise on perception and put this knowledge into practice in the museum. But this only explains part of my involvement. As a person with a sensory impairment, I can contribute the knowledge gained through experience that is indispensable for knocking the visual regime in a museum off its pedestal.

We all know emancipation never works when imposed top-down. Nothing about us without us! But beyond a collaboration with specific target audiences, making visual art accessible to other senses implies doing away with one of the most important unwritten rules of museums. Art is for looking and listening and the object must always be protected against visitors who might

damage it with their bodies.² Moreover, the artwork is a unique, autonomous, and incorruptible object. Challenging these assumptions can be problematic as museum professionals have been socialised in the restrictive panopticon of the museum gallery.³ So is my body, but these same assumptions cause me discomfort, pain, and exclusion. And it is this experience that exposes the implicit, invisible barriers you can remove to become radically accessible. This explains why the museum is currently collaborating with a group of consultants from diverse backgrounds and with different disabilities.

To be fair, I did not think that my own disability could positively influence a museum's policy during my initial meetings with the Van Abbemuseum's team in December 2014. My disability was an ambiguous burden. I make every effort to participate in society. Asking for changes or help is complicated because my efforts are such that they mask my disability. Society's high standards and my own efforts to meet them mean that I was never able to develop a disability identity. The Van Abbemuseum reversed this notion, as it used my body and its limitations as its starting premise. I did not notice this initially. When I finally became aware of this, I was relieved that the way in which I perceive things could be more just than a shortcoming.

In this essay, I discuss the museum's journey towards becoming more accessible since 2014. At the same time, I cannot ignore how my self-image has changed in the process.

Special Guests Programme

The figure leans against the wall, one ear pressed against the wall, without kneeling. The figure is a tumbler. What do you

suppose it hears? Is it listening, or did it accidentally lose its balance and lean against the wall for support?

The Special Guests programme, launched in 2014, consisted of a series of gallery tours adapted to different target groups. At the time, the Van Abbemuseum began to work on making its building accessible in anticipation of the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Working on the collection and exhibitions were part of this process. Project leader Marleen Hartjes collaborated with visitors with disabilities and knowledge centres such as Dedicon to understand the most appropriate approach. The outcome was a diverse programme. The deaf artist Jascha Blume was trained as a tour guide, the Van Abbemuseum developed a series of audio tours in Dutch Sign Language, and the museum also developed a tour in collaboration with Mijke Ulrich for visitors with aphasia. I was primarily interested in developing touch tours for visually impaired visitors as part of the Special Guests Programme.

Perceiving visual arts through touch may sound contradictory, or at any rate, it is from a museum's perspective. Many artworks are too fragile to be perceived by touch. A flat surface, a photograph, painting or drawing is just not very interesting. You can feel the shape of the object and the material, but the image, composition, or figure make up the artwork, and this is very difficult to perceive. The Special Guest programme therefore looked at different ways of distilling these visual arts into tangible objects such as tactile replicas, 3D versions of artworks, and interpretations using smell and descriptions of artworks art during guided tours.



Visitor touches replica made in a 1:1 scale of *Listening Figure* by Juan Muñoz during a guided tour, ca 2017.
Photo Marcel de Buck, Van Abbemuseum

A touch tour on Sunday afternoon consisted of a tour of a small part of the exhibition. Each time, five visitors came to the museum with their companions, where they had the opportunity to observe a number of pre-selected artworks. The tour guide brought a series of different versions of artworks, such as scent samples, tactile plates, and 3D replicas into the gallery. Some artworks could be touched under supervision, however, including, for example, Juan Muñoz's sculpture, *Listening Figure* (1991), of which a miniature tactile replica exists. I witnessed this on one of my first working days in the museum and the tour afforded me a far-reaching insight into the importance of the secondary senses, i.e., touch, smell, and taste, when it comes to perceiving visual art.

The average sighted visitor spends about three seconds looking at a work of art. But when you touch and explore a work of art with your hands, especially if you have a vision impairment, you absorb the artwork much more carefully. Your hands and skin provide information about the material, the finish of the material – does something feel smooth or rough? –, the sculpture's shape, posture and temperature, as well as various details. If you were to only look at the *Listening Figure* you would not notice this, but the eyes have bars. What does it mean? The tour guide also asked visitors to mimic the sculpture's pose with their own bodies, prompting a conversation about the work's meaning as they leant against the wall.

The tours on Sunday afternoons promoted visitors who usually stood little to gain from a museum visit to privileged guests who were able to experience the artworks up close, touching and even smelling them. As a philosophy student, I learned that my intuition, i.e., that the senses of the human body play a crucial

part in how we perceive visual art, could be applied in practice. So how should we use our body in the museum?

The Multi-Sensory Museum

By investigating how we can transpose a work of art into touch and smell so that it becomes perceptible to people with a vision impairment, we learn the possibilities for actually doing this. But it is also a potent reminder that we tend to forget about our bodies in a museum context. Now there is nothing unusual about this. The arts are visual arts and their meaning is derived from what the eye can perceive and the mind can interpret. Moreover, we are generally unaware of our bodies. We only notice them when we experience pain, arousal, or discomfort.

The body cannot be assigned a major role due to museum etiquette. Talking loudly in the galleries is deemed inappropriate, an attendant or wire prevents us from leaning in too closely to the artworks, and museum galleries generally have terrible acoustics, meaning every movement is heard, including shuffling feet, squeaky shoes, and the clacking of one's heels. Moreover, museums are primarily designed to make you forget about your body. They are devoid of smell, you may not eat or drink in the museum galleries, and exhibitions usually come with a set route that takes you through the entire building. At the heart of this experience is the artwork.

But the Special Guests programme challenged the premise that the body does not matter, that it cannot be a starting point for a museum experience. Perception is always a profoundly physical experience.⁴ Our senses each have their own realm. While the eye cannot taste, the senses work together, in synthesis. The different sensory experiences are merged into one experience

for our intellect, they engage with each other, working together as one body.⁵ Moreover, they also learn from each other. As a baby, you start by learning how something tastes or feels. Only when you have acquired this knowledge can you distinguish bronze from wood by looking at it and understand how far an object is located from your body.⁶ Using just one sense when it comes to experiencing art is therefore very strange.

Context also colours our perception. Just think of Wim T. Schippers's *Peanut Butter Floor* from 1962. When the work was re-exhibited at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 2011, a whopping 1,100 litres of Calvé Peanut Butter in an area of 4 by 14 metres meant that the museum must have reeked of peanut butter. At best, the floor caused confusion, newspapers reported how people accidentally stepped on it, after which the museum used a trowel to smooth it again. Someone even had strewn sprinkles on it at one point.⁷ But nowhere did I read that, as a joke, someone walked in with a sandwich and a knife, prepared a peanut butter sandwich, and ate it. Things would have probably been very different if the same artwork had been installed in a restaurant.

In a museum, you can play with this context. And that is exactly what the 2018 multi-sensory museum set out to do. Architects Peter-Willem Vermeersch and Tomas Dirrix partnered with a group of 'experience experts' to develop a museum gallery that acknowledged the body in its layout and design. The walls were made of clay stucco, creating a pleasant atmosphere and acoustics. Instead of being straight, they were slightly curved. Two railings were attached to the wall, allowing people to visit the space unaccompanied. Only one artwork was on display in the space: Andrzej Wróblewski's *Dzienie Do Doskonosci* (1952).



Project leader Marleen Hartjes walks through the multi-sensory museum, 2018, Van Abbemuseum. Photo Van Abbemuseum, Joep Jacobs

This drawing also exists as a tactile object and comes with a fragrance sample. Muted light made the ambience more pleasant.

For me personally, this project was also a tipping point. During the Special Guests programme, I was an intern working on a research project. But for the multi-sensory museum, I had a seat at the table, providing input based on my experiential knowledge. I had deepened my knowledge in the period between my internship and 2017, during which I had become so ill with tinnitus that I had to stop working. I no longer felt at home in my body and my disability made life in general very complicated. This was a life-changing experience, but the multi-sensory museum gave me the opportunity to translate this experience into a concrete project. My need for silence manifested itself as a design of two alcoves, lined with felt, offering visitors a haven, an oasis in the museum.

Delinking/Relinking

An exhibition as a haven. The multi-sensory museum was located on the third floor of the new building, at the very top of the tower. To be fair, it was not a museum, not even a museum gallery, but a corridor with a corner, a passageway from the lift to the immense stairwell. It was an experiment on the fringe but its outcome served as a launchpad for a more comprehensive project in the form of a multi-sensory collection presentation titled Delinking/Relinking.

In the spring of 2020, during the first lockdown, a team from the Van Abbemuseum teamed up with a group of experts to make the new collection presentation largely accessible to visitors with disabilities.⁸ An ambitious undertaking and not

just because our consultations took place online. Unlike the Special Guests programme, our ambition was to allow visitors to perceive the collection in the gallery through various tactile objects, scent samples, spoken audio tours in print and in Dutch Sign Language, independently and during the museum's opening hours. This is crucial. Because accessibility should not be limited to one tour a month, on a Sunday afternoon. By now we had also learned that everyone stood to benefit if we recognised the entire body as an observer of art.

There is no definitive conclusion yet, but I think curating and designing while taking all the senses into account makes visual art more approachable, making it possible to build an emotional relationship with a work of art. Even more than an emotional response, this form of curation offers the opportunity to give in to what we naturally do, namely to touch.

Objects, as well as works of art, have haptic properties.⁹ Think of a door handle or a cup. The door handle is made for touching, your hand automatically finds the handle and pushes the door open. The same applies to works of art to a lesser extent, although this depends heavily on the material. I can't resist touching a tapestry, I like to run my fingers over a sculpture, and I have always wondered what the contrast lines in a cubist painting would feel like. Are they as sharp and angular as they seem?

The collection presentation *Delinking/Relinking* (2021–2025) allows you to also experience this. Of the 120 artworks on display, 25 have been made accessible as multi-sensory experiences. At the same time, this creates confusion, because why is it okay to touch Wilfredo Lam's beautiful wooden tactile replica



Visitor touches touch replica of Pablo Picasso, *Buste de femme* in *Delinking and Relinking* in 2021. Photo Van Abbemuseum, Joep Jacobs



Touch replica Buste de femme by Picasso, with a label in braille, *Delinking and relinking* in 2021. Photo Van Abbemuseum, Joep Jacobs

of *Le Marchand D'oiseaux* (1962) but not *Saint Sébastien* (1929), the wooden sculpture by Ossip Zadkine, alongside it? Because the museum must protect Zadkine's sculpture from deterioration and thus touch. The use of tactile replicas in museum galleries subverts the unwritten rules of conduct in a museum, creating confusion.

Doubts about etiquette and the conservation of artworks are not the only aspects that provoke tension in this project. This may also give rise to tensions within the team of experience experts, about which needs prevail. Whereas I value peace and relative quiet in a museum but enjoy exuberant colours and stimuli, the same cannot be said for someone who is sensitive to stimuli. In contrast, someone with a vision impairment relies on auditory stimuli. The ridge used to guide a person with a white cane can also be a barrier for a wheelchair user. One set of measures, which is designed to increase accessibility for one group, may exclude another. Radical accessibility for all is an almost unachievable ideal. Although the exhibition is therefore far from perfect, it is a successful and loving attempt at radical accessibility.

And I? I learned how to combine my professional and experiential knowledge, made friends for the first time with people with disabilities, and absorbed enough from this process to take on a curatorial job in early 2022. But more than anything else, I felt angry. Do we really need loving accessibility? Why can we not be more empowered, just like the Black community, which rightfully asserts its claims to its heritage and visibility? When will people with disabilities finally become emancipated? Are we too focused on arranging basic amenities to look beyond them? Are our complaints and limitations too diverse and do



Still from *Smoke* by Roy Villevoye, 2016,
in *Delinking and Relinking*.

they prevent us from pinpointing one dot on the horizon? And why is the Crip Community not visible in the exhibition, except for Ndo in Roy Villevoye's film *Smoke*, who was flown from New Guinea to Germany for an eye operation to restore his vision. An operation that failed, by the way. Why does *Delinking/Relinking* visualise our fears, and why does it stop at celebrating us as a community? Why do audiences love to look at the pain of others, all the while feeling a sense of relief that this is not their fate?

Conclusion

And so Charley Toorop has tinnitus. I can't prove it, nor is this pertinent to my premise. What is relevant, however, is that I have learned, in my six-year involvement with the Van Abbemuseum, what it means to be disabled, with my disability serving as inspiration rather than a burden. My body, which was full of construction flaws from the outset, has never been beautiful or attractive. It is still not portrayed in paintings. But my discomfort can serve as a starting point for making museums just ever so slightly more accessible. This is pioneering work. All my life I have been looking around me in hopes of finding people just like me, on whose shoulders I could stand, but I have yet to find them outside my small circle of family members. I did encounter pioneers such as Jan Troost (activist and advocate) and Jacqueline Kool (consultant, researcher, and an author in the field of disability studies) however, as well as generational colleagues such as Mari Sanders (filmmaker) and Simon Dogger (designer) with whom we are now laying a foundation for generations to come. Until then, I have no choice but to sometimes project recognition and representation, even though it may be unjustified.

I have also learned that this is neither easy nor straightforward. Much like the museum has to learn to take a different approach to conservation, (in)visible exclusion, and touching artworks, and the public has to become accustomed to a new way of dealing with visual art, I had to learn to be disabled and accept my situation to its full extent. My name is Barbara Strating, I am hearing impaired, I am vision impaired, and my ability to move around is at times limited. This is a phrase that I would never utter outside the context of this process at the Van Abbemuseum. For too long, however, I have underestimated the impact of how pronouncing this phrase within the museum context is a form of emotional labour to be compensated with an appropriate fee for work done and a mention in the credits. Too many people with disabilities still don't have access to a decent income. The time has come to stop being modest and grateful that we are included in the process.

My involvement in making visual arts accessible to people with disabilities has come to an end, for now. But it is my fervent hope that Delinking/Relinking will serve as a starting point, inspiring more institutions to make accessibility their starting premise. The days when people with disabilities deserved just one tour are behind us. Currently, there are two million people with disabilities in the Netherlands alone, and this number is only increasing as people grow older. Ageing comes with defects, so why not design our museums today in anticipation of this future?¹⁰

- 1 Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J Mamiya. *Gardner's art through the ages, twelfth edition*. Thompson Wadsworth, 2005.
- 2 Constance Classen, "Touch in the Museum," in *The Book of Touch*. Ed. C. Classen. (Oxford and New York, Berg, 2005), 275–286.
- 3 Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex." *New Formations* 4, Spring (1988) 73–102.
- 4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *De wereld waarnemen*. transl. J. Slatman, Amsterdam, Boom, 2006.
- 5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Fenomenologie van de waarneming*. transl. Douwe Tiemersma and Rens Vlasblom, Boom, Amsterdam, 2013.
- 6 Johann Gottfried Herder. *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*. transl. J. Gaiger, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- 7 "Pindakaasvloer Wim T. verrijkt met hagelslag." *De Volkskrant*. 14 March 1997.
- 8 The group of experts consisted of Mari Sanders, Barbara Strating, Simon Dogger, Severine Kas, Angelo Custódio, Jascha Blume and Adi Hollander.
- 9 Erik Rietveld, "The affordances of art for making technologies." *Adaptive Behavior* 30. no. 6 (2022): 489–503.
- 10 Anais Ertvelde. *Zorgangst, Zes oefeningen in hulpeloosheid*. Academia Press, 2022.

merging con-
tact zone with
safe(r)-safe

Decolonising Archives and the Need for Emo- tional Accessibility as Part of a Safe(r) Space

Keywords

emotions

accessibility

institutionality

intergenerational archives

colonialism

decolonization

safety

systemic injustices

Decolonising Archives and the Need for Emo- tional Accessibility as Part of a Safe(r) Space

Charles Jeurgens

Archival institutions strive to reflect everyone's experience, which is why they are working hard to improve accessibility. Their mission statements and mottoes often refer to the role of a city, province, or nation as a site of memory. The Rotterdam City Archive thus styles itself as "the public memory of Rotterdam"¹, the Zeeuws Archief is "the memory of Zeeland"², the Utrecht Archive preserves the "collective memory of Utrecht"³, and the National Archives manage "our national memory".⁴ In this context, I have chosen to refer to these institutions as 'institutional archives' as they manage government archives, making them available to the public. Depending on these institutions' policy choices, they may also collect archives of social groups, businesses, and churches. These institutions have held a dominant position for many decades, determining which records are relevant to preserve. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that their claim to being the memory of a city or country is problematic because of their selective, one-sided interpretation. Large groups are made to feel uncomfortable because this paper memory does not have much to offer to them.⁵ The memory does not remember nor serve all people in the same way. Because of this selective approach, the metaphor of memory may make sense⁶, but only if it comes with very detailed instructions for the users of this 'memory'.

In this essay, I will be focussing on the issue of accessibility of colonial archives and, in particular, on what I call the ‘emotional accessibility’ of archives. I use this term as the opposite, or perhaps better yet, as a complement to the technical accessibility of archives. I also argue that archival institutions should open themselves up to and anticipate the emotions that confrontations with archives may trigger. Archives need to start paying structural attention to the emotional aspects of archival work to become a ‘safe(r) space’ for people from marginalised groups. This essay is inspired by and builds on encounters with a large group of ‘critical visitors’ during the decolonisation roundtables organised by the National Archives in 2020–2021.

I start by briefly describing the reason for and context within which this contribution was written, focusing on the need to question the genre of colonial archives, followed by a discussion of archival methods, in which I delve deeper into various aspects of accessibility. A key theme in this essay is the asymmetrical relationship between archival institutions that manage and make available colonial archives on the one hand and people, mostly from former colonised communities, who desire meaningful access to the archives on the other. In conclusion, I ask institutions to acknowledge this asymmetry and analyse it from different perspectives, ensuring that institutional archives ultimately become safe(r) spaces.

Decolonising archives

In 2017–2018, the National Archives in The Hague organised *The World of the Dutch East India Company*, an exhibition that attracted over 40,000 visitors. Drawing on numerous documents from the comprehensive archives of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oost Indische Compagnie, VOC*),

which is managed in large part by the National Archives in The Hague⁷, the exhibition brought 200 years of history of this colonial trading company and of the people who engaged with or were exposed to it in various ways to life. The exhibition met with mixed reviews. In the *Volkskrant* (*ed: a Dutch daily*), Sander van Walsum wrote that it was a “critical exhibition (...) which focused heavily on the violence, atrocities, and oppression by the world’s first multinational.”⁸ Historian Caroline Drieënhuizen, meanwhile, criticised the exhibition for being “very Dutch-centric, developed from a white perspective, and influenced by nineteenth-century nationalism.”⁹ The exhibition’s narrative thus reflected “the structure and perspective of the VOC’s archives”, she wrote. This astute observation, implicitly highlighting the problematic aspects of colonial archives, is symptomatic of an increasingly important issue that even archival institutions can no longer ignore. How should they deal with perspectives from the past that are considered problematic, controversial, racist, and degrading in the present day, both by the descendants of the former colonised and the former colonisers?

At first glance, one might rightly assume that exhibition makers, the storytellers, as users of the sources, should adopt a more critical attitude than archivists who merely manage these archives and make them available. But this is a mistake. Instead, as intermediaries between the past and the ever-changing present, archivists must also continually ask themselves what attitudes they adopt toward the sources they manage, process, and make available, and the audiences they serve. The changing context in which archives are used shapes the meaning attributed to them, illustrating the widely embraced idea within the field of archival studies that “records are always in a state of

becoming and never in a final state of being.”¹⁰ Something that becomes even clearer when focussing on the search tools that archivists have developed for accessing archives. According to archival scholar Geoffrey Yeo, descriptions of archival records should therefore “always be beta”, meaning they should continually evolve to ensure they remain receptive to new insights.¹¹ Creating inventories, archival descriptions, and other tools for accessing archives is the remit and responsibility of archival institutions.

The conversations organised by the National Archives within the scope of the 2020–2021 ‘decolonisation roundtables’ were set up so participants could share their ideas on how an archival institution such as the National Archives could make a meaningful contribution to ‘the decolonisation of archives’. In this instance, the emphasis was on the colonial archives managed by the National Archives. These colonial archives were formed in the margin of political-administrative, socio-economic, cultural, and/or religious colonisation practices. The information generated in the context of these activities constitutes an administrative record of colonial thinking, actions, and observations. The most eye-catching – and comprehensive – colonial archives managed by the National Archives are those of the Dutch East India Company (approx. 1,250 m¹), the Dutch West India Company (110 m¹), and the Ministry of the Colonies (over 3,000 m¹). There are, however, numerous other collections and archives that are also colonial archives, such as the archives of the Dutch Naval and Army Intelligence Service, the Netherlands Forces Intelligence Service (NEFIS), and the Central Military Intelligence Service (CMI) in the Dutch East Indies, or the many private archives of officials in the colonial administration which are also held by the National Archives. Obviously, there are

significant differences between these archives, which were established in different periods and contexts. However, almost all of them have one thing in common: they are the product of highly asymmetrical colonial relations of power. This applies to the many personal documents that were seized by the Dutch intelligence services during the struggle for independence and have therefore acquired meaning from a colonial perspective. The same applies to the archives developed by institutions and individuals that played a role in the colonial administration of territories in different parts of the world. As such, they represent a one-sided European worldview, reflecting the asymmetrical power structures of this colonial period.

Colonial archives: controversial archives

Colonial archives are deemed controversial for several reasons. Firstly, they may contain documents of local institutions or individuals that were looted, confiscated, or obtained by colonisers in unclear circumstances under colonial occupation. The archives of the Dutch intelligence services (NEFIS and CMI), which contain a lot of material seized during the decolonisation war in Indonesia, are an excellent example of this.¹² This controversial archive received widespread attention in the margin of *Revolusi*, an exhibition on the Indonesian War of Independence between 1945–1949. Dozens of photographs, posters, friends’ books, and other materials from this archive were included in this exhibition hosted by the Rijksmuseum in 2022.¹³ Some of the materials originally belonged to Indonesians, who were considered a state threat by the Dutch. The intelligence agencies confiscated them because they might serve as evidence in investigations. The resulting vast archive primarily serves as a testimony to this history. Until recently, the fact that this archive contains many personal documents of hundreds, if not

thousands of people, often of great emotional significance to them, was glossed over.

Although no systematic investigation was conducted into the origin and owners of the material seized by the intelligence services, we do know the names of the original owners of some of these documents. Jerky video footage on YouTube¹⁴ of a meeting between Rosihan Anwar (1922–2011), a journalist and co-founder of the daily *Merdeka*, and Dutch state archivist Martin Berendse shows them leafing through an album of family photos together in the reading room of the National Archives. The album was seized by NEFIS from Rosihan Anwar's home in 1946. More than fifty years later, a researcher at NIOD (the Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies) informed Anwar that the Dutch National Archives potentially held a photo album that may have originally belonged to him. As Anwar looks at the album, he is asked if he is interested in taking it home with him, to which he replies: "Gladly, but if it is not possible...oh well, kismet,"¹⁵ upon which the interviewer asks why he would not be able to take it home. Anwar proceeds to explain: "They told me it is state property, and it must stay in the museum, in the archives, or so they told me. If I can take it home, I can show it to my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren." He subsequently received reproductions of the photographs seized by NEFIS from the National Archives, but the original album remained in the National Archives.¹⁶ Anwar was able to access his photo album, but most of the people from or about whom material is kept in Dutch archives are completely unaware that this material still exists. Today, almost 75 years after the end of the decolonisation war and given that most of the people whose material was confiscated at the time are either too old or deceased, a conversation has

been started as to whether it should be kept in the Netherlands rather than Indonesia, and whether it should not be returned to its rightful owners or their descendants. Following previous actions regarding colonial objects, the State Secretary for Culture and Media asked the Council of Culture for an opinion on how to deal with these colonial archives.¹⁷

Colonial archives are also controversial for other reasons. A harrowing and uncomfortable picture emerges when colonial archives are approached from the perspective of the descendants of enslaved and colonised people. Much has since been written about the painful discomfort caused by archives. This discomfort relates to the fact that the victims' perspective is completely overlooked in these colonial archives and to the violence of these sources for those hoping to find fragments of their ancestors' past. Searching these colonial archives becomes a disappointing and particularly harrowing experience for many. Saidiya Hartman wrote that the archive of slavery is "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history."¹⁸ In short, it is an excruciating encounter with a violent past. In her book *Dispossessed Lives*, Marisa J. Fuentes paints a poignant picture of her own experience with the colonial archive. Fuentes set out to portray the stories of enslaved women from the perspective of these women. In the epilogue to her book, she reflects on the two years she spent in archival institutions, which she calls a chilly mortuary of the past.¹⁹ Reflecting on this confrontation with the archives, she writes that "nothing prepared me for the encounter with the paucity of material about enslaved women, the complete absence of material by enslaved women, and the intensity of archival and

physical violence on enslaved women (...). The women I did find were battered, beaten, executed and overtly sexualized. They were listed on estate inventories only as Phoebe, Mimba, or ‘Broken Back Betty’ and sometimes only as ‘negroe’ – stripped bare of all that was meaningful in their lives. Bequeathed in wills and deeds (...) they could not tell me about these conditions or what they thought (...).”²⁰ It reflects the concept of ‘social death’, as defined by Orlando Patterson, who described how slavery, as an extreme form of domination, robbed enslaved people of their identity by renaming them, deprived them of their social heritage, and turned enslaved people into “non-persons” and “genealogical isolates.”²¹ Fredrick Douglas, who escaped from slavery in 1838, was not exaggerating when he cynically remarked that “[g]enealogical trees do not flourish among slaves.”²²

Dutch authors with roots in territories colonised by the Netherlands also increasingly highlight the selective silence of these colonial archives, meaning they are of little use for reconstructing their family histories. Authors such as Suze Zijlstra²³ and Roline Redmond²⁴ take alternative approaches in their books in an attempt to put a face to their personal past. Historian Suze Zijlstra argues that traditional scholarly historical methods are often anything but adequate for writing about the Asian foremothers who lived on the margins of colonial society. Not much has been recorded, and very little information is available about them.²⁵

Archival methods

Archivists have learned to think like the people who established these archives to understand the guiding principle behind the archive. In their *Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven*

van archieven (Manual for the Description and Arrangement of Archives), the founding fathers of modern archival science in the Netherlands, the archivists Muller, Feith and Fruin, stated that archivists should consider the archive as an organism and study it as such, in order to get to know its “personality” and “individuality” before proceeding to organise and describe it.²⁶ The authors of the manual are very clear that archival requirements and not research interests were the primary starting point for making an archive accessible.²⁷ Similarly, their British counterpart Hilary Jenkinson stated that the archivist is “the servant of his Archives first” and only then of the public, its users.²⁸ The primacy of the archive ensures the knowability of the “objective facts”.

This vision served as the starting point for the archivist’s self-image as a neutral custodian of archives and an impartial mediator between the past and present. Until recently, the self-proclaimed idea of neutrality was the dominant self-image of this profession, and this idea still prevails. Moreover, according to some, this was only possible because archivists hid behind a professional view that tended to emphasise the importance of technical tasks for the purpose of collecting, preserving, organising, and making archives available. In 1977, the historian Howard Zinn stated that this supposed neutrality of the archivist was utterly outdated and misleading. He argued that “the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role is not, as so many scholars fear, the politicising of a neutral craft, but the humanising of an inevitably political craft.”²⁹ Archivists have only come to realise gradually that they are co-creators of archives, making choices that relate to every aspect of archival work, such as collecting, preserving, describing, or providing access. Under the influence of the work of Foucault

and Derrida³⁰, archival scholars have increasingly focused on research into and awareness of the power mechanisms inherent in archiving: who was able to document, archive, and shape the narrative? Which interests and intentions underpin the archive? Through whose eyes was society made legible and recorded? Which mechanisms ultimately determine which elements from the past may be included in the archive? Which role do archival institutions play in eliminating or maintaining these mechanisms?³¹

Incidentally, it is worth remembering that the growing awareness of these aspects among archival theorists did not give rise to short-term, manifest changes in archival practice. It took quite some time before the new ideas from archival literature trickled down to applications in the field. Moreover, the rapid digitalisation of society gave a tremendous boost to the more technically oriented interpretation of the profession, which focused on the digitalisation of analogue archives. This was considered the preferred way to reach the public. The policy document *Archieven in de Etalage* (2000) speaks volumes in this regard: “[i]n the future, archival services should primarily focus on the collection’s exploitation, making it available and accessible to a broad audience. The further digitalisation of archives is thus a prerequisite, especially given the educational potential of these archives.”³²

At first glance, the retro-digitalisation of archives by Dutch archival institutions seems like a successful innovation on a technical level. Three phases can be distinguished to date: the first phase focussing on the digitalisation of archive access, the second phase on the digitalisation of documents, and the third phase on making digitalised documents searchable.

Emphasis has thus shifted towards using digital methods to ensure archives are optimally accessible for the public. However, archival institutions tend to gloss over the fact that accessibility implies much more than being able to identify relevant information on a technical level.

Decolonising archives and the accessibility issue

More than forty participants (from the Netherlands (26), Suriname (2), Indonesia (4), Curaçao, and the Caribbean (4), Sri Lanka (1) and the United States (5)) representing interest groups, NGOs, academia, and heritage institutions attended the 2020 roundtable discussions organised by the National Archives on the theme of decolonising archives.³³ The ten roundtables were supervised by a moderator who was not affiliated with the National Archives. Two National Archives employees were on hand during each roundtable. Instead of actively participating, they listened.³⁴ The main purpose of these roundtables was to listen to opinions and experiences that could help the National Archives reflect on its role in decolonisation and inclusiveness. The organisers hoped these discussions would provide building blocks to develop concrete activities and initiatives to promote inclusiveness.³⁵

Many participants were critical of the National Archives as an institution of power. However, almost everyone appreciated the initiative, the small scale of the roundtable discussions, and the open atmosphere in which they took place. The roundtables thus focused on the question how decolonisation could be shaped by the National Archives. Almost everyone considered decolonisation to be an ongoing endeavour. The spotlight in this process should be on the mindset, attitude, and accountability with which these often-painful colonial archives are managed

and made available rather than on the archives themselves. The participants stressed the importance of a deeply felt awareness that the National Archives should convey very clearly that these archives reflected centuries of social injustice. These were “crimes committed against my ancestors, who are defined in the archives as cargo, ship cargo”, one participant noted. Decolonisation does not begin at collection level; it occurs first and foremost within the organisation, among the people working there, the participants stressed. The institution should thus work on establishing a new relationship with the past. According to the participants, the National Archives should also include this in their mission statement. One participant suggested adding something along the lines of “it is the ethics of the National Archives to undo harm.” All the participants in the roundtables wanted institutions to finally start to acknowledge how their existence was ignored and denied. Archives would become more accessible if this became the context in which people could search for information about this painful past.

Another point of attention during the roundtables related to the accessibility of archives. When archival institutions talk about accessibility, and the National Archives is no exception to this rule, they almost always seem to focus on how easy it is to find the information people are looking for. As mentioned above, this is a technical and very one-sided way of looking at accessibility, with the institutional archive placing itself front and centre. Some of the participants in the decolonisation roundtables voiced criticism about institutions’ pretensions and claims about how to increase accessibility through digitalisation. Digitalisation does not promote accessibility. However, it does increase the availability of documents, and the participants argued that these are two different things. Nor is accessibility a

unilateral quality of an archive, to be defined and arranged by the archivist or archival institution. The archival scholar Theo Thomassen has pointed out that accessibility relies on the interaction between stakeholders: the archive, the archivist, the person consulting the archive and the social environment.³⁶ As Costis Dallas states, it is a “contact zone practice” shaped by a wide range of stakeholders.³⁷ What may be accessible for some does not necessarily need to be accessible for others. Several circumstances influence the degree of accessibility: does a person speak the language and read the script in which the documents have been written? Does a person have a visual or other impairment that impacts the way they read documents? Does a person have the knowledge needed to situate the content of the archives in their time frame and the competences to understand the structure of these archives? Are there any legal barriers to accessing the archives, etc.?

Even then, this approach to the accessibility of archives is very technical-instrumental. However, the roundtables highlighted another, entirely different dimension of accessibility, a dimension I would venture to call the ‘emotional (in)accessibility’ of archives, to which archival science pays much less attention. Emotional (in)accessibility can always be traced back to the asymmetrical power relations, and these cannot be undone, not even with a ‘contact zone’ approach.³⁸ That is why, for years, Verne Harris has advocated a people-centric archival approach that puts archives at the service of social justice. In essence, he interprets this as unlimited hospitality.³⁹ In their *Critical Archival Studies*, activist archival scholars such as Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, and Jamila Ghaddar argue in favour of an archival approach based on “radical empathy” and an “ethics of care” to ensure that the focus of archival work is on those who have

suffered most at the hands of history.⁴⁰ Temi Odumosu suggests using the digitalisation of archives as an opportunity to give people who were marginalised by history a voice through their descendants, e.g., by creating ‘counter-records’ that are added as metadata allowing the digital object to say: “Look, here is my story. I have experienced pain, and now you are part of it; tell me what you intend to do with me?”⁴¹ That way, technical capabilities are used for a greater purpose, i.e., transforming a cultural practice and ensuring it accommodates multiple voices.

In relationship studies, emotional accessibility is sometimes seen as a partner’s willingness to invest time, attention, and resources in the relationship. In so doing, the partner shows affection, opening up and becoming accessible. Emotional accessibility emphasises the development of an affective relationship based on being able and willing to understand and respond appropriately to emotional reactions and recognising the needs that arise from them.⁴²

The many shared experiences of people with roots in a past of colonisation or slavery demonstrate why we need to pay more attention to the emotional aspects of archival work. We already mentioned that reading documents from colonial and slavery archives can inspire horror, indignation, and pain, an aspect that the participants in the decolonisation roundtables also mentioned. Inexperienced users of the archive explained how they were not prepared for the horrors and violence contained in archives, calling them shocking, painful and sickening. Even more experienced researchers expressed how reading texts teeming with violence exhausted and affected them, dulling their emotions. However, it is not just the texts that inspire emotions. Experiences with the archive as an institution and

with the tools developed and provided by the archive to identify relevant documents also triggered lots of emotions.⁴³

Emotional (in)accessibility

Emotions are often equated with an individual’s feelings, but this is an oversimplification. According to the American Psychological Association, emotion is a “complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioural, and physiological elements.”⁴⁴ While emotion implies feeling, the main emphasis is on the relationship between a situation or event and the emotion it inspires. Sara Ahmed argues that emotions are therefore relational: “They involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to (...) objects.”⁴⁵ In her book *Cultural Politics of Emotions*, she explores this relationality in the context of relations of power. She calls emotions “the very ‘flesh’ of time”⁴⁶ because they indicate how long the past clings to the surface of the human body, citing how the history of colonialism, slavery, and the violence that accompanied it continue to shape people’s lives today as an example.⁴⁷ Unlike Ann Cvetkovich,⁴⁸ Ahmed is not interested in the emotions and feelings in texts, but in what these texts do: how words for feeling, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects: how they move, stick, and slide.”⁴⁹ Emotions thus are effects rather than causes. Texts play an important role in her work. In *Cultural Politics of Emotions*, she describes the meaningful archive as the result of a contact zone rather than a central repository of documents from the past. An archive is “an effect of multiple forms of contact, including institutional forms of contact (with libraries, books, websites), as well as everyday forms of contact (with friends, families, others). Some forms of contact are presented and authorised through writing (and listed in the references), while other forms of

contact will be missing, will be erased, even though they may leave their trace”.⁵⁰ In this approach, the emphasis shifts from the institutional paper archive to the people who use it to shape their own meaningful personal archive. It is important to remember that the moment of contact in the institutional archive is not an isolated experience shaped solely by what a person reads, sees, and experiences in that instant. People bring their entire history and previous experiences and the emotions associated with this to their encounter with the archive.

The performative nature of past experiences and associated emotions⁵¹ is manifested most poignantly in the documentary *Wit is ook een kleur*,⁵² in which white documentary maker Sunny Bergman explores how white and non-white Dutch people perceive the influence of whiteness on society. She demonstrates how white Dutch people are barely aware of the privileges afforded to them by their skin colour, compared with Dutch people of colour. The documentary showcases the influence of colour on how people move in public spaces. Whereas most white Dutch people associate more police on the streets with increased safety, one interviewee of colour explained that he felt more unsafe because he knew he would be stopped more often by police patrols.

Recognising and acknowledging these mechanisms is important as they significantly impact feelings of personal safety. The participants in the decolonisation roundtables also highlighted such mechanisms, and it is these mechanisms that also influence their encounters with archives. For many people of colour, museum and archive buildings represent the colonial, aggressive, and oppressive white past. “Why should you trust such institutions?” one of the participants wondered. During the

discussions, it was stressed that visitors find the appearance of the space they are entering important, that they look at what is hanging on the wall, and whether the layout takes into account things they can identify with.⁵³ Most importantly, however, they are mindful of how they can or should enter an archive space. The National Archives scored poorly in this respect, according to participants. Many considered the fact that you can only enter and leave the reading room after being stopped by uniformed guards, who check that you are not taking anything in or out that is not permitted, is intimidating. Or as one participant put it: “People underestimate what it feels like when you visit the NA in this way and as part of an underprivileged group. These are the same threatening patterns that people of colour experience daily and which thus also occur within the archive’s walls.” Sara Ahmed calls this a continuous confrontation with “a sea of whiteness.”⁵⁴

Many people of colour find researching colonial and slavery history in reading rooms or through the websites of archival institutions a confrontational experience. The decolonisation roundtables frequently referenced the language used to describe archives and their context. “When I read something like the ‘Dutch presence in Asia’ on the website, I find this to be a very euphemistic representation of the brutality with which this presence was enforced”, one of the participants observed. This is construed as a denial of an enforced relationship. Much criticism has also been levelled at the use of offensive colonial language in archival accesses. The necessity of displaying offensive language by archival institutions is often lamented, but for reasons of historicity this is seen as inevitable by many archivists. Anthony W. Dunbar calls this a microaggression.⁵⁵ Microaggression is an umbrella term for subtle forms of racism

and prejudice often embedded in customs, practices, or methods. Existing archival methods and practices for selecting and describing archives should be critically scrutinised to identify their contribution to microaggressions.⁵⁶ One of the participants explained how difficult and painful she found it that she had to think like the colonial ruler when searching for information about her ancestors. Worse yet, she needed to use racist terms that were downright offensive in her search queries.⁵⁷ She mentioned several times that she did not want to conduct her research this way but had no option if she wanted to retrieve information from the archives. She also failed to understand how some people find such archives accessible. As a result, the archive is perceived as intimidating, painful, and unsafe.

Conclusions & discussion

The idea of a contact zone where the institutional archive and marginalised communities meet on equal footing to build a common future together in a safe way is wonderful but also naive. Naive because, as Robin Boast has convincingly demonstrated for museums, the “dark underbelly of the contact zone” is not usually considered. When dealing with asymmetrical relations of power, we tend to often overlook that this is and always will be “a site in and for the centre”, where the marginalised briefly stand to benefit from their contact with the institution, but where the centre always ends up having the upper hand.⁵⁸ This does not mean that a contact zone model cannot play an essential role in strengthening the positions of marginalised groups. However, I believe a clear distinction should be made between a contact zone model and a safe space model. These two different concepts have the potential to reinforce each other. In her article “The Arts of the Contact Zone”, Mary Louise Pratt describes an experiment in which students from different

ethnic-cultural backgrounds meet in an educational setting for an extended time and explain to each other how they position themselves, the other, and their own history, and in relation to the dominant history and culture. This led to intense confrontations, with both positive and negative feelings. Every student, Pratt writes, had the experience “of seeing the world described with him or her in it. Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom—the joys of the contact zone. The sufferings and revelations were, at different moments to be sure, experienced by every student. No one was excluded, and no one was safe.”⁵⁹ This is the essence of the contact zone.

I envisage a similar contact zone where the centre (dominant and normative group) and the periphery (a group marginalised by history) can meet to expose the archive’s painful layers, rendering the abrasive relations with the institutional archive visible, and where the asymmetrical aspects of these relations are unravelled and displayed rather than being glossed over. Such a contact zone can be meaningful on several levels. Firstly, between communities and the institutional archive, but also between new employees who have been recruited by the institutional archive in the context of diversity and inclusiveness and the dominant, normative group that defines the archive’s professionalism based on training and tradition. This contact zone is not designed as an outward manifestation of diversity and inclusion practices. Instead, it must become a workplace where participants take down and forge new visions, concepts, and perspectives and where the noxious fumes of history, the archives it has produced, and the responsibility of the archival profession are tackled head-on. Such an environment cannot

necessarily be described as safe. However, a contact zone model can provide the required space if we consider emotional accessibility as a relational form in which everything does not revolve around the archives but rather around the people who start from different backgrounds and experiences to engage with their own, often marginalised history. A space to share and address the asymmetric aspects of the relationship with the archive, the archival institution, and the archivist, to raise questions about the underlying mechanisms of power and powerlessness, to visualise emotions triggered by confrontations with the institutional archive, to explore and discuss the way the past has an impact on the present and what this could or should mean for archival institutions.

The contact zone is thus, per definition, an uneasy encounter where a struggle is waged to be heard, taken seriously, and recognised. In such a process where the periphery must compete with the centre, it is easy to see how communities may need their own safe space to share experiences with kinsmen without considering the asymmetrical aspects of this contact. Organisations often find this difficult to accept because, on the face of it, this goes against the very principles of an inclusive, safe space for all. The latter is often an argument for organisations to reject a safe space for a limited group. The voluminous report of an expert group set up by the federal Belgian parliament, which was tasked with formulating recommendations on how to deal with Belgium's colonial past, highlights the maliciousness of this reasoning. The authors state that “[w]hen thinkers and/or activists try to explain a concept such as intersectionality to members of the majority group or try to explain why they feel the need (and sometimes the necessity) to meet in the non-mixed context of a ‘safe space,’ in which care spaces

must be created by and for people of African descent (...), the dominant world usually invokes universalist and humanist values. However, these universalist values underpin the theory of the hierarchical division of races and the discrimination of the Black race. Racism thus is already enshrined in the basic values of the dominant society. The reference to these ‘humanist’ values thus is nothing more but a reference to the supposed superiority of the white race. It is a devious way of feigning innocence and hiding behind grand principles to maintain these privileges (but also the conventions) of domination.”⁶⁰

This statement may come as a blow to institutions that say they mean well. Ultimately, however, if the archive is to genuinely become a safe(r) space, a combination of an uneasy, even abrasive contact zone as described above, with safe spaces for specific groups, may be necessary. As such, the archive becomes a place where ‘anyone’ can retrieve information, using the accesses and latest digital methods and techniques the archive is developing. At the same time, the archive also becomes a meaningful space for debate, a workplace that revolves around the process of making history and where access is based on relational values, in which the people, rather than the archives, take priority.⁶¹

- 1 See <https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl>
- 2 See <https://www.zeeuwsarchief.nl/expertise-in-archiveren/>
- 3 See <https://hetutrechtsarchief.nl/uw-materiaal-in-ons-archief>
- 4 See <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/over-het-na/organisatie>
- 5 This has also caused communities to take matters into their own hands and build archives of their own that document their experience, such as The Black Archives, the Muslim Archives, and IHLIA LGBTI Heritage in the Netherlands.
- 6 On the selectivity of memory, see the work of Douwe Draaisma in which he regularly makes interesting allusions to archives. Douwe Draaisma. *Waarom het leven sneller gaat als je ouder wordt. De geheimen van het geheugen*. Historische Uitgeverij, 2001; Douwe Draaisma, *Vergeetboek*. Historische Uitgeverij, 2010.
- 7 In terms of volume, the Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia in Jakarta (Indonesia) manages most of the archives of the Dutch East India Company (approx. 2400 m1). The Western Cape Archives and Records Service in Cape Town (South Africa, approx. 450 m1), the Sri Lanka National Archives in Colombo (approx. 310 m1), and the Tamil Nadu Archives in Chennai (India) (approx. 65 m1) also manage parts of the VOC's archives.
- 8 Sander van Walsum, "De schaduwzijden van de VOC." *De Volkskrant*, 23 februari 2017: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/de-schaduwzijden-van-de-voc-bcf97647/>.
- 9 See <https://carolinedriehuisen.wordpress.com/2017/04/29/de-negentiende-eeuwse-wereld-van-de-voc-tentoonstelling-de-wereld-van-de-voc-in-het-nationaal-archief-in-den-haag-nog-tm-7-januari-2018/>
- 10 This idea was first coined by Sue McKemmish in 1994. Op cit. Frank Upward, "The Records Continuum and the Concept of The End Product," *Archives & Manuscripts* 32, no. 1 (2004): 40–63.
- 11 Geoffrey Yeo, "Continuing Debates about Description," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather McNeil and Terry Eastwood (Santa Barbara–Denver: Libraries Unlimited, 2017, second edition), 177.
- 12 See, for example, Michael Karabinos, "Indonesian National Revolution Records in the National Archives of the Netherlands," in *Displaced Archives*, ed. James Lowry (London–New York: Routledge 2017), 60–73.
- 13 At the time, several media raised questions about the questionable origin of many of the items on display: see <https://www.nu.nl/binnenland/6183271/tentoonstelling-revolusi-in-rijksmuseum-bevat-geroefde-eigendommen.html>; <https://nos.nl/artikel/2416790-geroefde-objecten-te-zien-in-rijksmuseum-tentoonstelling-revolusi>; <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/nationaal-archief-worstelt-met-roofkunst-in-collectie-bij-indonesie-tentoonstelling-b9477780/>
- 14 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbg5r9wgMps&t>. Rosihan Anwar was informed by Marije Plomp of NIOD.
- 15 Kismet means fate, there is nothing you can do to change this.
- 16 See <http://sejarahkita.blogspot.com/2010/02/masya-allah-sejak-kapan-saya-jadi-pacar.html>. Originally published in *Rakyat Merdeka*, 25 January 2010. In his book *Napak Tilas ke Belanda. 60 Tahun Perjalanan Wartawan KMB 1949*. Kompas Jakarta, 2010, Rosihan Anwar describes his attempts to recover his photo album (pp. 36–37).
- 17 Advisory Committee National Policy Framework Colonial Collections. *Colonial collections and recognising injustice*. Council for Culture, 2020. Archives were deliberately not included in this opinion. The report states: "The Commission's opinion does not consider archives, other than those present in museums, which shed light on the objects in them. Archives focus on archival records and objects, as well as the information they contain and (the right of) access to it. Dealing with archives therefore requires a specific, tailor-made approach that is beyond the scope of this opinion" (p. 15). The committee established in 2022 to review the issue of the colonial archives will publish its opinion in autumn 2023.
- 18 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother. A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, 2.
- 19 Marisa J, Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives. Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, 147.
- 20 Ibid. 144–145.
- 21 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and social death: A comparative study, with a new preface*. Harvard University Press, 2018, 5 and 55.
- 22 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and my Freedom*. Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855, 34.
- 23 Suze Zijlstra, *De Voormoeders. Een verborgen Nederlands-Indische familiegeschiedenis*. Ambo|Anthos, 2021.
- 24 Roline Redmond, *De Doorons. Op zoek naar een Afro-Amerikaanse slavenfamilie in het Caribisch gebied*. De Arbeiderspers, 2021.
- 25 Zijlstra, *Voormoeders*, 19.
- 26 Samuel Muller Fz., Johan Adriaan Feith and Robert Fruin Th.Az., *Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven van archieven*. Erven B. van der Kamp, 1920, second edition, 5.
- 27 Ibid. 40.
- 28 Hilary Jenkinson. *A Manual of Archive Administration. Including the problems of War Archives and Archive Making*. Clarendon Press, 1922, 107.
- 29 Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *The Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 14–26, 20.
- 30 Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Routledge Classics, 2002; Jacques Derrida. *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- 31 Some authors and works: Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, Razia Saleh (eds). *Refiguring the Archive*. Kluwer, 2002; Eric Ketelaar, "Recordkeeping and Societal Power," in *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*, ed. Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed and Frank Upward (Wagga Wagga: Centre for Information Studies, 2005), 277–298; Randall C. Jimerson. *Archives Power. Memory, Accountability and Social Justice*. Society of American Archivists, 2009; Ann Laura Stoler. *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton University Press, 2009.
- 32 Project team for the review of the archive system. *Archieven in de Etalage*. Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2000.
- 33 The participants were selected very carefully. The organisers chose to apply the snowball method. People who were involved in or had views on colonial archives and the institutions that manage them, from different perspectives, were approached through the organisers' own network. They were then asked if they knew people in their network who might be interested in participating.
- 34 Anonymised minutes were drawn up of each meeting. A final report was published at the end of the series of roundtable discussions, which also included a summary of recommendations made to the National Archives during the interviews. The final report was shared with all the participants. A webinar was organised in the spring of 2021, to which all the participants were invited and in which the National Archives reflected on the series of round-table discussions and indicated which recommendations had been put into practice.

- 35 The National Archives distilled 17 recommendations for itself from the panel discussions. See the final report *Round-table discussions. Decolonisation of archives, June–December 2020*. National Archives 2021.
- 36 Theo Thomassen, “De veelvormigheid van de archiefontsluiting en de illusie van de toegankelijkheid” in Toegang: *Ontwikkelingen in de ontsluiting van archieven*, ed. Theo Thomassen, Bert Looper, Jaap Kloosterman (The Hague: Stichting Archiefpublicaties 2001), 13–43.
- 37 Costis Dallas, “Digital curation beyond the ‘wild frontier’: a pragmatic approach” *Archival Science* 16, no.4 (2016): 421–457.
- 38 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the contact zone” *Profession*, 91 (1991): 33–40; Robin Boast, “Neocolonial collaboration: Museum as contact zone revisited” *Museum anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2011): 56–70.
- 39 Verne Harris. *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*. Society of American Archivists, 2007.
- 40 J.J. Gaddar and Michelle Caswell, “‘To go beyond’: towards a decolonial archival praxis” *Archival Science* 19 (2019): 71–85.
- 41 Temi Odumoso, “The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons” *Current Anthropology* 61, no. 22, (2020): 299.
- 42 David Clay, Erica Coates, Quynh Tran and Vicky Phares, “Fathers’ and Mothers’ Emotional Accessibility and Youth’s Development Outcomes” *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 45, no. 2 (2017): 111–122; T.J. Wade and Justin Mogilski, “Emotional Accessibility Is More Important Than Sexual Accessibility in Evaluating Romantic Relationships – Especially for Women: A Conjoint Analysis” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 1–7.
- 43 Several participants in a debate titled “Koloniale Archieven op de Kaart,” held on 19 June 2023 at Pakhuis De Zwijger in Amsterdam, led by Aldith Hunkar, also mentioned this. See <https://dezwijger.nl/programma/koloniale-archieven-op-de-kaart>
- 44 See <https://dictionary.apa.org/emotion>
- 45 Sara Ahmed. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 2nd edition, 8.
- 46 *Ibid.* 202.
- 47 Something that Prime Minister Rutte also acknowledged in his speech in which he formally apologised on behalf of the Dutch government to enslaved people in the past and to all their descendants up to the present day, who suffered the consequences of the historical role played by the Dutch State in the slave trade and in which he stressed several times that people have failed to sufficiently acknowledge the negative knock-on effect of this slavery past in the present. See: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2022/12/19/toespraak-minister-president-rutte-over-het-slavernijverleden>
- 48 Ann Cvetkovic. *An archive of feeling: trauma, sexuality and lesbian public cultures*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- 49 Ahmed, 14.
- 50 *Ibid.* 14.
- 51 For the performative character of emotions, see Ahmed, Chapter four.
- 52 See <https://www.2doc.nl/documentaires/2016/12/wit-is-ook-eeen-klleur.html>
- 53 The uncomfortable feeling of being in a room where little or nothing refers to your own cultural background was cited. This is a reference to the film *Do the Right Thing* (1989) by American director Spike Lee in which an Italian-American owner of a pizzeria in a predominantly African-American part of Brooklyn has a Wall of Fame in his restaurant that is exclusively populated with famous Americans of Italian descent.
- 54 Sara Ahmed. On being included: *Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press, 2012, in particular see pp. 19–50.
- 55 Anthony W. Dunbar, “Introducing critical race theory to archival discourse: getting the conversation started” *Archival Science* 6 (2006):109–129.
- 56 The website of the National Archives features the following text on the use of language in archives: “On our website you can search archives using inventories (descriptions of archives, also called access). These inventories are often as old as the archives themselves. It is possible that you will encounter words that used to be common, but are now experienced as hurtful, racist or discriminatory. The National Archives has chosen to preserve these original descriptions because they give an idea of the era in which they were created or included in the collection. The National Archives is currently investigating the possibilities of adapting, explaining, or providing contemporary alternatives to this language in inventories.”
- 57 See also Jeftha Pattikawa, Charles Jeurgens, Erik Mul and Anne-Marieke Samson, “Inclusie en dekolonisatie binnen archiefinstellingen: Op zoek naar muren, blinde vlekken en kansen,” *Archievenblad* 126, no. 3 (2022): 16–21.
- 58 Boast, “Neocolonial collaboration,” 66–67.
- 59 Pratt, *Contact Zone*, 39.
- 60 *Bijzondere commissie belast met het onderzoek over Congo-Vrijstaat (1885–1908) en het Belgisch koloniaal verleden in Congo (1908–1960), Rwanda en Burundi (1919–1962), de impact hiervan en de gevolgen die hieraan dienen gegeven te worden. Verslag van de deskundigen*. Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 4th session of the 55th legislature, 21 October 2021, 651–652.
- 61 Although some scholars have already questioned the traditional archival model for some time, this has not yet led to a fundamental transformation in the way in which archives work. In addition to Harris, Cifor and Caswell, it is also worth mentioning the work of Sue McKemish, Tom Chandler, Shannon Faulkhead, “Imagine: a living archive of people and place ‘somewhere beyond custody,’” *Archival Science* 19 (2019): 281–301; Gregory Rolan, “Agency in the archive: a model for participatory record-keeping,” *Archival Science* 17 (2017): 195–225; and Jeannette A. Bastian. *Archiving Cultures. Heritage, Community and the Making of Records and Memory*. Routledge, 2023.



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