

**Imagining Museums Otherwise:  
An examination of the institutional and curatorial practices in Dutch art  
institutions**

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1960s, art institutions and museums in particular, have been facing many changes regarding their function and position within society.

By looking into three different case-studies, the Van Abbemuseum, Witte de With and the Stedelijk Museum, this research aims to generate an understanding of how these changes are being faced within the Dutch cultural scene. It does so through the analysis of three semi-structured interviews with individuals who occupy directorial and/or curatorial positions within each of the mentioned institutions. Fundamentally, the study seeks to provide an answer to the question “To what extent do these three institutions have different approaches regarding their role in society?” Furthermore, the analysis of the content will be conducted through the construction of a dialogue between the practices of these institutions and relevant literature concerning institutional theory, curatorial practices and the conception of art as dialectical. The findings suggest that all of the three institutions are attempting to develop a stronger connection to the local publics and societal issues that arise closer to them, rather than focusing merely in a more distant and international art world. Additionally, they have designed ways to create room for a pluralism of perspectives within the space of the museum, in an attempt to broaden the canon of art history and generate a more accessible and representative public space, where different voices can be heard and dissensus can be generated in order to stimulate dialogue and mutual comprehension. However, all of them are doing so through different strategies which differ according to their own context and vision. Overall, Van Abbemuseum devotes more attention to deconstructing modern art as a universal movement and to collaborating with local constituencies (often minorities or activist groups), whilst Witte de With is greatly concerned in assuring diversity within its own institutional structure while investing in the relationship with local younger publics. The Stedelijk, on the other hand, faces different challenges due to its much broader range of audiences to which it tries to connect by creating multiple layers of mediation and by consulting experts who can reassure a pluralism of perspectives. This suggests that Dutch institutions are developing interesting and diverse practices which can be of use to other art professionals and researchers, contributing to a more informed critical reflection on the existing theory.

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## 1. Introduction

The origin of museums can be traced back to the tradition of serving the cultural elite and showcasing the nation's treasures along with the values of the dominant cultures. They have been, for a long time, considered "emblematic spaces for consolidating the values and identity of the society by which they were created, transmitting monologues which, until recently, could not be questioned."<sup>1</sup> However, the museum world has been undergoing extreme changes since the 1960s which are particularly evident nowadays.

When it comes to questioning the relevance of museums for contemporary society, divergent views emerge. In *The Future of Museums*, Gerald Bast questions their ability to survive at all, arguing that the relevance of this type of institutions "will have to be grounded and secured in a different way than today. Museums of the future will—at least in certain areas—be radically different, or they will simply cease to exist."<sup>2</sup> In the same book, Peter Weibel argues how museums still remain a manifestation of the bourgeois self-consciousness, mirroring the art market which is itself dominated by a limited group of private collectors and companies who invest in artworks as shares. "Therefore, the museums and the markets are closed circuits which reinforce each other"<sup>3</sup>, he concludes. The author advocates for a change in the 'museums of the future', implying that the visitors should not be treated as tourists who travel between the most famous paintings, spending only a few seconds with each of them without any desire for reflection or understanding.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, as many other researchers and practicing professionals do, the art historian Terry Smith contemplates how biennials have become the central focus of the art world, while "the museum seems no longer to be the limit setter, perhaps not even the default, for contemporary art and contemporary curating."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elena Delgado, "Museums as spaces of negotiation," in *Museums as places for intercultural dialogue: selected practices from Europe*, ed. Simona Bodo, Kirsten Gibbs, and Margherita Sani (MAP for ID Group, 2009), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Bast, David F. J. Campbell, and Elias G. Carayannis, eds., *The Future of Museums* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2018), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Weibel, "Manifesto for a New Museum" in *The Future of Museums*, eds. Gerald Bast, David F. J. Campbell, and Elias G. Carayannis (Basingstoke: Springer, 2018), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Weibel, "Manifesto for a New Museum", 51.

<sup>5</sup> Terry E. Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators, 2012), 68.

Authors such as Chantal Mouffe, however, see in that a specific kind of potential: “under present conditions, with the art world almost totally colonized by the markets, museums could become privileged places for escaping the dominance of the market.”<sup>6</sup>

It is important to refer that, within this research, the notion of ‘art world’, refers to “a network of institutions all of which participate in constructing a global, international system or network of networks for Art”, as defined by Martin Irvine.<sup>7</sup> This network possesses its own symbols, tacit rules, and “theories of art” which all of its members implicitly assume in order for certain objects to be considered as art.<sup>8</sup>

The museums of today seem to occupy a liminal position in society: precisely with one foot in the art world and another in the public sphere, as they are faced with questions about their historical narratives, as well as with matters of representation and accessibility. As Terry Smith argues, curators in museums and other art institutions must “articulate a position that interrogates ‘local history and contexts’, though always in terms of their potentially productive relationships with the ‘horizon of internationalism’ on which the biennial is based.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, there has been a focus in attracting more public and enriching the visitor’s experience, which often results in defying the conventional ways of setting up an exhibition room, playing with the permanent collection, expanding the focus on research, exploring alternative pedagogical methods, and developing activities which attempt to position the audience, the artist and the curator at the same horizontal level.

## 1.1. Aim and Structure

This research aims to explore and present the current practices of three Dutch institutions: Van Abbemuseum, Witte de With - Center for Contemporary Art, and Stedelijk Museum. My focus is in understanding how they position themselves in

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<sup>6</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Institutions as Sites of Agonistic Intervention,” in *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. Pascal Gielen (Amsterdam: Valiz 2013), 70.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Irvine, “Institutional Theory of Art and the Artworld,” Georgetown University, accessed May 24, 2019, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/visualarts/Institutional-theory-artworld.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Danto, “The Artworld”, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, No. 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting. (Oct. 15, 1964), pp. 571-584.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 86.

relation to contemporary society, while generating an analysis that documents their goals and processes which can, amongst other things, be of use to national or international institutions that aspire to learn about the practices of others. Furthermore, this study intends to produce a relevant dialogue between theory and practice. Throughout this exploration, different questions shall arise within the multiple topics that will be discussed. However, the main research question that guides this study is the following: To what extent do these three institutions have different approaches regarding their role in society?

In order to formulate a comprehensive answer, I will first lay out a theoretical framework which will be divided in three sections: the first one, "Looking at the Art Institution" will be considering art institutions as the context where the posteriorly discussed practices take place; in "Curatorial Practices and their Evolution" I will provide an overview of how the role of the curator has evolved historically until this day and discuss its importance in shaping the institution, and at last, in "The Dialectical Potential of Art" I will examine how modern and contemporary art are seen to be in connection with society nowadays. In order to understand the practices of these Dutch institutions, it is crucial to look at them considering these three aspects. Curators have a fundamental role in society's relationship with culture, as their functions involve "supporting the seeds of ideas, sustaining dialogues, forming and reforming opinions, and continuously updating research,"<sup>10</sup> but, as it will become evident, nowadays "exhibitions are not the first, or only, concern of the curator."<sup>11</sup> To quote Walter Whoops, "The closest analogy to installing a museum exhibition is conducting a symphony orchestra."<sup>12</sup> For this reason, it became more pertinent to understand how the curator's concerns and actions are materialized within an institutional framework and ponder how these institutions fit into the debate about the potential of museums and even art.

This theoretical approach is laid out in chapter two, and, afterwards, the sections three, four and five will be dedicated to the exploration of the case studies, consisting of detailed summaries of the interviews, alongside critical remarks and an

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<sup>10</sup> Kate Fowle, "Who Cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator Today," in *Cautionary tales: critical curating*, ed. Steven Rand, Heather Kouris. (New York: Apexart 2007), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Fowle, "Who Cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator Today", 18.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 37.

analysis based on the previously discussed theory and relevant findings. For the purpose of providing context I also refer to a few of the aspects that I encountered in my own visits to the institutions. Finally, the differences and similarities of the case studies will be outlined in a brief comparative analysis just before the final conclusions. Furthermore, the interview guide and the full transcriptions can be found in the appendices, except for the one concerning the Stedelijk museum, as the interviewee has preferred for it to not be included.

## 1.2. Methodology

As previously explained, this research takes into account three major Dutch cultural institutions, and, therefore, it can be considered a collective case study.<sup>13</sup> In this section I will provide some context on these institutions as well as explain their relevance to the study and elaborate on the chosen methodology.

The Van Abbemuseum is located in Eindhoven and it is a public institution founded in 1936. As it is stated in the website, the institution “has an experimental approach towards art’s role in society.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, among their key values, we can find “openness, hospitality and knowledge exchange.”<sup>15</sup> It also aims to challenge the visitors to rethink the role of art in society and its collection as a ‘cultural memory’ built in a public site. They are strongly oriented towards international collaborations and dedicate a lot of attention to research and education.

Witte de With - Center for Contemporary Art, is set in Rotterdam and it was founded in 1990. The center was named after the colonizer Admiral Witte Corneliszoon de With and has therefore been involved in a big debate concerning a change of its name. In spite of that, their mission is to examine how art has shaped the past and how it can shape the future, working with artists and “engaged

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<sup>13</sup> Robert E. Stake, “Case Studies” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. N. K. Denzin; Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. (2003), 134-164.

<sup>14</sup> Van Abbemuseum, “Who We Are,” Van Abbemuseum - Museum Voor Hedendaagse Kunst - Eindhoven, accessed May 25, 2019, <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/about-the-museum/organisation/who-we-are/>.

<sup>15</sup> Van Abbemuseum, “Who We Are”.



audiences, who are interested in posing challenging inquiries and articulations of our present.”<sup>16</sup>

The last case study is the Stedelijk Museum, founded in Amsterdam in 1870. In its website, it is expressed how the main goal of the museum is to offer “insights into today’s world and highlight topics that impact our societies and individual lives.”<sup>17</sup> The institution also presents a predisposition to generate dialogue between audiences and artists and seeks to embody a “fresh, energetic approach to displaying”, while “caring for and renewing” their collection.<sup>18</sup>

According to Robert Yin, case studies offer the possibility to explore “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context.”<sup>19</sup> As Cohen, Manion and Morrison consider, “contexts are unique and dynamic, hence case studies investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance.”<sup>20</sup> Consequently, this approach has been chosen precisely because it offers us the possibility of a thorough insight into the complexities of the current practices that take place in these institutions.

Collective case studies “are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases.”<sup>21</sup> The selected institutions share certain similarities such as their relevance within the Dutch cultural scene and their stated mission of bringing up current issues, attempting to draw the audiences closer to art with a focus on engagement, education and research. On the other hand, they each are located in very disparate cities (Eindhoven, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam), which largely differ, among other things, in the number of inhabitants. By looking at the annual reports of 2017, we can also observe the contrasts in terms of visitant numbers: as the largest

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<sup>16</sup> Witte De With - Center for Contemporary Art, "About," Witte De With, accessed May 25, 2019, [https://www.wdw.nl/en/about\\_us/](https://www.wdw.nl/en/about_us/).

<sup>17</sup> Stedelijk Museum, "Organisation" — Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, accessed May 25, 2019, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/museum/organisation>.

<sup>18</sup> Stedelijk Museum, “Organisation”

<sup>19</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case study research: design and methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994), 13.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (London: Routledge, 2007), 253.

<sup>21</sup> Stake, R. E., “Case Studies” in N. K. Denzin; Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. (2003), 134-164.

and most popular out of the three, the Stedelijk museum registered 691,851 visitors,<sup>22</sup> whereas Witte de With recorded 35,450<sup>23</sup> and the Van Abbemuseum 104.809 visitors.<sup>24</sup> These characteristics allow simultaneously for an observation of the practices within different unique contexts and for a more global perspective on the Dutch museum scene. Furthermore, case studies contribute to the development of theories “which can help researchers to understand other similar cases, phenomena or situations.”<sup>25</sup> Consequently, I aim to generate a structured analysis that can both document today’s curatorial processes and be of use to other researchers but also to national or international institutions that aspire to learn about the practices of others. Moreover, this study intends to engage with different theories and produce relevant dialogues between them and curatorial and institutional practices.

For this analysis, I chose to make use of qualitative research, conducting semi-structured interviews with people who are considered experts in the field and who operate within the curatorial realm of the referred institutions. According to Byrne, “qualitative interviewing is particularly useful as a research method for accessing individuals’ attitudes and values - things that cannot necessarily be observed or accommodated in a formal questionnaire.”<sup>26</sup>

In order to do this, I laid out four topics in advance (see Appendix A) and introduced each one of them with only one question, so as to give more freedom to the participant. The sequence and, ultimately, the nature of the next questions, was decided in the course of the interview. This “relatively unstructured nature of the semi-structured interview” has the capacity to provide a deeper insight into what the participant views as important, rather than confronting him or her with the researcher’s concerns.<sup>27</sup> Since this is an exploration of current practices, it was

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<sup>22</sup> Stedelijk Museum, "Annual Report," Cloud Object Storage | Store & Retrieve Data Anywhere | Amazon Simple Storage Service, last modified April 25, 2018, [https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/production-static-stedelijk/images/\\_museum/Jaarverslagen/2017/engels/SMA\\_Annual%20Report%202017.pdf](https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/production-static-stedelijk/images/_museum/Jaarverslagen/2017/engels/SMA_Annual%20Report%202017.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, "Jaarverslag 2017," Witte De With, accessed April 29, 2019, [https://www.wdw.nl/files/WDW\\_jaarverslag%202017\\_LR\\_spreads.pdf](https://www.wdw.nl/files/WDW_jaarverslag%202017_LR_spreads.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Information obtained directly through Jantine Claus, PA to the director of the Van Abbemuseum.

<sup>25</sup> Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (London, England: Routledge, 2007), 253.

<sup>26</sup> David Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2006), 184.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 466-467.

crucial to maintain an approach that would generate the necessary space for the relevant topics to surface. In addition, this methodology was chosen with the intention to allow for an adjustment of the emphasis of the research, “as a result of significant issues emerging in the course of interviews.”<sup>28</sup> After the interviews were transcribed, a preliminary analysis was conducted through the use of codes. Seidel and Kelle highlight the role of coding as a methodology which contributes to “noticing relevant phenomena; collecting examples of those phenomena; and analyzing those phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns and structures.”<sup>29</sup> This analysis contributed to a better understanding of the information and for a more coherent comparison of the data, as well as for the designing and structuring of the following chapters. Finally, the interview transcriptions and the subsequent research were shared with the interviewees, as a way to ensure the veracity of the findings and their correct interpretation.

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<sup>28</sup> Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 467.

<sup>29</sup> Udo Kelle and John Seidel, *Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis: Theory, Methods and Practice*, ed. Katherine Bird (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1995), n.p.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Looking at the Art Institution

The concept of institution has been very debated throughout social sciences, containing in itself a broad range of definitions. However, generally speaking, it refers to “a convention established by mutual agreement between people, being thus arbitrary but also historically dated.”<sup>30</sup> Institutions are part of a broad range of solutions that humans have created in order to generate responses to the issues raised by the natural needs of life in a society.<sup>31</sup> As it is explained in ICOM’s Key Concepts of Museology, an institution refers more specifically to an organism “that is public or private, established by society to fill a specific need.”<sup>32</sup> A museum, in particular, is defined as a “non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”<sup>33</sup>

According to Borja-Villel, curator and director of the Museum Reina Sofia, the recent history of western museums can be divided in three different stages: the exclusivist, modern institution, “which used white cube transparency and immediacy to display a linear art history to a specialist and a generalized public”<sup>34</sup>; the inclusive postmodern museum, “which mixed styles, mediums, and chronologies and used marketing to sell multiculturalism as a product to audiences”<sup>35</sup>; until the museum of today, which faces a moment of crisis, confronting a need to “rethink the presumptions about property and patrimony embodied in collections and to treat them instead as an ‘archive of the commons’.”<sup>36</sup> He argues that this archive should function as a repository of multiple narratives and stories of belonging, treating artworks as relational objects, meaning “objects to which people can relate in a

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<sup>30</sup> André Desvallées and François Mairesse, eds., *Key Concepts of Museology* (Armand Colin, 2010), 43.

<sup>31</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *A scientific theory of culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944)

<sup>32</sup> Desvallées and Mairesse, *Key Concepts of Museology*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 77.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

variety of ways.”<sup>37</sup>

The second phase appointed by Borja-Villel occurred in the mid-twentieth century and it was closely connected with a wave of protests against the socially defining role of institutions, which were seen as a manifestation of oppression that limited the freedom of the liberal individual.<sup>38</sup> This surge of protests became known as institutional critique, taking place between the late 1960s and 90s, and since then “freedom, creativity, and talent tends to be primarily ascribed to the individual and certainly not to a collective, let alone a bureaucratic institution.”<sup>39</sup> However, as that same critique progressively started being incorporated into the institutions themselves, the protests coming from the outside seemed to lose its relevance. The discussion was internalized, growing into an auto-critique, that was put forward by curators. As time progressed, this critique evolved into a search for a “tactical museology”, through which the museum attempted to remain as an independent space from the commercialization of contemporary life, while still exercising a criticism towards everyday realities.<sup>40</sup>

One of the most significant terms to emerge from this search was the concept of New Institutionalism. Introduced in 2003 by Jonas Ekeberg, this discursive practice refers to a field of curatorial practice, institutional reform, arts education and critical debate “engaged in the transformation of art institutions from within, seeing them as sites of research and socially engaged spaces of debate.”<sup>41</sup> It considered approaches to deal with dilemmas such as “how to respond to artistic practice without prescribing the visitors’ responses, and how to create a programme which allows for a diversity of events, exhibitions and projects, without privileging the social over the visual.”<sup>42</sup> This diverged from the historical premise of institutional critique due to the convergence of three factors: the predominance of relational and socially engaged visual art; the recognition of the importance of cultural experience as a component of

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<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 77.

<sup>38</sup> Pascal Gielen, "Emancipating Cultures beyond Multiculturalism: From Canonizing Cultural Institutions towards Commoning Art Constitutions" (2019), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Gielen, "Emancipating Cultures beyond Multiculturalism," 1.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 221.

<sup>41</sup> Claire Doherty, "The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism," *engage*, no. 15 (2004), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Doherty, "The institution is dead! Long live the institution!", 3-4.

urban regeneration; and the participation of a generation of curators and artists who emerged from the biennial culture, bringing with them new forms of presentation.<sup>43</sup>

However, the model soon lost the support of many of its proponents as it became schematic, codified and canonized, lacking a flexible approach. At the time, Charles Esche, now director of the Van Abbemuseum, chose to name his practice as “experimental institutionalism”, arguing that the prefix ‘new’ suggested a creation of a model that would be applicable to all, hence evoking a neoliberal mindset rather than emphasizing the unpredictability of the curatorial experimentation within the institution.<sup>44</sup> He has stated that experimental institutionalism releases the institutions from “the idea of creating a grand narrative of ‘new-ness’” and creates more space for the institutions to push boundaries and test their conduct in the times after Modernity.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, many of the supporters of New Institutionalism argued that, whilst it should not work as a strategy or a set of rules, its legacy could originate a series of art institutions which would be “able to morph around artists’ work, providing spaces for active participation, collaboration and contemplation, but most importantly a space for the visual imagination.”<sup>46</sup>

In face of this brief historical analysis, some questions inevitably arise. How are museums handling the challenges that are being posed to them after the end of Modernity? Does the previously incorporated institutional critique still exercise its influence? Even though they have failed, what remains of discourses such as New Institutionalism in today’s institutions? Are museums completely giving in to the demands of the art world and the neoliberal economy, or are they striving to become an ‘archive of the commons’?

Various authors have developed theories that engage with these questions to different extents. Institutions, and museums in particular, are often seen as rigid, bureaucratic and hierarchical, functioning as a ‘routiniser’ of human behavior and imposing limitations to creativity, whilst not being transparent enough.<sup>47</sup> However, as Pascal Gielen argues, institutionalization can also work in favor of innovation:

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<sup>43</sup> Doherty, “The institution is dead! Long live the institution!”, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Esche, “We were learning by doing” *ONCURATING.org*, no. 21 (December 2013), 23-27

<sup>45</sup> Esche, “We were learning by doing,”

<sup>46</sup> Doherty, “The institution is dead! Long live the institution!”, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Gielen, “Emancipating Cultures beyond Multiculturalism”, 1.

After all, by routinizing social behavior institutions relieve us of having to take decisions on a basic level time and time again or reinvent the wheel all over again. When multiple individuals align certain behavioral patterns and take them for granted, this creates room for experimental practices. From this we can infer the paradoxical function of institutions: at the same time, they determine and liberate, conserve and dynamize social and individual behavior. Institutions generate routine and security but also provide the basis for freedom and creativity.<sup>48</sup>

Institutions, and namely curators who work within them, mediate between past and present and categorize what is old, valuable or canon, but, in addition, their decisions also determine what can be considered new and innovative. However, this is not the outcome of a linear process: on the contrary, it is a result of the interplay between many different parts, in particular, the balance between the art world and the public, which is, as it will be displayed later on, one of the main concerns for the museums used as case studies. When looking at the liminal position occupied by these institutions, it is pertinent to regard Chantal Mouffe's concept of 'agonistic intervention'.<sup>49</sup> In light of today's remains of the institutional critique, the author argues for a strategy of engagement with the institutions, contradicting the conventional idea that they have become merely complicit with capitalism and that they are no longer a place for artistic practices that aim to stimulate the conception of an equal and just society. As explained by Maria Lind, Mouffe believes that, "although proximity can certainly be compromising it can just as well stimulate a kind of exchange which allows for the system to be challenged."<sup>50</sup>

When looking at art institutions as this "in-between, the mediator, interlocutor, translator and meeting place between art production and the conception of its public",<sup>51</sup> it also becomes important to take them into consideration as physical

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<sup>48</sup> Gielen, "Emancipating Cultures beyond Multiculturalism", 1.

<sup>49</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Art and Democracy - Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space," in *Art as a Public Issue: How Art and Its Institutions Reinvent the Public Dimension* (Rotterdam/Amsterdam: NAI Publishers, 2008)

<sup>50</sup> Maria Lind, "Contemporary art and its institutional dilemmas," *ONCURATING.org*, no. 8 (August 2011), 25.

<sup>51</sup> Simon Sheikh. "Public Spheres and the Functions of Progressive Art Institutions" *Republicart*, February, 1.

buildings, or ‘establishments’, the “concrete form of the institution”, located in its own spatial and social ambience.<sup>52</sup> Regardless of the strength of the ties that they may develop with local communities, museums act as a “center of many efforts to establish local identity and to provide means for promoting the ‘locale’, both internally – within the community – and externally”, by attempting to become “vehicles of social cohesion, of collaboration and identity formation.”<sup>53</sup>

The Van Abbemuseum, Witte de With and the Stedelijk Museum are all institutions that have been engaging with these issues, not only from a historical perspective but also in their day-to-day practices. Understanding their role as art institutions in The Netherlands is only possible when keeping in mind these different dimensions: both their position as physical structures within a certain society, and their conceptual point of view influenced by the historical evolution of institutional practices.

## **2.2. Curatorial Practices and Their Evolution**

Although artists were the main precursors of institutional critique, curators would soon after take a prominent role in the movement themselves. Up until this day, and maybe now more than ever, they have been crucial when defining and putting into practice the vision and the mission of art institutions. When speaking about curating, Mike Bal states that “it is never ‘simply’ a matter of showing esteemed artworks or interesting artifacts. Instead, it is a discourse with all the overtones this word entails.”<sup>54</sup> Being a discourse, it includes performative speech acts that influence visitors and their thought processes. The multiple definitions of this role that exist today are a consequence of the so-called ‘curatorial turn’. As the critique of the institution took on, and alongside with the institutional changes that have previously been described, curators progressively started to be understood and accepted as active players in a more creative and political way in the production, mediation, and dissemination of art itself. In order to understand where they stand today, we will look

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<sup>52</sup> Ivo Maroević, *Introduction to Museology: The European Approach* (Vlg. Dr. C. Müller-Straten, 1998), 110.

<sup>53</sup> Alexandra Bounia, "Cultural societies and local community museums: A case study of a participative museum in Greece," *zarządzanie w Kulturze*, 2017, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Mieke Bal, "Curatorial Acts," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012): 179, doi:10.1386/jcs.1.2.179\_1.



into the main developments of the curatorial trends according to Paul O'Neill's approach, which situates them in three different historical moments:

The demystification of the curatorial role from the late 1960s onward as an extension of the project of the historical avant-garde; the primacy of the curator-as-author exhibition model of the late 1980s; and the consolidation of a curator-centered discourse in the 1990s, when a history of curatorial practice began.<sup>55</sup>

As Terry Smith explains, innovative curatorial practices were actually preceded by the work of artists who reimagined ways to exhibit.<sup>56</sup> That was precisely the case in the 1960s, when social, relational and situational contexts began to play a fundamental part in the artworks of artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and Piet Mondrian, who “actively reconsidered how the viewer could be brought into play.”<sup>57</sup> Spectators were encouraged to engage in more physical interactivity and new exhibition formats were developed, such as publicly sited exhibitions, art magazines, publications and transient events.<sup>58</sup> This demanded the emergence of a new type of collaboration: the boundaries between the roles of the artist, the curator, and the critic got increasingly more blurry as they began working together in a cooperative way. Consequently, the mediating role that each of them played when forming, producing and disseminating an exhibition started to be acknowledged.<sup>59</sup> It was in the end of the 1960s that Siegelau introduced the term ‘demystification’ in order to refer to the changing conditions of the exhibition production, as curators were starting to make their actions, choices and motivations clearer and more visible.<sup>60</sup> It is here that curating is for the first time seen as “a combination of framing objects and speaking through those framed objects”<sup>61</sup>, which is how curators such as Mieke Bal still define it today. By taking a more transparent stand, curators revealed their impact on which artworks were exhibited and how, defying the traditional conception of the museum

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<sup>55</sup> O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 104.

<sup>57</sup> O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 10.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, “A Conversation between Seth Siegelau and Hans Ulrich Obrist,” no.6 (1999), 56.

<sup>61</sup> Mieke Bal, “Curatorial Acts,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012), 179.

as a rational and neutral place, where the exhibitions appeared as objective and organized according to a conception of an absolute truth. The sudden sight of the “curatorial hand” denoted that “those responsible for providing the mediating context of art were, therefore, almost as central to the production of art as the artists themselves”<sup>62</sup> and turned curation into the object of critique, which was previously reserved only for the artworks.

Flourishing from the new curatorial visibility, a second shift that took place in the 1980s had the individual curatorial statement at the center, “with exhibitions being allocated a unifying concept or narrative thematic in a break with the historical conventions of display.”<sup>63</sup> The artworks were presented based on their form, theme or context, according to a narrative conceived by a single curator. This made even more evident that there was an agency at play other than that of the artist, and these practices eventually started raising various critiques as they seemed to subject art “to a reconditioning of its meaningfulness within the exhibition context.”<sup>64</sup>

When the 1990s began, the idea of ‘demystification’ did not act anymore as an oppositional force, instead it had been internalized and it was now inherently part of the curatorial practices of many. As O’Neill puts it, “In being assimilated into the dominant culture, demystification has effectively been incorporated, reinterpreted, and diluted as ‘visibility’ for the curatorial position.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that this is still a characteristic in many of today’s curatorial projects. This period also witnessed the emergence of many meetings, summits and biennials where curators speak on the behalf of their discipline, followed by a rise of curatorial educational programs which increased professionalization and contributed to constituting curation as a discipline.<sup>66</sup>

Besides demystification, the discipline comprises today many other traces that emerged from this evolution which has been delineated. While there is a culture of “celebrity curators”<sup>67</sup> the curatorial practices are also seen nowadays as being more

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<sup>62</sup> O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 21.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 35.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 35.

of a collective process rather than individual, as Maria Lind describes, “curating is the result of a network of agents’ labor. The outcome should have the disturbing quality of smooth surfaces being stirred - a specific, multilayered means of answering back in a given context.”<sup>68</sup> Terry Smith argues that the modern styles of contemporary curating are being characterized by a bigger commitment to the outside of the art world, a more direct collaboration with the artist and participatory and activist practices.<sup>69</sup> An additional aspect that also gained form in the 1990s and that still manifests in contemporary practices is what Mick Wilson has called the ‘discursive turn’, which took place both in curating and in art itself, referring to “the practice of talking together publicly” as a form of evoking critical reflections and shaping historical discourses.<sup>70</sup>

Since all the interviewees are curators they are able to provide some insight on the institutions’ curatorial mission and vision. They occupy a fundamental role in the process through which “already invented institutional types might suddenly offer themselves for full or partial revival under new circumstances at almost any moment.”<sup>71</sup> Throughout the analysis of the interviews, we can observe how the historical changes have influenced contemporary curatorial practices and understand what their main focus is nowadays.

### **2.3. The Dialectical Potential of Art**

Artworks have always been the primary object of the curatorial practice. However, the way they have been seen, as we discussed previously, has changed a lot throughout the times. In order to better understand the standpoint of today’s museums on the objects they work with, I have chosen the concept of ‘dialectical contemporaneity’ developed by Claire Bishop, which I will later elaborate on. It is also important to state that all the institutions considered for this research work with contemporary art, and both the Stedelijk Museum and the Van Abbemuseum possess

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<sup>68</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 50.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>70</sup> Paul O’Neill, and Mick Wilson. *Curating and the Educational Turn*. 2010, 33.

<sup>71</sup> Lucy Steeds, Paul O’Neill, and Mick Wilson, eds., *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse* (Cambridge: Mit Press, 2017), 21.

significant modern art collections, therefore making it relevant for us to understand what that means through the lenses of today.

The term 'modern art' denotes artworks predominantly conceived in Western Europe and North America between the 1860s and the 1960s.<sup>72</sup> In art history, the period associated with Modernism is characterized by prominent social, cultural, technological and political developments in the western world, alongside with the rise of the middle class and the emergence of a consumer culture. During this period, traditional practices such as perspective and representation were dismissed and replaced by more experimental approaches. This originated movements such as abstractionism, impressionism and fauvism which became known as avant-gardes, reflecting a "belief in the progressive tendencies of modernity."<sup>73</sup>

After the rise of institutional critique, prompted by multiple social, cultural and political changes, in addition to the emergence of feminist studies and postcolonial theory, artistic practices started to evolve towards more socially engaged approaches. Initially, the art produced over this period was considered contemporary; however, it then started being seen rather as high modernist. Instead, contemporary art is now considered to start around 1989, after the fall of communism and the rise of global markets.<sup>74</sup>

As Claire Bishop explains, the main drawback of these periodizations is that they all operate from a western point of view and are, therefore, unable to contemplate global diversity.<sup>75</sup> As an attempt to think beyond these limitations, some theorists have defined the contemporary as a discursive category. Peter Osborne classifies it as an 'operative fiction', an act of the imagination that aims to give a sense of unity to the present that "encompasses disjunctive global temporalities we can never grasp."<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, the art historian Terry Smith argues that the contemporary should be seen in opposition to the discourses of modernism and

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<sup>72</sup> Lisa Moran and Sophie Byrne, *What is Modern and Contemporary Art?*, 2009, 5. Irish Museum of Modern Art. Accessed June 18, 2019 <https://imma.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/whatismodernandcontemporaryartmay2010.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> Moran and Byrne, *What is Modern and Contemporary Art?*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Claire Bishop. *Radical Museology, Or, What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?*. London: Koenig Books, 2013), 16.

<sup>75</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 16-17.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

postmodernism, as it is marked both by antinomies and asynchronies, which Bishop relates to the invent of new technologies: “the simultaneous and incompatible co-existence of different modernities and ongoing social inequities, differences that persist despite the global spread of telecommunications systems and the purported universality of market logic.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, it is also difficult to find a unifying and prevailing medium, ideology or style among today’s artists. Instead, Smith remarks how what is shared between them are mostly their concerns: placemaking, world picturing and connectivity.<sup>78</sup>

With this in mind, Bishop draws on two different conceptions of the contemporary: the first one is the most common and it concerns presentism, “the condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking” and “it is underpinned by an inability to grasp our moment in its global entirety.”<sup>79</sup> The second model, however, conceives the contemporary as a dialectical method that “seeks to navigate multiple temporalities within a more political horizon”<sup>80</sup>, and “does not designate a style or period of the works themselves so much as an approach to them.”<sup>81</sup> This model does not assume that each artwork contains a trace of a past temporality, but rather questions why certain temporalities are present in specific objects at particular historical moments, and it does so with the goal of understanding how these past times are related to our present condition and how they aim to change it.<sup>82</sup> She argues that museums which possess historical collections, such as the Van Abbemuseum, have become “the most fruitful testing ground for a non-presentist, multi-temporal contemporaneity” as they attempt to disrupt the idea that all styles are equally valid without offering a more critical point of view that is simultaneously rooted in the past but very much connected to the present.<sup>83</sup> Along the same lines, curator João Ribas argues that the contemporary is “a time experienced as a new

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<sup>77</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 18.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 28.

<sup>79</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 1.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

temporality, a present that makes demands on the past and the future.”<sup>84</sup>

Taking into consideration these views, it is interesting to examine how the researched institutions are actually taking part in this discourse. How do they engage with the idea of temporality? Do they perceive the described dialectical potential of contemporaneity? If yes, how does it manifest in their practices?

## **2.4. Bridging Theory and Practice**

This theoretical framework provides an overview of the topics and positions that have recently been approached and discussed in literature regarding art institutions and curatorial practices. However, only through the following analysis of case studies can we understand how these matters are being encountered in practice within Dutch art institutions.

Admittedly, this framework allows us to identify a shift which progressively brought audiences to occupy a more relevant position within the practices of art institutions. Driven first by the rise of relational and socially engaged artistic practices and later by the changing of curatorial methods, the involvement of the public became a clear priority. Furthermore, as shown by Claire Bishop, some institutions have been putting a lot of emphasis in considering the connections that can be drawn between modern and contemporary art and the present. However, as previously mentioned, museums occupy a somewhat ambiguous position. There is an attempt to “shift visitors’ expectations of art museum visits from a traditional guided didactic experience asserting the authoritative voice of the institution, to an open intellectual relationship, allowing for discussion and interpretation and co-creation of knowledge.”<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, this is not yet true for all museums and, when it is, the way it is approached naturally differs from institution to institution, according to each context. For this reason, it became pertinent to understand how the institutions that constitute the case studies position themselves within this framework and in relation to society. For instance, do they share this orientation towards the public or do they remain more focused in the art world? What position are they striving to occupy in

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<sup>84</sup> João Ribas, "What To Do with the Contemporary?," in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (Mousse Magazine & Pub, 2013), n.p.

<sup>85</sup> Emilie Sitzia, “The ignorant art museum: beyond meaning-making”, in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 37:1, 81.

their local context? Are they merely expanding their audiences or are they deepening their connection to them? And through what strategies?

The open questions designed for the interview intended to help explore the interconnections between these topics in relation to each specific context. The interviewees were asked about how they viewed the role of the curator in relation to society and what were the main concerns that arose for them. Furthermore, I questioned them on what it meant to address those concerns within an institutional framework and what were their most relevant exhibition strategies and mediation practices. Each interviewee navigated the topics depending on what was more prominent for them and their institution. In the case of the Van Abbemuseum, for instance, the topic of transparency and reflexivity emerged very often because of how central it is for that institution's mission and vision. Meanwhile, Witte de With and its current director have a more explicit concern with the legitimation of art as a research practice. For this reason, and because they were not contemplated in the initial division of topics, these subjects became substantial enough to justify the creation of specifically dedicated subchapters. On the interview about Stedelijk, on the other hand, the matters which were discussed fit within the initial topics, and therefore there was no need for an extra subchapter.

Through the conversations that will be presented and analyzed, we will understand what these three people consider to be the role of the institution regarding society, and, in particular, that of their own institution. Although they each have different backgrounds and professional paths, all of the interviewees occupy a relevant position for this research in the sense that they have a broad knowledge of their institution, an impact on the conception of its role and a part in its application into practice.

### 3. Van Abbemuseum

*Once upon a time, the people living in a region known as the West, decided to name beautiful, man-made objects art. (...) The westerners started to collect and often steal artworks from all over the world to be preserved and shown in galleries and museums.*<sup>86</sup>

#### 3.1. Diverse Audiences and Local Publics

The previous quote is part of one of the first wall texts which visitors encounter as they walk into the Van Abbemuseum. The five floors of the building include classic modern art, new acquisitions and experimental presentations, all encompassed by colorful walls and exhibited through various forms of display. At first, it may strike the viewers as slightly overwhelming, but the chances are that soon enough a staff member will approach them with clarifications and recommendations which will make for a smooth start. Hospitality, as Alex Farquharson has highlighted, is a strength, “one that Esche and Van Abbemuseum, in particular, have advanced.”<sup>87</sup> Ever since it has been under the direction of Charles Esche, the Van Abbemuseum has often been mentioned in many publications concerned with curation, contemporary art and museology, as an example of a groundbreaking institution.

As Farquharson, director of the Tate Modern explains, being welcoming increases the chance that the audience will be curious and open minded:

Be welcoming, particularly if you want to work critically, and you want what your institution produces to challenge normative wisdom, to open up new regions of thought. (...) Work on the assumption that everyone is invited, and what you do is for anyone at all; that art, and the thinking it gives rise to, cuts across the ways societies are segmented as markets, bracketed by class, known by power.<sup>88</sup>

This reasoning seemed to be very much at the center of Charles Esche’s concerns as he explained, in the interview, how the museum has been looking at questions of inclusivity and consequently developing programs for people with physical and mental disabilities, such as vision impairment or aphasia, all of whom

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<sup>86</sup> Wall text present at the Van Abbemuseum on March 5th, 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Alex Farquharson, “Institutional Mores”, *ONCURATING.org*, no. 21 (December 2013), 55-58

<sup>88</sup> Farquharson, “Institutional Mores”, 55-58.



are part of “groups of people who traditionally were not really welcome at the museum, which was always a sort of space largely for white European, fully able bodied people.”<sup>89</sup> Moreover, in another perceivable attempt to be more welcoming and inclusive, the museum currently works with local constituencies, small groups such as the queer and migrant communities, feminist groups and activists within the ecological movement, among others. However, this orientation towards the local public has not always been a major presence in the objectives of the museum.

Up until around 2011, both the museum and his director had their attentions much more turned to the so-called art world, meaning the global art markets, critics and publics. As Esche described, when he first got to the Van Abbe, he was inclined to challenge the immanent traditions of those spheres, but, simultaneously, he wished to “get acknowledgment and credibility from peers within the art system”, such as other museum directors and critics from publications, in particular Frieze and Art Forum, who were still his number one audience.<sup>90</sup> As he explained, their primary approval was essential for the museum to know that they were on the right path, “and then our efforts were to basically tell the local people ‘this is good for you. We thought it was good, and our peers think it's good, so therefore it must be good’.”<sup>91</sup> As Esche highlighted, this model shares a lot of its ideas with the avant-garde, which is “ahead of society and it knows which direction society is moving”, but only ends up being self-confirmatory and self-referential.<sup>92</sup> If one of the major roles of art is to “imagine something otherwise, than what exists” then this model only allows people to re-imagine something within the molds that the institution already has, “you've already done it, and you're just getting confirmation from them.”<sup>93</sup> Likewise, Joshua Decker notes how a large majority of museum visitors “are not arts professionals, and their criteria of evaluating their museum experiences may not be in synch with the art professional class.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Joshua Decker, “Will There Still Be a Future When the Museum of the Future Arrives?” in *The Future of Museums* eds. Bast, Gerald, Elias G. Carayannis, and David F. Campbell. Arts, Research, Innovation and Society. Basingstoke, England: Springer, 2014, 16.

In the same way, Terry Smith has reiterated how curators all over the world are constantly confronted with the challenge of balancing the need to build local infrastructures while at the same time obtaining appropriate international recognition.<sup>95</sup> In this case, it was a combination of factors which urged a shift of priorities for the Van Abbe: the financial crisis, in association with a warning from the city council regarding the funding and a change of Esche's own personal views, as he started to see the art community "not being progressive at all", being rather conservative instead and striving to keep its power structures in place as well as maintaining its loyalty towards a limited and elitist audience.<sup>96</sup> "If we want to reach more people we don't need to reach more people of the same kind", Esche reflected, and so they turned to the local community of Eindhoven, trying to understand what to change so that it made sense for other people to come to the museum.<sup>97</sup> That was the origin of the local constituencies, which now have their own space in the building, called Werk Saloon, that they can use not only for museum related activities but also to hold any meetings they desire. They promote debates or prepare performances and there are also multiple banners created by them hanging from the ceiling in one of the exhibition rooms, which contain sentences such as "Are we willing to understand each others' struggles?" and "All gender is drag." These concerns with opening up the museum to the local audiences and placing their creations on the same space as those from internationally recognized artists, can be seen as one of the strategies which may approximate the museum to the ideal "archive of the commons", as designated by Borja-Villel, by highlighting the potential of the institution as an archive based on "collective memory, identity, and experiences", which can be created and accessed by everyone, as it was stated in the Seminar 'Archives of the Commons'.<sup>98</sup>

Along these lines, Esche expects the communities to "take a kind of ownership of the museum", arguing also that it is through this process that both him and the Van

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<sup>95</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 152.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Mela Dávila Freire et al., "The Archives of the Commons, Seminar, Madrid, 2015," *L'internationale*, accessed May 19, 2019, [https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising\\_practices/61\\_the\\_archives\\_of\\_the\\_commons\\_seminar\\_madrid\\_2015](https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/61_the_archives_of_the_commons_seminar_madrid_2015).

Abbe learn more about new directions that they ought to explore.<sup>99</sup> As another example, he points out the People's Parliament, an installation built in the museum with the artist Jonas Staal, which is a copy of a previous project in Syria. Upon the installation of the exhibition, the staff proceeded to get in touch with the Kurdish community from Eindhoven, who told them that before this primary contact they would never go to the museum as they felt as if it was not their place. According to Esche, due to this installation and the interactions with the institution, the community has now begun "to feel a kind of ownership of it", something that has also started influencing their internal discussions and program: "What would it mean to have signs in Kurdish? What would it mean to think about the Kurdish art scene and how could we represent that? All those questions sort of come up for us, so that people can feel to some extent represented in the building."<sup>100</sup>

Social justice, emancipation and equality are some of the values that Charles Esche argues he would always fight for. And even though the Van Abbe has an extensive collection of modern art, Esche placed much more emphasis on the new things that may arise from collaboration with these local constituencies. As he explained, modernity has abandoned these values almost entirely, and for that reason it becomes necessary to take a political distance from it.

### **3.2. Towards a Pluralism of Perspectives**

Considering the significant size of the collection of modern art housed in the museum and the director's critical position towards this artistic period, it does not come as a surprise that one of the institutions' priorities is to actively work towards a broader scope of representation and a display of multiple perspectives. According to the director, one of the main functions of the curators is the production of a canon, by defining what is and what is not important in art. "I think we're constantly struggling with how to make sense of something that is broader without it falling completely into chaos", he explained.<sup>101</sup> For him, it is the curator's responsibility to question the

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<sup>99</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

existent canons and to understand if they should be changed or broadened, “in the light of what feels relevant to society now.”<sup>102</sup> Following this train of thought, the Van Abbe has a very clear and unique standpoint on modern art. While developing their opposite position towards the avant-garde model, they realized the need to leave the conventional story of the modernism behind. “The avant-garde is the story of modernism, in a way”, Esche argues, explaining that both narratives were based on a self-confirming model:

That story is really about a sort of Western hegemony and the West universalizing itself (...). Picasso is not copying African sculpture. He's being inspired by it in order to create something totally new and 'much better'. (...) So it's always the West the one that invents things, and that's the story that we have told ourselves and that's in a way embedded in modernism.<sup>103</sup>

To Charles Esche, one of the questions that this raises is how can a non-western person who lives in The Netherlands relate to this narrative if it is presented as an absolute truth throughout the walls of a museum. The artist Katya Sander has also written about how the modern art museum, by producing a discourse which understands itself as 'universal', consequently produced a public which also understands itself as such.<sup>104</sup> However, she argues that through some artistic practices it is possible to work against “this inscription of the spectator into the kind of 'universality'”.<sup>105</sup> Even though Esche admits that they have not fully succeeded yet, the Van Abbemuseum seems to be attempting to do exactly this through its curatorial decisions and institutional practices which are oriented towards presenting something more diverse “because society is much more diverse and the world is much more diverse.”<sup>106</sup> As he makes clear, when the white Western canon was conceived, society was already this diverse, but, “it was just that only white male, largely heterosexuals, at that time were seen to be relevant to making a kind of a

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

<sup>104</sup> Katya Sander. "Criticizing Institutions? The Logic of Institutionalization in the Danish Welfare State." *Republicart*, February 2004, 2.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>106</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

cultural canon.”<sup>107</sup> As a consequence, large parts of the human experience were erased, leaving out different perceptions of geography, gender, sexuality and life, in order to make sense of only one perspective of the world. For Esche, one of the biggest jobs of the curator is to find this balance, between a unifying story and a pluralism of perspectives, to tell stories which allow people to position themselves in them and feel that they are part of something bigger than just the individual life.

In order to do this, a different type of framing is necessary. For this reason, the Van Abbe aims to present modernity through a cultural historical approach, rather than as an imminent representation of the current world. “Picasso is an old artist in that sense, he's like Rembrandt, he needs context and explanation.”<sup>108</sup> The contextualization that the Van Abbe provides comes from looking with a certain distance, “almost as an outsider.”<sup>109</sup> In one of the rooms, the modern paintings are exhibited on white walls but here the white cube is not presented as neutral, instead it is made clear that it plays a role in the framing of the works and, consequently, of the narrative. “Putting Rembrandt in a completely white cube would kind of also feel a bit strange”, and perhaps the white walls are not necessarily ideal for contemporary work either: it is not neutral, even though in modernity it was “the form that frames an understanding of one self – or of ones institutional 'self' – as universal.”<sup>110</sup>

In the last room, the museum makes use of the language that Thomas Moore has developed in Utopia to try and “look back at this phenomenon called modern art. This strange thing that they (the curators from Utopia) try to figure out what it was about. And probably get it wrong or probably tell half of the story”, but remarking that it is a story, and that it reads in different ways to different people.<sup>111</sup> The incomprehensible narrative created around the works of the collection facilitates an othering of the western culture, exposing how its perspective is subjective and can be completely deconstructed and turned around. This vision corroborates Jens Hoffmann observation of the importance of an institution’s permanent collection as “the ideal

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<sup>107</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Katya Sander. "Criticizing Institutions? The Logic of Institutionalization in the Danish Welfare State." *Republicart*, February 2004, 1.

<sup>111</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

space in which to pose questions of new histories and new modalities of display”, as it offers the perfect opportunity to entirely rethink how the past is told and understood,<sup>112</sup> and for this reason it can be seen as a “source of energy for the curators as much as the visitor.”<sup>113</sup>

Esche makes clear that for him a museum of modern art does not make sense in today’s world as it is only telling one story when in reality, different religions, traditions and ideas coexist in the same society but they “often live in their own bubble.”<sup>114</sup> Along the same lines, Russian linguist and cultural theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin states that “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.”<sup>115</sup> The fact that the Van Abbemuseum opts for this approach, highlights how, as argued by Claire Bishop, the museum is attributing a dialectical potential to art. The constant questioning and deconstructing of ways to look at modern artworks demonstrates a “present-minded approach to history”, generating an understanding of today that maintains the future in mind and which “reimagines the museum as an active, historical agent that speaks in the name not of national pride or hegemony but of creative questioning and dissent.”<sup>116</sup>

In light of this, it makes sense to also look into Jennifer Barrett’s claim that the museum is to be understood as a space of the public sphere, between the state and the people, and therefore “it needs to be a site where the people are able to determine and address matters of public importance.”<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Charles Esche questions: If a museum is a public space and a public institution, “shouldn't that be a place where these bubbles come together and they have the problematics rubbing up against each other, meeting each other? The violence that can produce, or that anger, or the dispute, or the arguments...That should happen in public, and it should happen here.”<sup>118</sup> In order to better understand this idea, we can draw on Chantal Mouffe’s

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<sup>112</sup> Jens Hoffmann, *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating* (Mousse Magazine & Pub, 2013), n.p.

<sup>113</sup> Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Lionel Bovier, *A brief history of curating* (Jrp Ringier Kunstverlag Ag, 2008), 47.

<sup>114</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

<sup>115</sup> Lise Sattrup and Nana Bernhardt, *Sharing is Caring - Openness and sharing in the cultural heritage sector*, ed. Merete Sanderhoff (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2014), 208.

<sup>116</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 59.

<sup>117</sup> Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 82.

<sup>118</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

conception of the museum as an ‘agonistic space’, which sustains that the aim of democratic institutions is not to establish a consensus within the public sphere but to “defuse the potential of hostility that exists in human societies by providing the possibility for antagonism to be transformed into ‘agonism’.”<sup>119</sup> Mouffe argues that art institutions have the potential to stage confrontations between conflicting positions, making “a decisive contribution to the proliferation of the new public spaces fomenting agonistic forms of participation where radical democratic alternatives to neoliberalism could be imagined and cultivated.”<sup>120</sup>

Museums become, then, a safe space where difference can be presented, considered and debated, potentially originating new ways of thought and unexpected possibilities. In this particular case, the Van Abbe is doing so by openly questioning the canon of modern art while listening to the voices of their local constituencies, publicly presenting both approaches and a multiplicity of perspectives that result from them.

### **3.3. Mediation Practices**

The idea of wanting to overlap distinct perspectives and tell different stories brings up a lot of questions regarding mediation views and practices. Can art speak for itself? Does mediation limit unique and individual interpretations or does it enhance them? The director of the museum admitted that it is a difficult subject to tackle, as “you almost need individually tailored mediation because each person needs something different” and it is necessary to find the right balance between lack of information and too much didacticism.<sup>121</sup> Yet, Charles considered that at the time of this interview the team was still using a “one size fits all” mediation, which, according to his beliefs, cannot be fully efficient.

Nevertheless, he stated that physicality is the primary aspect to consider when it comes to mediation. What the curators of the museum try to do is, first of all, create a bodily experience, “you have to actually walk through things and sit down or come

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<sup>119</sup> Simon Sheikh. "Public Spheres and the Functions of Progressive Art Institutions" *Republicart* (February 2004). np.

<sup>120</sup> Mouffe, “Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World”, 74.

<sup>121</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

to spaces where you're asked for your body to behave slightly differently in certain ways, or to break the normal trajectories of things” and that is something they strive to do more and more.<sup>122</sup>

However, what emerges as the most important form of mediation for the director is dialogue: “the thing that I believe in most is having conversations with people in the museum (...) and I think through that you get a much better experience, I think that for us it's really important, that people talk.”<sup>123</sup> It is important to notice that, besides the free guided tours which happen every day, a member of the staff can also be found in every exhibition room, willing to engage in conversations about the different artworks, something that remounts to Alex Farquharson’s observation about the Van Abbe’s hospitality. In spite of this availability, it is understandable that not every museum visitor wants to engage in actual conversations. For that reason, the Van Abbe is still searching for other attractive methods of mediation, “maybe some aspects of technology need to be more developed which we haven't done and maybe our language needs to be adjusted.”<sup>124</sup> Charles Esche recognized that they have not had the time and the means to do so, but that regardless of that, mediation is crucial, especially if the museum is trying to tell different stories: “If you don't have mediation then people bring their own mediation. And their own mediation is this modern story.”<sup>125</sup>

Despite it not being the main focus of the museum at the moment, in 2011 they were closer to Esche’s ideal of individually tailored mediation in one of the phases of the project “Play Van Abbe.” The title of this project, which took place in 2011, comes from the idea of one being able to play Van Abbe as if it were the same as playing a record. The main goal was to take the collection and see how it could tell different stories through different interactions with it. The initiative “Play Four” consisted of different styles of mediation designed for four different roles: the flâneur, the tourist, the pilgrim and the worker. Visitors who chose to be the pilgrim got a book “that was almost like a religious book that you go through and had lots of information about the artworks”, flâneurs got a soundtrack that they could listen to while wandering around,

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<sup>122</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.



and the tourist received a map to navigate the museum accompanied with short anecdotes about the works. As Esche stated in the interview, this kind of more customized and interdisciplinary mediation model is an asset that they are considering bringing back.

### 3.4. Transparency and Reflexivity

The first part of the project, “Play Van Abbe”, consisted of the reconstruction of an exhibition from the 1980s curated by a past director, side by side with an exhibition curated by the current director, with the works that had been bought more recently. The idea was, once again, to frame an exhibition and its artworks as cultural history, exposing how it was constructed in distinct time periods, by the different people behind the museum, and how it could be experienced and talked about in different ways by the audience. This is a way of clearly illustrating in practice the notion that “an exhibition, no matter what else it is, is not abstract or ahistorical, but a concrete situation located in a particular place and time.”<sup>126</sup> It is also a distinct example of how the permanent collection can function as a resource for the museum to “think in several tenses simultaneously”, by becoming a “time capsule of what was once considered culturally significant at previous historical periods” while allowing more recent acquisitions to offer a prediction of future history.”<sup>127</sup>

Up until this point, it is possible to conclude that, through different ways, the Van Abbe places a lot of emphasis on transparency, reflexivity and deconstruction. It is not uncommon for the visitors to find themselves confronted with written texts that demystify the objects that they are looking at. For example, nearby a sculpture of Madonna with a child, it is possible to read the following: “By entering a museum collection and therefore no longer subject to use in church rituals, the sculpture lost its religious function in what is known as desacralization, and became an artwork. But its transformation didn’t end there. In becoming a work of art, the artefact was simultaneously artcized.”<sup>128</sup> This too is in conformity with what is argued by Bishop,

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<sup>126</sup> Helena Filipovic, "What is an exhibition?," in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (Mousse Magazine & Pub, 2013), n.p.

<sup>127</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 23-24.

<sup>128</sup> Wall text present at the Van Abbemuseum on March 5th, 2019.

as the author explains that the dialectical approach “defetishizes objects” and makes it possible for the contemporary to become “less a question of periodization or discourse than a method or practice, potentially applicable to all historical periods.”<sup>129</sup>

This deconstruction is also reflected in the way the Van Abbe brings to light facts and topics which typically tend to be enclosed behind institutional doors. At the start of the museum, the visitor can find a ‘museum index’, which looks at the politics of collecting and also constitutes a remaining part of the Play Van Abbe. One of the graphics displays how many of the artworks in the collection were made by men, and how a much smaller number belongs to women. Additionally, two maps illustrate how the diversity of the population in Eindhoven is much greater than the diversity of the collection: “When I first came here it was always said that the Van Abbemuseum was international and Eindhoven was local. (...) But actually, Eindhoven is international and the museum is local, local Western”, Esche reflected.<sup>130</sup>

As we have seen, the term demystification which was introduced in the end of the 1960s by Siegelau was eventually internalized by most cultural institutions and incorporated in many curatorial practices. However, when considering the information that has been discussed here, I argue that the Van Abbemuseum has not only internalized that approach but also taken it a step further with its innovational strategies, which manage to stand out despite the already widespread practices of demystification. A lot of potential resides in these practices as it is stated by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, for whom radically opening up an institution’s boundaries and providing insight on how it works is a crucial step in order to help curators slowing down their working process, so as to “imagine new ecologies of care as a way of naming a continuous practice of support, listening, attention, feelings, that arise from encounters with objects and subjects.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 59.

<sup>130</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

<sup>131</sup> Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, “On Slow Institutions” In *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*, edited by Lucy Steeds, Paul O'Neill, and Mick Wilson. (Cambridge: Mit Press, 2017), 38.

## 4. Witte de With

*Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art was conceived as an art house with a mission to be present and discuss the work created today by visual artists and cultural makers, from here and afar. This non-profit institution has especially worked with artists, and engaged audiences who are interested in posing challenging inquiries and articulations of our present.*<sup>132</sup>

### 4.1. Young Audiences and Local Publics

At Witte de With (WW), I held an interview with Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, curator and also the current director of the institution. It is important to state that WW does not have a permanent collection and it does not define itself as a museum, rather as a ‘center for contemporary art’. However, due to the fact that it is still a non-profit institution in service of society which researches, exhibits and communicates artistic works and projects, it fits the previously stated definition of museum and the framework of this research.

As Hernández Chong Cuy explained to me, despite receiving subsidies from different sources, the majority of Witte de With’s financial support comes from public funding. “I think that there's a very strong responsibility to the public and, not only to local constituencies, but also to a question around citizenship (...) or questions around nationality and civic responsibility”, Hernández Chong Cuy affirmed.<sup>133</sup>

Witte de With’s policy determines that its director must change every three to six years, and, alongside that, the relationship between the institution and the city of Rotterdam, where it is located, has also been a subject of change throughout time. Hernández Chong Cuy guided me through some examples of the visions of her predecessors, pointing out that WW’s first director, Chris Dercon, was the one whose strategies of engagement with the city she considered the most exciting: he conducted a series of commissions inviting artists to engage with community centers, homeless shelters and other different organizations that were not necessarily publics “that would be audiences of the institution that was emerging.”<sup>134</sup> To Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, this showed an inspiring example of how to collaborate with an existing

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<sup>132</sup> Witte De With - Center for Contemporary Art, “About” Witte De With, accessed May 25, 2019, [https://www.wdw.nl/en/about\\_us/](https://www.wdw.nl/en/about_us/).

<sup>133</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

institution or community group that had already its own causes and interests, “and how can you partner with them to engage them with your own causes and research but also to welcome them more significantly into your own program” so that both instances can grow together and generate a participation which also results in repeated visits.<sup>135</sup>

Furthermore, she highlighted how Defne Ayas, the previous director, brought together an education team in which Hernández Chong Cuy herself has invested exponentially since she took on this position, in the beginning of 2018. This team focuses on engaging with the schools of Rotterdam and its surroundings, working in order to provide high school students inspiring experiences at the art center. “The likelihood of them returning to Witte de With and feeling that this is an institution that is also theirs is higher”, Hernández Chong Cuy asserted.<sup>136</sup> Along these lines, Witte de With has been experimenting with the idea of collective learning, mainly in a specific space, thus far called “Untitled”, which is simultaneously a display room for artworks and archives, but also a classroom, a bookshop and a gathering site free of access, “It’s a multipurpose space, so leaving away the context of the white cube to becoming much more of a community center of sorts.”<sup>137</sup> In this space, different events are planned by a group of young people from Rotterdam which can, for instance, take art history or business classes there, but also help running the program and operations alongside the team of Witte de With. This is another example which approximates the institution to the idea of an archive of the commons, through the development of a space which can be “created, managed, conserved and opened up to citizens and the general public as an exercise in civic and democratic culture, irrespective of nationality or of the availability of financial means to consult, use, and enjoy said archives.”<sup>138</sup>

To Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, the curatorial vision of the institution is shaped by a global experience but also by the interests of the locals who get directly involved in shaping it. In order for this to happen successfully, it is necessary that Rotterdam citizens realize “that this is one more institution that they have and can

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<sup>135</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Mela Dávila Freire et al., “The Archives of the Commons, Seminar, Madrid, 2015”, np.

use.”<sup>139</sup> Witte de With is to become a place that is “very welcoming of change”, and “more of a social space than just a presentation space. And I think that that's how collective learning, rather than education per-say could actually be produced.”<sup>140</sup> According to Garavan and McCarthy, collective learning systems are viewed as open processes which interact continually with their environments, involving “social interaction, the leveraging of relational synergies, and the development of shared understanding and meaning,”<sup>141</sup> which seem to be the pillars of the logic behind Witte de With’s strategy.

## 4.2. Towards a Pluralism of Perspectives

When it comes to the relation with the city in terms of content, Hernández Chong Cuy reflected on how some curators think the issues thematically, “so that for example hip hop is important, which is true of Rotterdam or that spoken word is one of the artistic genres that is more experienced by younger people.”<sup>142</sup> However, her approach is quite distinct: “In my curatorial thinking, I find that I'm more interested in creating the strategies so that it's structures that I have an impact on”, she declared.<sup>143</sup> More than presenting artworks that bring up the urgency for more inclusivity and a more diverse way of thinking, she finds it crucial that those things happen from inside the institution in the early stages of the processes: “for me it's important to consider that within the staff, and within our methodologies and the tools that we use to develop projects, the idea of inclusivity and diversity is already present.”<sup>144</sup> Before looking at the exhibition topics, in her first year the director focused in “bringing people here that can form part of the team, or of the decision process, that come from a background that is representative of Rotterdam, in this case of an immigrant background.”<sup>145</sup> This relates to her objective of forming a platform where questions can be brought in into a participatory process “where

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<sup>139</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Thomas N. Garavan, and Alma McCarthy. “Collective Learning Processes and Human Resource Development.” *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 10, no. 4 (August 2008): 451–452.

<sup>142</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

voices that hadn't been heard here or voices that hadn't been having a platform to speak now have it.”<sup>146</sup>

As it has been previously stated, Witte de With is part of an ongoing debate about the colonial connotation of its name. In her own words, Hernández Chong Cuy's goal throughout her time as a director is that if the institution “didn't change its name, at least it changed the game.”<sup>147</sup> Besides the name, as she explains, the underlying critique to the art center was that they were not diverse enough, “and we were defending ourselves instead of being advocating and being proactive in raising those questions ourselves. So for me it's more important that we first and foremost change the structures.”<sup>148</sup> Besides, she hopes that it becomes a space “that welcomes other forms of knowledge that can only be brought in through the address of diversity and inclusivity.”<sup>149</sup>

To her, this diversity in the structure is very important when it comes to curators exercising what she considers to be some of their primary functions: questioning larger value systems, and “producing not only knowledge but more specifically a resignification of meaning”, by raising questions regarding knowledge that should be materialized in a space and shared publicly.<sup>150</sup> Hernández Chong Cuy's use of ‘resignification’ can suggest an idea which the curator Elena Filipovic also puts forward when thinking of the exhibition as a site “where deeply entrenched ideas and forms can come undone.”<sup>151</sup> Instead of aspiring to only produce knowledge, she argues that an exhibition can seek to provoke feelings of irreverence or doubt resonating with Chantal Mouffe's notion of the museum as an agonistic space, and, accordingly, also with Van Abbemuseum's vision.

### **4.3. Advocating Art as Research**

When it comes to other curatorial concerns in which Witte de With is focused, Hernández Chong Cuy highlights how it has been a priority for the institution to take

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<sup>146</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Helena Filipovic, "What is an exhibition?," in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (Mousse Magazine & Pub, 2013), n.p

a proactive position towards the recognition of visual arts in the public sphere. "For me, coming to The Netherlands and finding out that politically there's a debate around whether art is a hobby of the left, (...) to me, to say it like that, is a bit shocking", she stated.<sup>152</sup> The artists for whom she has a preference tend to present a work which is done "after a very, very serious, very rigorous investigation and that investigation involves sometimes archives, sometimes bibliography, technical investigation, material investigation, site investigation."<sup>153</sup> She emphasized how the work presented at WW is "a work that has been developed after much thought, after much investigation and after much transformation"<sup>154</sup>, therefore making it explicit that art can also be based in rigorous investigations which should add credibility and value to it.

The director stressed the importance of understanding that the visual arts have "a language of its own" which is used in order to "transform the world and resignify it."<sup>155</sup> This language differs from that which is written or spoken, instead it relies on the encounter with the artwork, its experience and the feelings it originates. "Materials can look cold or hot, or they could look wobbly and soft or hard", and this provokes a sensuality, meaning "how we encounter that character of the work and how that adds to the meaning itself of the place."<sup>156</sup> This physicality of the encounter appears as unique in exhibitions, in opposition to the consumption of images through social media or advertising. Contrary to what happens in those instances, a presentation institution like Witte de With provides "physical, perceptual, phenomenological experiences that happen actively within the space."<sup>157</sup> This experience becomes essential to the production of meaning that is expected not only from the ones who set up the exhibition but also from the audience members: "the public is here in a way to be able not to be taught, but to actually generate the meaning that we should learn also about."<sup>158</sup> As it is conceptualized by the director, exhibitions are open-ended and their meaning cannot be predicted, rather it is

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<sup>152</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

produced through an experience which ends up being, as described by Filipovic, “at once emotional, sensual, political, and intellectual while being decidedly not predetermined, scripted, or directed by the curator or the institution.”<sup>159</sup>

#### 4.4. Mediation Practices

Hernández Chong Cuy considers that communicating this artistic investigation to a greater audience is a great responsibility of the curator and that mediation plays a significant part in that. Subsequently, the idea of space, or spaciality as she puts it, is also a central point when it comes to their conception of mediation strategies. “I do believe that at this time, one of the things that I want to put forward is to reconsider that the ‘spacialization’ of information that can occur in the galleries can be very didactic without having to be bookish”, she affirmed, explaining how she has become slightly critical of exhibitions that rely too much on written information or that include too many books: “Because it's very clear that very few people actually sit down and see them within gallery spaces.”<sup>160</sup> The director considers that, as a cultural institution in contemporary society, they are faced with the challenge of competing with the mediatization that occurs in other spaces of culture and entertainment. “How do you create a sumptuous experience that is both essential and intellectual and certainly keeps the public engaged?”, she questioned.<sup>161</sup>

There are many possible answers to this question but according to Hernández Chong Cuy’s vision, the positioning of the artworks in the space is definitely at the core. She used the work that was currently on show at Witte de With “*An exhibition with an audio script by Sarah Demeuse and Wendy Tronrud, as well as a soundtrack by Mario García Torres in collaboration with Sol Oosel*”, to get her point across: “that's an exhibition that one could say is very didactic and at the same time one could say that's not an exhibition. Because where is the art?”<sup>162</sup> The gallery is almost completely empty, but the walls are painted in different color scales which aim to reproduce the solar time. The visitor can wander around while listening to one of two sound pieces:

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<sup>159</sup> Helena Filipovic, "What is an exhibition?," in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (Mousse Magazine & Pub, 2013), n.p

<sup>160</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.



an audio recording that can be experienced through wireless headphones or the ambient music throughout the gallery space, which is the exhibition's music soundtrack. The stories told in the first soundscape explore the idea of dropping out, posing questions "pertaining to economic, gender, racial, institutional, geographic aspects that inform an understanding of dropping out", and the colorful walls are punctuated with words in vinyl lettering that relate to those stories.<sup>163</sup> This artistic work is a collaboration between different artists who were specifically challenged to work together by Witte de With. "Creating a solar time, a color scheme within the galleries, is a curatorial decision, you know, all these things that involve orchestrating and staging the information so that you slow down and you think, so that you feel alone, which is part of the emphasis of the exhibition, of withdrawal."<sup>164</sup> The aim is to spatialize these intangible things so that the visitor can experience and relate to them instead of just being presented a work, "and for me that's the first step in mediation", the director explained.<sup>165</sup> She argued that the gallery space has to be used intelligently to create relationships between ideas so that "one idea can be constructed above another idea", generating a cohesive experience which can have "disruptions" and "spaces of boredom or engagement, but that it's rich in texture."<sup>166</sup> Paul O'Neill explains how this interest in spectators' interactivity and movement through the space of the exhibition suggests a "type of proactive reader-in-the-text scenario, identified with poststructuralist analysis and the notion that meaning is located at the point of reception"<sup>167</sup>, aligning with WW's views on open-ended and collective learning. Therefore, the use of "gallery didactics in the space" is the first aspect of mediation that Hernández Chong Cuy points out, but not the only one.<sup>168</sup> The information that is collected upon the making of the curatorial research, the conversations with the artists, the knowledge about the artistic processes should be

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<sup>163</sup> Witte de With, "An Exhibition with an Audio Script by Sarah Demeuse and Wendy Tronrud, As Well As a Soundtrack by Mario García Torres in Collaboration with Sol Oosel - Exhibitions - Program," Witte De With, accessed June 8, 2019, [https://www.wdw.nl/en/our\\_program/exhibitions/an\\_exhibition\\_with\\_an\\_audio\\_script\\_by\\_sarah\\_demeuse\\_and\\_wendy\\_tronrud\\_as\\_well\\_as\\_a\\_soundtrack\\_by\\_mario\\_garc\\_a\\_torres\\_in\\_collaboration\\_with\\_sol\\_oosel](https://www.wdw.nl/en/our_program/exhibitions/an_exhibition_with_an_audio_script_by_sarah_demeuse_and_wendy_tronrud_as_well_as_a_soundtrack_by_mario_garc_a_torres_in_collaboration_with_sol_oosel).

<sup>164</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 11.

<sup>168</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

reflected in those gallery spaces as a way of “sharing a knowledge that has been accumulated and that allowed us to produce the value and the meaning when we encounter the work”, so that the public that is interested in engaging more thoroughly with a work can read them in the space and then look at the work from a different perspective.<sup>169</sup>

Finally, she refers to the events, the public program and guided tours which are organized in conjunction with the exhibition, available to anyone who is seeking a deeper engagement with the work or simply looking for clarifications. As she explained, it is normal to hear from the visitors that they do not feel “confident that their experience there alone is worthwhile visiting.”<sup>170</sup> Usually free of charge, WW has been investing in a more regular agenda and doing weekly programs, so that the community can be more engaged, because “mediation also has to do with it, it’s not just a special activity, but something that you can access on a regular basis.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. Personal Interview. (Rotterdam. March 7, 2019)

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

## 5. Stedelijk Museum

*While Stedelijk Base is devoted to the highlights (artworks in the art historical canon), Stedelijk Turns sheds light on hidden or suppressed stories, and unseen or rarely exhibited artworks. Fueled by new research and topical themes, these alternative perspectives will inspire changes in Stedelijk Base. Consequently, Stedelijk Base will be a dynamic, changing presentation that, over the next five years, will invite visitors to experience the transformation of the canon.<sup>172</sup>*

### 5.1. Diversity of Audiences and Broad Local Publics

In the 1990s, the Stedelijk Museum belonged to Dienst Musea voor Moderne Kunst, a large organization under the administration of the city of Amsterdam. This organization also comprised the Fodor Museum which has, in the meantime, been closed. It was there that Leontine Coelewij started her job as a curator, having then moved to the Stedelijk Museum, where she currently works. Coelewij has been familiar with the institution for a long time, and, therefore, she has also “seen changes in how the museum functions.”<sup>173</sup> As the curator explained, there were many changes since 2012, which had partly to do with the fact that the Dutch government started playing a smaller role in the funding, resulting in a more significant dependence on sponsors and private funds. The Stedelijk Museum is still owned by the city of Amsterdam from which it receives a subsidy, but, nowadays, there are other parties into play. Furthermore, she pointed out the prominent growth of the museum, as Stedelijk is currently the biggest museum of modern art in The Netherlands. With a collection of more than a hundred thousand objects, it also has a broad scope of audiences which makes it difficult to address them as a cohesive group. On the one hand, “we have our audience which consists, for instance, of people who are really specialists, artists, and people from art institutions and universities”, but, besides that, a significant part of the people who visit the museum are also tourists, “who never visit the museum or visitors who do not have a specific knowledge of modern art, but just want to have a day out”, or also the locals of Amsterdam who “come here

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<sup>172</sup> Stedelijk Museum, "STEDELIIJK BASE - The New Collection Presentation from 1880-now," Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, accessed June 8, 2019, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/stedelijk-base-the-new-collection-presentation>.

<sup>173</sup> Leontine Coelewij. Telephone Interview. (Amsterdam/Utrecht. March 19, 2019)

regularly just because they love modern art.”<sup>174</sup> With a building in one of the most visited areas of Amsterdam, the Museum Quarter, being a big institution in a big city comes with lots of challenges. As Joshua Decter points out, “museums endeavor to think about their public outreach and public education programs, and yet there is a lot of unpredictability, for instance, in the encounter between multiple publics visiting one museum.”<sup>175</sup> It is then understandable that, in the interview, the curator also remarked how sometimes it is not easy to deal with so many different groups of people, considering that the size of the institution does not allow them to focus and invest specifically in one audience. In spite of this, being more open and more accessible still comes up as one of Stedelijk’s priorities: “it’s very good to be aware of the problems and the difficulties and what gaps, what stands in the way for people to come here”, Leontine Coelewij explained, as she gave the example of how they take into consideration a smooth visit for people with physical disabilities, or how they have created a program together with Van Abbemuseum called Onvergetelijk Stedelijk (Unforgettable Stedelijk), which concerns people with Alzheimer’s disease. “We want to do so many different things. You know, be accessible for minority groups, for all sorts of groups, but also for these big audiences. So it’s so much at the same time.”<sup>176</sup>

The variety of audiences also functions as a stimulus for the experimentation of different approaches. As an example, the curator puts forward *Amsterdam, the Magic Center*, an exhibition that took place from July 2018 until the January 2019, which aimed to offer a fresh look at the 1960s through insights into the transnational developments of the era, exploring the artistic and social happenings that took place in Amsterdam within that time. During the exhibition, there was a special evening in the entrance space “where you could come without buying a ticket. So you know, making it very easy for people to come”, whereas another evening about activism was aimed at completely different groups.<sup>177</sup> “You always look at what fits with the

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<sup>174</sup> Leontine Coelewij. Telephone Interview. (Amsterdam/Utrecht. March 19, 2019)

<sup>175</sup> Joshua Decter, “Will There Still Be a Future When the Museum of the Future Arrives?” in *The Future of Museums* eds. Bast, Gerald, Elias G. Carayannis, and David F. Campbell. Arts, Research, Innovation and Society. Basingstoke, England: Springer, 2014, 16.

<sup>176</sup> Leontine Coelewij. Telephone Interview. (Amsterdam/Utrecht. March 19, 2019)

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

exhibition. What's the logical step to take.”<sup>178</sup> For her, the role of the curator consists of a great responsibility both towards this heterogeneous audience and towards the artist. Their focus is to create a program which is as diverse as possible but also to generate connections to the contemporary world and present new perspectives.

## 5.2. Towards a Pluralism of Perspectives

Leontine Coelewij explained how these new perspectives can often come from modern artworks, as the Stedelijk, in a logic similar to the one of the Van Abbe, also uses its permanent collection to try and generate new ways of looking at the past. In order to address this in practice, they have created two different sections within the museum: *Stedelijk Base* and *Stedelijk Turns*. The first one comprises the highlights of their collection, which the viewers can navigate in order to encounter artworks from the biggest names of the art history canon. However, in *Stedelijk Turns*, the focus is in showcasing new perspectives and new topics, which will refer back to the main collection but also alter it, according to the new explored possibilities connected to the present day. Coelewij recounted how one of her colleagues was presently developing an exhibition around Picasso, Chagall and many other artists who were migrants in Paris, in the beginning of the twentieth century. “This is very much about the role of the migrant artist in Paris, in a society that was really xenophobic and anti-Semitic”, and it also invites the audience to reflect on the idea of freedom of movement.<sup>179</sup> The curatorial actions become a collective process, as the curator works together with the education team and other different departments in order to translate ideas and see what they “mean for us today” and also “what does it mean for the city of Amsterdam.”<sup>180</sup> For instance, with this future exhibition, they are attempting to question the role and the position of the people “who come here as migrants.”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Leontine Coelewij. Telephone Interview. (Amsterdam/Utrecht. March 19, 2019)

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

In order to generate these new points of view, the Stedelijk is also committed to “talk with people from outside of the museum to get feedback from them.”<sup>182</sup> Depending on each exhibition, they get a small group of experts together “in which we brainstorm about the concept but also about what is a good way to communicate with our audiences.”<sup>183</sup> For instance, for the migrant exhibition, Wim Manuhutu, director of the Migratie Museum and Jessica de Abreu, co-founder of The Black Archives, were asked to contribute to the discussion. “We try to bring in knowledge and experiences, different voices, that we don't have here in our museum”, also with the aim of creating open channels of communication which will lead to having the public more engaged in the exhibition and generate better possibilities for the audience to communicate back with the institution as well.<sup>184</sup>

As another example of an innovative exhibition, Leontine Coelewij mentioned *Amsterdam, the Magic Center* once more, reflecting on how the museum looked at the connection between art and radical political groups and movements, complementing the exhibition with a public program rooted in the question 'what is activism today?'. “In each exhibition we try to see how can we make historical art relevant for people today. What does it say to our society at the moment?”<sup>185</sup> This too resonates with Bishop’s notion of a dialectical contemporaneity, as the museum is using these exhibitions as a way for “narrating the past through a diagnosis of the present, while keeping their eyes on the future.”<sup>186</sup>

At the time of my visit, the exhibition presented in the *Stedelijk Turns* space was *Pinball Wizard - The Work and Life of Jacqueline de Jong*, which was centered around an artist who was also a former employee at the museum. The exhibition incorporated artworks from the artist alongside with objects from the Stedelijk collection, many of which had been previously incorporated by Jacqueline de Jong in exhibitions that she had curated. This approach is also a way of putting forward the already discussed ‘demystification’, as it offers a view on certain artworks which is openly tied to a personal perspective, not only from an artist but also from a previous worker of the institution.

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<sup>182</sup> Leontine Coelewij. Telephone Interview. (Amsterdam/Utrecht. March 19, 2019)

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Leontine Coelewij. Telephone Interview. (Amsterdam/Utrecht. March 19, 2019)

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 61.

### 5.3. Mediation Practices

Regarding mediation practices, Leontine Coelewij remarked that this diversity of publics also creates room for a lot of excitement when thinking of the possibilities for different ways to communicate. According to a belief that mediation should be layered, she stated that “we offer mediation on many different levels.”<sup>187</sup> However, the wall labels are always present, as that is an element that “people are very happy with.”<sup>188</sup> Besides that, the museum also has an audio tour available “which is even more accessible”, designed for “visitors who do not have a specific knowledge of modern art.”<sup>189</sup> The catalog, both in physical and digital formats, offers more in-depth articles, “for specialists, or for people who want to know more.”<sup>190</sup> On top of that, the institution also works on the *Stedelijk Studies*, an academic peer reviewed magazine online, which, as it is argued by Storr, can be considered as a great strength since it gives continuity to the exhibitions, shaping them in a “definite, but not definitive, point of view that invites serious analysis and critique.”<sup>191</sup>

Since 2008, they have also assembled a team of young people from fifteen to nineteen-years-old, named *The Blikopeners*, which has as a main goal offering an open look at the art, based on their personal experience and knowledge which they share with the visitors, focusing mainly on young peers. The intent is to get people more comfortable to appreciate and interpret art through their personal opinions and experiences. *Blikopeners* offer guided tours but, when they are not present at the museum, it is still possible to get acquainted with some of their points of view through the audio guides. They incite to action, advising the visitor to look closer, to answer a question or even to initiate a debate with the nearest security guard, which can be seen as an attempt to generate proximity between the audience and the institution, despite its substantial size. This is the range of mediation that the museum offers, but as Coelewij explained, the museum is aware that some people prefer to just look at the artworks, which remains always an option.

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<sup>187</sup> Leontine Coelewij. Telephone Interview. (Amsterdam/Utrecht. March 19, 2019)

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Robert Storr, "Show and Tell," in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2006), 44.

Furthermore, they also experiment with different forms of mediation depending on the exhibition. “For instance, with *Amsterdam, the Magic Center* we had an online platform, and we had articles, but we also made podcasts.” The goal is always to offer different layers of information and interpretation, “connecting with the audience in many different ways.”<sup>192</sup>

In what concerns the exhibition display as a form of mediation, the Stedelijk presents a very interesting example with their unconventional display of the permanent collection. It was developed by the former director Beatrix Ruf, who wanted to mix visual art, applied arts and design collections. There is a timeline situating all the artworks, but they are displayed thematically, developing a strong interrelationship with the architecture by Rem Koolhaas, that constructs an “open landscape in which you can wander around” without a “very fixed sequence of rooms.”<sup>193</sup> This set-up of the collection was inaugurated in 2017, and it was agreed that it would stay on for five years, due to the enormous investment that was made. Coelewij explained that a new artistic director will be starting soon, and that will certainly bring modifications to the way of presenting the permanent collection. Claire Bishop has argued that the abandonment of chronology alone is not the way to make the collections more exciting and interesting, as it does not guarantee them the dialectical possibilities that we have already discussed.<sup>194</sup> The current display allows for a more open visit, but it also aims to present the more prominent highlights of the collection, targeting, for instance, tourists who do not have much time to wander around the museum and just want to see the main works. As Leontine Coelewij herself stated, “We as curators also think it would be interesting to rethink this permanent presentation and work on it in a different way and maybe not just only the highlights but include, you know, some newer insights and unknown works and different perspectives on the collection”, therefore this is a challenge on which the team is planning to work on in a near future.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Leontine Coelewij. Telephone Interview. (Amsterdam/Utrecht. March 19, 2019)

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 24.

<sup>195</sup> Leontine Coelewij. Telephone Interview. (Amsterdam/Utrecht. March 19, 2019)



## 6. Comparative Analysis

The main purpose of this research is not to evaluate the different strategies used by these institutions through a comparison because, as it has been stated, the context of each case study is very specific and it involves different parameters. However, comparing the insights gathered through the interviews can lead to some conclusions and it can help us gaining both a deeper and broader comprehension of the Dutch art scene. Furthermore, this comparison is essential as a way to formulate a cohesive answer to the main research question: “To what extent do these three institutions have different approaches regarding their role in society?”

Even though all the institutions seem to struggle with maintaining a balance between the art world and the local publics, it is possible to conclude that currently, there is a trend which favors the later in detriment of the former. Particularly in Witte de With and the Van Abbemuseum, it is apparent that at the moment it is the local that weighs more on their concerns and resorts more influence on their choices. This indicates that the idea that all museums are succumbing to the global markets is a misconception and some of the reflections brought up by the interviewees show alternatives to that. This is perhaps less true for the Stedelijk, which as the largest institution out of the three faces the bigger challenge of finding a balance in dealing with a higher variety of players. Despite this, we can affirm that all of these institutions are attempting to connect with the local publics and they do so through different strategies: while the Van Abbemuseum places a lot of emphasis in collaborating with local constituencies, Witte de With works a lot with youngsters and is focused in building a staff composed by local people, thus aiming for a structural change. This also connects with their focus in broadening and questioning established canons and opening up a space for the coexistence of new and multiple perspectives, something that the Stedelijk also strives for, in particular through consulting and listening to the voices of experts from different fields. In all of the interviews, relevant societal topics came up, such as migration issues and gender equality, strengthening the idea that these institutions are attempting to draw connections between the artworks and the present day debates. Along the same lines, they all seem to openly conceive art as a tool for social change in different domains. Witte the With, in particular, has become an advocate for the validation of visual arts as a research practice.

In what concerns modern art, it is interesting to notice how both the Stedelijk and the Van Abbemuseum are using their permanent collections to question the established canons. However, Stedelijk does so in a specific section (*Stedelijk Turns*), maintaining a more conventional perspective of art history in its *Stedelijk Base*, where the unconventionality emerges in the way the space is shaped and organized, rather than in the content. Van Abbemuseum opts for a more comprehensive approach, by pointing out the subjectivities of the constructed canons right from the entrance of the museum until the very end. It can be suggested that, among other things, it is the difference in size and the audience reach of the institution which allow for a more radical approach, while the Stedelijk may be inhibited to do so due to its importance to the city tourism, as it has been stated that museums such as this have the potential to be one of the central axes of cultural and tourism development.<sup>196</sup>

In relation to practices, the setting up of the exhibitions and the mediation that they require, both Witte de With and the Van Abbemuseum place great importance in the physicality of the experience, by dedicating a lot of attention to the behavior of the visitor's body in the space. In the Stedelijk Museum, the importance of the space comes up more prominently in their permanent collection, where the set-up of the room epitomizes an experimental and open-ended approach. Overall, they have left behind the white cube as the standard framework in which to present an exhibition, displaying the necessary flexibility to devise a context which fits well with the specific artworks. Besides, all of the institutions seem to attribute a lot of significance to their public programming, namely debates or guided visits.

Both Van Abbemuseum and Witte de With are opting for practices which reflect their mentioned desire to become more similar to community centers and less like presentation institutions, mainly through creating spaces in the museum that can be used for different activities by community groups. In WW it seems that young people are the central focus, while the Van Abbe appears to be working mostly with minorities and activist groups. The emphasis of the latter in the transparency and demystification of the institution can also be regarded as a method for building trust and generating more proximity with the public. Additionally, the fact that this museum

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<sup>196</sup> Eleni Mavragani, "Museum Services in the Era of Tourism?" in *The Future of Museums* eds. Bast, Gerald, Elias G. Carayannis, and David F. Campbell. Arts, Research, Innovation and Society. Basingstoke, England: Springer, 2014, 44.

exhibits artworks made by members of the local constituencies in the same room as the ones produced by international artists is another strong indicator of a horizontal relationship with its local publics. As for Witte de With, this is more evident in their efforts to give the Rotterdam youth a closer access to the actual structure of the institution by involving them, for instance, in the organization of multiple activities in the “Untitled” space.

What also stands out is how both Stedelijk and Van Abbe are striving to create a more welcoming and familiar atmosphere, by encouraging the dialogue between the visitors and the museum staff. Furthermore, they also share the goal of reaching out to bigger and more diverse audiences, developing projects of inclusivity and accessibility, which reflect the need to challenge the conception of the museum as an exclusive and elitist space.

It is apparent that, not only through these activities but also through the chosen mediation strategies, the three institutions are aiming to create several layers in the museum, making it interdisciplinary, open, captivating and accessible for a broad range of people, from the art experts, to the tourists and the locals.

## 7. Conclusions

Before addressing the conclusions, it is important to clarify that the initial research proposal for this thesis had its major focus on the changes that have been occurring in curatorial practices. However, it rapidly became evident that the role of the curator has been getting more and more intertwined with other roles inside and outside the institution, as the curator becomes, amongst other things, a researcher and a programmer. One of the reasons for this, as Terry Smith argues, is that the modern styles of contemporary curating are being characterized by a bigger commitment to the outside of the art world. Taking this into account, the scope of this study was broadened in order to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the functioning of the museums, which nowadays is, as we could see, strongly holistic.

Overall, the three institutions seem to engage with the dialectical potential of art, such as theorized by Claire Bishop. When speaking about the Van Abbemuseum, the author argues that this institution has “hung its collection to suggest a provocative rethinking of contemporary art in terms of a specific relationship to history, driven by a sense of present-day social and political urgencies.”<sup>197</sup> I suggest that not only this is true for the Van Abbe but also for the Stedelijk and Witte de With, which are doing a similar thing to different extents. This can be related to what Mick Wilson called the “discursive turn”, which took place both in curating and in art itself, referring to “the practice of talking together publicly” as a form of evoking critical reflections and shaping historical discourses.<sup>198</sup> It is through this stimuli that the museums seem to be developing exhibitions in a way for them to become sights for ‘agonistic intervention’, as defined by Chantal Mouffe. The overlapping of different points of view can destabilize one’s beliefs and even evoke a feeling of dissociation, which is, nevertheless, part of society and people’s identities, as Gaitán argues by saying that “perhaps contemporary art is the space where fractures of the public are made most visible.”<sup>199</sup> At the same time, these museums seem to be aiming to use art and the

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<sup>197</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 27.

<sup>198</sup> O’Neill and Wilson. *Curating and the Educational Turn*, 33.

<sup>199</sup> Juan A. Gaitán, “What is the public?,” in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (Mousse Magazine & Pub, 2013), n.p.

dialogues that originate from it to generate a sense of unity, or multiple unities, as they open their doors to a pluralism of perspectives which on the one hand seems to produce knowledge and, on the other, to generate new meanings in collaboration with its publics. These views seem to be incorporated in the discussed strategies and they also strengthen Borja-Villel's argument that museums can become 'archives of the commons', in the sense that they can bring together multiple narratives and stories of belonging, opening up a wide range of possibilities through which people can relate to the artworks.<sup>200</sup> In the same way, Bishop argues that this dialectical approach to art drives culture to become "a primary means for visualizing alternatives; rather than thinking of the museum collection as a storehouse of treasures, it can be reimagined as an archive of the commons."<sup>201</sup>

Such a trend can be traced back to the historical evolution of institutions and curatorial practices, whose recent past exerts nowadays a strong influence on the identity of the three subjects of the study, as they all appear to be defying the traditional conception of the museum as a neutral place and exhibitions as objective presentations of absolute truths. The ideals of the institutional critique and New Institutionalism seem to still be very present within this logic. However, institutional critique did associate freedom, creativity, and talent with the individual rather than with the collective and that seems to be an aspect which has definitely not been incorporated in today's practices. Throughout the different conversations, it was possible to observe how working and thinking collectively rather than individually seems to be a current trend, whether regarding the different jobs in the museum, or, for instance, mediation practices.

It can also be argued that, in consonance with what Smith states, "curators have recognized that building local infrastructure is a necessary condition for encouraging and enabling artists and audiences to think away from the vertical structures of local and international art worlds"<sup>202</sup>, and therefore it is striking that many of the chosen tactics are aimed at generating a greater involvement from the local community. This leads to the museum becoming increasingly more similar to a

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<sup>200</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 77.

<sup>201</sup> Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 56.

<sup>202</sup> Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 233.

community center, or, as defined by Renée Kistemaker, a dynamic workplace where relating memories and working together on the history, background and identity can “have a healing effect and contribute to recording parts of history that have been suppressed”, or realities that are usually left at the margins of society.<sup>203</sup> At last, another major trait which transverses all the case studies is their intent to create several layers to the museum experience, by making it accessible to different audiences in different ways. It is clear that Witte de With, Stedelijk and Van Abbemuseum are not trying to follow a model but instead attempting to listen to the needs of their specific publics and develop strategies according to them, opening their doors to a co-creation of knowledge rather than claiming a strictly authoritative voice as an institution, as problematized by Sitzia.<sup>204</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that the fact that this study was based on semi-structured interviews may have resulted in an uneven amount of information about each institution and in limitations regarding a deeper exploration of certain topics which the interviewee did not choose to focus so much on. Some of the strategies or issues that may also be part of these institutions’ agendas may not have come up in this research, as the goal was to focus almost exclusively in what was mentioned in the interviews as a way to understand the topics that come up to the interviewee’s minds when asked certain questions. Furthermore, the prominence of certain issues that were not considered at first only became clearer as the interviews progressed. However, this method also allowed for a more organic analysis of the institutions, as the interviewee’s were given the necessary space to focus on the matters of stronger importance to them and their institution.

As stated by Steeds, O’Neill and Wilson,<sup>205</sup> it is important to map the possibilities that present themselves in our current world within the sphere of art institutions. Only by doing so can we learn from specific places and practices which can fruitfully inform other projects. For that reason, I would suggest that examining other case studies might prove useful to the finding of more and even improved

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<sup>203</sup> Renée E. Kistemaker and Amsterdams H. Museum, *City Museums as Centres of Civic Dialogue?: Proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the International Association of City Museums, Amsterdam, 3-5 November 2005* (2006), 200.

<sup>204</sup> Sitzia, “The ignorant art museum: beyond meaning-making”, 81.

<sup>205</sup> Lucy Steeds, Paul O’Neill, and Mick Wilson, eds., *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse* (Cambridge: Mit Press, 2017), 21.

strategies through which museums and art centers can better achieve their objectives. Furthermore, a similar analysis to art institutions from other countries would definitely contribute to a broader comprehension of the relationship between arts and society. In what concerns these museums in particular, it would be interesting to talk to other members of the staff in order to gather more perspectives or with the same people a few years from now, in order to analyze future changes and evolutions that may take place. Finally, further research is required in order to provide an understanding of how the strategies and the logics of these art institutions are affecting the behavior and the experience of the audience. Although it was out of the scope of this research, that knowledge is crucial if one aims to understand whether the reasoning behind the designed strategies is achieving the desired results.

As an ending note, I wish to clarify that the title of this dissertation draws from an expression utilized by Charles Esche during the interview: “imagining the world otherwise.”<sup>206</sup> By choosing it, I intend to suggest that these three institutions, each with its own practices and specific ways of connecting to its public, are all attempting to re-imagine the art institution as a more inclusive, representative and challenging public space, a territory of “complexity and dissensus, a civic space wherein if we cannot agree, we must at the very least agree to disagree.”<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Charles Esche. Personal Interview. (Eindhoven. March 5, 2019)

<sup>207</sup> Joshua Decker, “Will There Still Be a Future When the Museum of the Future Arrives?”, 17.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

### **Topic 1. Societal issues**

Start off question: How do you see the role of the curator in relation to societal issues?

Other possible questions:

- What are some of the societal topics that this museum's curators are mostly concerned with and how does that concern manifest into practice?
- Should curation aim to contribute to the production of knowledge?
- Can curation stimulate models of participation and engagement that are lacking from our society?

### **Topic 2. The institution**

Start off question: What does it mean to address those concerns within an institution?

Other possible questions:

- What do you as a director and as a curator aim to achieve in this institution?
- What does it mean for you and for this institution to be experimental?
- Is there still anything like an institution of critique, and what does it mean in the present context?

### **Topic 3. The exhibitions**

Start off question: What are some of the strategies used here for the exhibitions and collection display and what is the logic behind it?

Other possible questions:

- How do you curate a permanent collection and how does that differ from temporary exhibitions?
- How do you see the role of the audience?

### **Topic 4. Mediation**

Start off question: How would you describe the position of your institution in relation to mediation practices?

Other possible questions:

- How much mediation should exist between the public and the art in what form(s)?

**Appendix B**  
**Transcription of a personal interview with Charles Esche**  
**Curator and director at the Van Abbemuseum**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> of March, 2019**  
**Eindhoven, The Netherlands**

**Clara Mendes:** So first can you just tell me about your background and give me a bit of context a from your professional journey?

**Charles Esche:** Okay. I mean I think I got into art because of politics largely. I think I was more interested in a kind of leftist politics in the nineteen eighties which when I grew up when I was a teenager and things like that. So a long time ago. And then in the 90s I became disillusioned with that kind of party political structure and things like that. And I thought that art was a maybe more interesting realm in which you could express certain alternatives. Yeah... What I what I often talk about: imagining the world otherwise. I sought that imagination in politics and I realized that it didn't and I thought that it maybe lay in art. And so that became the thing that I got interested in and I still remain interested in, although I have my doubts about it sometimes, but also when you get older your options get more limited in what you got let start a whole new strategy. But I still see that are some possibilities in it. So that's where I came from so it wasn't really from a sort of aesthetic experience or an idea that art was something that was pleasurable to the eye, I suppose. Which is I think how sometimes art is understood, as a sort of, as a visual pleasure if you like, but more that it was connected to social political, even economic developments in the world, and through art we can understand how the world works in a certain way or what different balances in the world represent, what different powers in the world represent. And that artists maybe are people that can make that visible, not only visually but also in all sorts of other ways, but make it tangible, make you feel what the power is, otherwise rather invisible. So that was my sort of, that's I suppose that's my take on art, and I'm interested in, I mean now obviously we've come a lot further and I've become more meticulous in what I feel is important but I think in the early days it was really this idea that art could allow us to understand, maybe get to grips with structures in society which we were not able really to grasp otherwise. That it could that could allow us to see the consequences of our actions as collective actions, that allows us to see where power was being misused. All those things that you would have wanted perhaps from the left politics, that left politics abandoned, after 1989 particularly after the end of communism and that I felt you know maybe art could provide.

**CM:** Well my program is called Arts and society so I very much relate to those views. And that's basically what also got me interested in this.

**CE:** Good!

**CM:** How did you end up here? Because you're from England, right?

**CE:** I was born in England, my parents a German, I lived in Scotland for a long time

so. So if I could be I'd be Scots but I can't be because we're not a country. You're lucky, Portugal is a separate from Spain. We didn't make it. But then I moved to Sweden and then I did some big projects in Turkey and also Korea, actually. And then now, 15 years ago, 2004, I got the job here, a long time ago. But then I've also done biennales like in São Paulo in 2014 or Jakarta in 2015, and sort of various exhibitions outside of here. So I feel I've still been connected with other contexts, not only with the Dutch.

**CM:** OK. Well and how do you see the role of the curator in relation to society? You've talked about how art relates to it, but how does a curator come in that equation?

**CE:** One thing that curators do is, they produce stories, if you like. They're sometimes called the canon, or canons, it's that sort of the basic idea of a sort of set of developments in art and how those developments have gone, curators are the ones that produce those things and they put the artists into the empty slots that they create, in a way. So they're telling stories like that, they also tell stories through individual exhibitions. So they're often the ones that make individual artworks and individual statements of artists. They give them some kind of intelligibility. So you know without cubism would we value Picasso? And without modernism would we value cubism? So these bigger stories are very...all the artists, the individual artists, even though they're said to be geniuses and things like that, and autonomous, and all these things which I think are very problematic, but actually they're very much dependent upon these bigger structures and curators also sit into a bigger structure, but they are producers of this canon, this story of what's important and what's not important in art. And so for me then the object of a curator in society would be to question the canon that exists and to see whether you can broaden it or change it, in the light of what feels relevant to society now. So for instance that would be away from, I mean classically, we've been doing it for 15 years, but we're still not there, a white male Western canon towards something that's much more diverse, because society is much more diverse and the world is much more diverse. It was very very diverse when they made the white Western canon. It wasn't that it wasn't diverse. It was just that only white male, largely heterosexuals, at that time were seen to be relevant to making a kind of a cultural canon.

**CM:** That's where the questioning comes in, I guess.

**CE:** And so and so that was ignored. So huge parts of human experience of the world in geography, in gender, in sexuality, but also just in terms of different types of human experience that we have, was ignored in order to create that modernist canon. And I think we're constantly struggling with how to how to make sense of something that is broader without it falling completely into chaos and just being all individuals or struggling to survive or whatever but still be able to tell stories about it and I think it's that balance that a curator has to do to try and provide a story for society in cultural terms which allows people to position themselves and allows them to feel maybe that they're sort of contributing to something bigger than just that just the individual life.

**CM:** And how does an institution like this museum address that balance? Is it possible to be experimental? What does that mean? Does the institution limit the freedom and

the possibility for the curator to find that balance that sometimes goes against establishment and things like that? How does it work within an institution?

**CE:** Yes I think that's a good (question). I mean institutions are the product of society in a way, they're sort of a product of a collective will. So there were there are lots of different people that have gone in to make the Van Abbemuseum which is a kind of singularity, the Van Abbemuseum, but it's the combination of a history which began in 1936 and has gone on since that time to be the kind of manifestation in a way, the materialization of all those desires of those people who worked here but also maybe of the city itself and the sort of aspiration of the city to be a bigger city or better city or a more humane city or whatever different aspirations that it might have had at different times, a more successful city economically, which is its main concern these days. So those elements I suppose go into an institution, and they are also, to the individual ego, they could be seeing as limitations as well. If you want to prize your ego above the collective, which I think we shouldn't do, but that's a political position, so you could say that they are limitations in the sense that all those desires, and all the knowledge that have been loaded into the into the institution are things that you have to deal with. I would say you have to respect to some degree or you have to struggle against but there are things that you can't ignore, so they're one form of limitation. There are also practical limitations like budgets and architecture and things like that which also mean that you can't realize everything that you want to do. And there are limitations in terms of the capacity of not only you but the people that you work with they knowledge is do they have. It would be hard for us suddenly to go off and say let's make an exhibition about I don't know, lunar technology or something, because we wouldn't have the knowledge and so we have certain things that we can do well and other things that we can do badly. So I think all those you can see has limitations but there are limitations that feel to be totally reasonable or natural to a situation. So you're you're a dependent upon that history, upon your colleagues and upon the wider context of how much money you can get from the various sources that we get money from and the architecture that you inherit. You know because this architecture, one building was built in 1936 the other one in 2003. So I had no role in shaping either of the architectures. And the 36 one is quite good and adaptable. The 2003 one is quite about building, actually. It's a building from the 80s that got realized in 2003 because of the process of raising the money. So yeah it's just that sort of not very good architecture. So those are all limitations, that are on you. And then the question is, I mean for me as a director but also as curator here is to what extent can you find a way of pushing against those limitations maybe be but doing something that you find useful that you find that contributes to a story that you want to have told in the world, that you want to exist in the world. So maybe that's you know breaking that Western canon how can we do that more or what would it be to queer the museum, which is something that we're interested in, and I think what's interesting there in the process of the 15 years that I've been here is that the field in a way has changed quite a lot for me, and there's lots of reasons for that, but I think when I first came here it was very much within the artfield, that I was thinking we wanted to push the boundaries, if you like. So the tradition of art, particularly modern art and the contemporary sort of marketization of art through the commercial field through the art fairs and things like that, to challenge that, but also to get acknowledgement and credibility from peers within the art system. So you know other museum directors or



critics who write for Frieze or Art Forum or whatever. I think that was our sort of number one audience, in a way. And then if they approved, then it was okay to try and sell it to the local population, so, because if they approve then we knew we were on the right way and then our efforts were to basically tell the local people 'this is good for you'. We thought it was good, and our peers think it's good, so therefore it must be good. So therefore if you don't think it's good is your problem and we have to bring it to you. So I think that's largely been the model and that's a kind of avant-gardist model. So that's the old modernist model, where an avant-garde is ahead of society and it knows which direction society is moving, so it knows it's kind of moving towards it because it's an avant-garde of a you know, you could only be an avant-garde if you know which way the main body of the army is moving, because you're in front of the army. But if the army is moving the other way, you're not an avant-garde at all, you're just a minority, standing there.

**CM:** Yeah, just isolated.

**CE:** Exactly. And they're not going to come and rescue you. You're just going to get killed. (laughs) So that metaphor only works if there's this connection between the two bits. So in many senses I think that that's happened and that there's been through this idea that the avant-garde also, in a way, is traditionally a kind of self self justified. And so within the avant-garde there would be discussions, of course, but there'd be a kind of recognition that we're all basically on the same side. I remember somebody, once an artist saying when we argue about politics, said: "yes but we all love art, don't we?" and I just thought: "I'm not sure I do love art. If the art that you're talking about is the art I have to love. I'm not sure I do. I don't think I want to be in this community anymore because I'm not sure that I like it very much because it seems to be being taken over by money, investment, other terms." And so I think that then this sort of realization that maybe that wasn't the place that we needed to get our validation from. And then of course you turn in a way naturally to this this big amorphous glob, which is not the avant-garde, which is society as a whole. And then you think, "well let's try and get it from the local situation. Let's try and get it from Eindhoven" and kind of with a sort of attitude, if you can't do it here, locally, then you're not really doing anything at all. If you want to change the world, if you like, but if you want to change people's imagination if you want or to imagine something otherwise, than what exists, the status quo, then you have to do it at the local level, otherwise it's not...it's a bit meaningless. And then you're just asking people to imagine otherwise, but you've already done it, and you're just getting confirmation from them. You want to create real change you have to change minds and the easiest minds to change are the ones that are very very close to you. So at a certain point, it was around I would say, it was around 2011 and it was partly to do with the financial crisis I think and a sort of awareness that the politicians gave us that we could no longer rely on this argument of being validated by the avant-garde and therefore being able to basically do what we want as long as we have that support. So that would manifest itself in somebody complaining and you say "yes but we've got a great review in Art Forum" or whatever, so therefore it's all right.

**CM:** Yeah.

**CE:** So that methodology no longer became valid for the politicians as well. But I think also for me personally it became also something which I understood in a different way. So I previously thought. "we're basically part of a single progressive art community, even though we have our differences..." But I saw that art community really not being progressive at all, being super conservative and actually wanting to keep its power structures in place and it's serving what we call the idle rich. I mean these people that are in the 1 percent or whatever and basically that most things that [00:16:17] we got on in the art world [0.9] work were centered around, you know, maybe 500 collectors in the world who were really the validation system within an that, and Art Forum and Freeze were irrelevant if the 500 collectors didn't approve. So that was the validation system and is that really a validation system you want to be attached to? So then we just turned around and what we're doing now, we've been doing since around 2011 is thinking about strategies for how we can in a way build a relevance for the program from particular relationships with local communities and what that's been very much about is thinking about different communities within our society and seeing what we need to do in order to make sense for them to come to the museum. So one of the first steps was to look at the question of inclusion in terms of people who had physical disability, mental disabilities, had Alzheimer's, had aphasia, short or hard of hearing or partially sighted so all these groups of people who traditionally were not really welcome at the museum, which was always a sort of space largely for white European, fully able bodied people. And so saying well, you know, if we want to reach more people we don't need to reach more people of the same kind. We don't want need to reach the bourgeois 30 percent of society, because 70 percent of society never come to museums. So rather than trying to get these 30 percent to come more often, which is in a way the avant-garde strategy, it's like, you're validated by the avant-garde, those 30 percent of people that maybe think that's slightly interesting. So we just need to try and get them to be more interested in us, and the 70 percent can go, and it's irrelevant. And with those 30 percent of people we're doing really good, that's sort of the attitude, because we're very elitist. And then how could we reach this other group of people that maybe had very different ideas, were very very differently educated and things like that. And, so initially we worked with the question of different abilities of people, in terms of physical ability or mental ability, and then increasingly we started working with what we call constituencies, which are small communities, like the queer community or the migrant community, asylum seeking community, or the people that are activists within the ecological movement, within the Green Movement or the well they called themselves the international locals which are a group of mostly women because of the gender breakdown in the technology industry, because Eindhoven is a very technological city, so they come with their husbands mostly, and they don't have anything to do, but they're kind of a community of like international people, that are sort of looking to have some function in a way in this in this society. So those kind of groups and we're working now with a few others, like a black feminist group that's here, different groups, we give them a space in the museum, the Werk Saloon, which is upstairs, you should have a look around, if you haven't.

**CM:** Oh yeah, I already did, but didn't have time to see the entire thing but I'll go again afterwards and yes I passed by the Werk Saloon and was very intrigued, yeah.

**CE:** Yeah, there's a map on the wall at the end so you can see the various groups that we've been working with and things like that. That will give you a sort of an idea of what the structure is and then there are some sort of play, some wooden structures and each one represents one of the groups. So those people are part of our constituencies and they make the banners which then hang out further upstairs. If you go to the next floor you'll see some of the banners which are they're sort of statements about it. And they also then do everything from performances, to have meetings about their subjects, not necessarily anything to do with the museum. But gradually they sort of become, I suppose, we hope, take a kind of ownership of the museum. And and from them then I think we learn more what we should be doing, what would be the interesting things to do. So you know, we built together with Jonas Staal who's an artist from Rotterdam, we built the Parliament all the way downstairs, which is a copy of a parliament or sort of copy of a parliament that's in north Syria. And then we got in touch with the Kurdish community who would never ever come, they've told us "we'd never come to this. This is not our place", you know. And now and now they begin to feel a kind of ownership of it. And I think that's influencing that our programming at other levels. So what would it mean to have signs in Kurdish? What would it mean to think about the Kurdish art scene and how could we represent that? All those questions sort of come up for us, so that people can feel to some extent represented in the building. And so this diversity of Eindhoven, which is quite a diverse city actually, is something that's reflected in the in the collection and in the museum, it's interesting because when I first came here it was always said that The Van Abbemuseum was international and Eindhoven was local. But there are two maps on the wall as you go in, and you see that the diversity of the population in Eindhoven is much greater than the diversity of the collection. So actually, Eindhoven is international and the museum is local, local Western, yeah? So you know, we have to sort of turn around some of our expectations and I think that this move then from this sort of avant-garde strategy of getting validated by the avant-garde and then telling people this is good for you, to thinking about how we can have a dialogue with the people who are local. It has been a sort of profound shift in what we do.

**CM:** Yeah and it happened throughout the period that you've been here, which is quite interesting. And how does this... You've already mentioned that through all those work groups and they also contribute the museum. But in a general way how do these concerns get reflected in exhibitions that in your collection, and temporary exhibitions, how do you apply these concerns into practice? Even your way of displaying everything is very different from lots of museums that I've been to.

**CE:** Yeah yeah yeah yeah I think I mean I think there are two things that are at stake I think. I think one thing is that when you leave this story of the avant-garde then you also leave this modern story behind, in a way, because the avant-garde is the story of modernism, in a way. And Like Picasso, was a crazy painter and the Nazis or the Soviets thought he was crazy, but we liked him, and we were proved right because now he's one of the most famous painters or whatever. That's the kind of narrative, Yeah that's a modernist narrative. And I think that's the narrative that maybe we should no longer hang on to. In a certain sense it's also just the movement of time because we're no longer in that modern time, we left modernity in a way, and suddenly modernism behind, so these objects become much more cultural historical

than they are like imminent representations of the current world. So Picasso is an old artist in that sense, he's like Rembrandt, he needs context and explanation. And putting Rembrandt in a completely white cube, would kind of also feel a bit strange. It would feel like you were taking it out and putting it into a context of it that it didn't belong to. And then is it a sort of alien in that context or is the context alien to it? Yeah that would be a modernist frame. And then you would have this object from the non-modern times, so maybe white cubes are actually there for historical work because that's their context but not for contemporary work. And if you want to look at this work in a more...Less In a wave of a sort of pattern, I suppose, of how Modernism is a grand narrative that proves Western superiority, in the way it does. The sort of modern day story of art, you know, developing from Van Gogh, if you like, from Courbet through up until as supposed to 1960s or so, then it starts to break down a bit, but that story of more or less 100 years or so. That story is really about a sort of Western hegemony and the West universalizing itself, so the West discovers everything and nobody else has the capacity to discover anything. And even when the West is informed or influenced by your African sculpture or by Japanese prints or something like that, it's only a sort of inert material that just inspires the West to create. So it's not that the West is derivative. So the West, you know Picasso is not copying African sculpture. He's being inspired by it in order to create something totally new...

**CM:** And much better.

**CE:** And much better. And Much more valued and everything. So that process is going on. Or Van Gogh is not copying Japanese prints. He's being inspired by that in order to produce something much better. So it's always the West the one that invents things and that's the story that we told ourselves and that's in a way embedded in modernism. So what happens then if you're now a Kurdish artist or a Lebanese artist and you live in the Netherlands. How do you relate to that? And if you're a Kurdish person or a Lebanese person who's not an artist how on earth do you relate to that, because you haven't even got the art connection. You've got a story about white guys and a story about art and you're a non-artist, you know, brown person. There's no there's no link there. But the non-artist brown person is actually a person we need to talk to, I would say, because they don't sit in that 30 percent, they sit in the 70 percent, and they're the ones we need is to talk to. So we have to change our story. And so what we've done with the exhibition and that's very much from sort of our concerns is to try and take a distance from the modern story and try and almost as an outsider, as an anthropologist, almost look at modern art. So that first, that ground floor, is really that idea. It's like an outsider. In the end it's a utopian and you have the last room is a utopian room, that uses the language of Thomas Moore's Utopia. To in a way look back at this phenomenon called Modern Art. This strange thing and try to figure out what what it was about. And probably get it wrong or probably tell half the story. That's not the point but not treat it as something which is somehow a story that's inside our body because if it's inside my body or maybe inside your body is not inside the body of a majority of people in the world. Yeah and even my body and your body would kind of reject it now, to some extent.

**CM:** Yeah. Do you think more museums are adopting that kind of strategy?

**CE:** I think so yeah, I think I think you see you see around the world, I mean less so in the Netherlands I suppose but I think even if you go to Stedelijk contemporary presentation downstairs, the presentation of the collection where they mix design and art. I think there are attempts.

**CM:** Yours is very clear. Even in the writings near the art works, you deconstruct it in a very honest way.

**CE:** It would be interesting if you do Centraal Museum, I mean it'll be interesting to look at what they how they deal with that collection because they've got a very different collection, so they've got like old works and they've got some clothes and things like that.

**CM:** And They mix it up.

**CE:** Yeah. But they also try to tell a story I think but a different one from us so I feel that even in small ways in the Netherlands, but less so in the Netherlands but then outside the Netherlands I think you see these kinds of stories coming back more and more I think. I mean maybe we're one of the early ones to go so far which we're not unhappy with. But I think I think that everybody's asking these questions now you know to some extent I think it would be hard not to. You'd have to be really... The interesting thing is you have to be a sort of overt white supremacist these days to actually defend it before you just said "Oh yeah. I'm a liberal but I just think Picasso's great. I mean the fact that he's a white man has nothing to do with it. Look at his paintings they're amazing." Now I think you have to be much more overtly saying "no I want white men to be in charge." You know that's where we get Trump from and that's where we get all the right-wing people from in a way that the previous generation they weren't particularly exceptional. They didn't feel they had to voice that because it was just a given that white men would be in charge. And now it's a question. And so I think it's hard for museums not to adapt to that, and not to ask the question, because the question is everywhere. Which is which is great which is you know I think in all the darkness around I think that's very positive that that's happening but it's obviously happening with a lot resistance from those very people and it's very white men who don't want to give up that power. So they are fighting back in many ways.

**CM:** Do you feel resistance also from society in a way that is you know this may be more representative but other people it might be a bit strange because it's so different from what they've known as a museum.

**CE:** So where you get resistance from is the art lovers, is the people that liked the art in the past, because they were used to that confirmation and also used the kind of self-satisfaction of feeling that they were in front. They were part of the avant-garde, meant that all the rest the people get there eventually. So their taste would be validated, or their choices will be validated at some point, they would come to be recognized as being the heroic people that they feel they are. And this is sort of the classic Bourgeoisie position in a way, with modernity sort of ahead of the game. And

that's also what the economy tells us, when you think about investment, in shares or something. All that you need to do is have that information just a bit earlier and then you can make money. So that avant-garde is also like an avant-garde in the shares, it's the ones that know that company is gonna go bankrupt, so you sell those shares before everybody else does. This sort of avant-garde in knowledge, so that sort of model of the economy is also a model of the avant-garde in the art world. In a way, you could say, and people have written about this, that the model of the art world became the model for neo liberalism in a certain sense because the artist is a figure was this sort of creative individual who relied entirely on themselves and their own creativity and they became the kind of precariat. Artists were the first precarious workers and they were dependent on patronage, and they were totally committed, they would work 24 hours a day, they would never sleep. And that's the perfect model for working in the contemporary economy. Where you do everything, you do five times more than you're expected and then your boss could maybe be happy or whatever. So and also in a way this idea of the avant-garde is also sort of making this investment communities and things like that where you are sort of ahead of the game. That's where that's where the best investments lie. That's where you can make money, because people don't make money making things anymore, they make money investing in making money things. That's where the majority of wealth is produced and so this knowledge and this being so sensitive to what's going on, you could be sensitive to what's going on in art and picking the latest trend or can be picking the latest trend in some other aspect which can also make you money because you invest in it, so you know, you're the first one to say "Apple it's gonna be a really successful company" and then you invest in it. If you're the first one then you make lots of money. So that's the model. So Apple is the avant-garde in a way, in the same way that, you know, young artists would be, that Ed Atkins would be, he's kind of the Apple of the art world, and if you invested in him then, now you'd be making a lot of money. So I think in a lot of ways the art world became that and that's why, you know, if you're interested in that kind of counter narrative and you're interested in in a way in always turning away from what seems to be the most likely to succeed in itself...You start opening up certain trajectories I suppose that are closed off. So, you know, I think I mean I think there are some fundamental things like social justice or emancipation or equality, and things like that, that I would fight for. But how you do that, it changes all the time. But I think those are some of the things that you would, you would fight for. I mean you don't really find that anymore in modernity. It did have something to do with modernity once, but it also I think had a lots to do with lots of other societies. So, emancipation was there in ancient Greece, emancipation was there in Abbasid, Iraq, in the 8th century. Democracy was an idea that has nothing to do with modernity, ideas of equality were around at the time of Buddha. So all these ideas were there in very different cultures. They don't belong to modernity at all. Modernity has really abandoned them almost entirely. And so, you know, you can't find them there anymore. We have to look elsewhere. And so this taking a distance from modernity is also in that sense kind of political. I suppose, to go back to your question, we've made those decisions that we want to take away, if we were entirely led by, well let's say by constituencies because they're particular people that we've talked to, but by this sort of bourgeois 30 percent then of course what we would do is a completely other kind of exhibition.

**CM:** And how do you see the question of how much mediation should exist between the work of art and the publics and what kind of mediation should that be?

**CE:** I think we're really struggling with that, still. I don't think we've got it right at all. I mean I think we try to mediate it through the experience of the exhibition. So if you go back also and have a look around you see that it does and it's hopefully quite a bodily experience so you have to actually walk through things and sit down or have to come to spaces where you're where you're asked for your bodies behave slightly differently, in certain ways, or to break the normal trajectories of things and I think we need to do that more and more. But my sense is that we still haven't got the mediation right between the sort of didacticism, telling people what to do.

**CM:** Yeah, it's a blurred line.

**CE:** Yeah, it's very blurred and it's and in a way you almost need individually tailored mediation because each person needs something different, so somebody might need really a long story and other people can just get it. And there are many many steps in-between. And so we use this sort of "one size fits all" mediation which I'm not sure it's so accurate. But the thing that I believe in most is having conversations with people in the museum, people with the red shirts or whatever and I think through that you get a much better experience, I think that for us it's really important, that people talk. Obviously not everybody wants to come to a museum and talk to people. I don't do it very much, so I can't ask other people to do it. So I think you need to try and find methods of mediation which are attractive and maybe technology, maybe some aspects of technology need to be more developed which we haven't done and maybe our language needs to be adjusted. There's so many different things I think that sort of through that process. We didn't have time or other have resources or things like that to develop but I think mediation is important. I mean, we're telling a story, you know, and if you don't have mediation then people bring their own mediation. And their own mediation is this modern story. There is that Alfred Barr on cubism and abstract art where he goes through everything and that's the story that most modern art museums told. And I think for me also increasingly I'm sort of aware that modern art museums themselves don't make much sense. I mean, why are they not art museums which tell a much longer story? In which this story of modernity and modernism, which are two different things, but both of them could be included in that. So you know, the story of the colonial history of Western Europe particularly but also Eastern Europe, the story of modernism that we know from the mid 19th century and the stories of, you know, older cultures and older artistic activities in Europe. Why can't they be combined? So that we can put, I don't know, a Syrian...I mean, you know, you have a Rijksmuseum, you have...In The Netherlands you have a museum for old things like antiquities and then you have a museum for the colonial history and colonial pasts. So you have all these things separated and then you have a modern art museum which is even more sort of marginal in a way because it's only focusing on the last 100 or so years, doesn't often go back into the 19th century even, our collection starts more or less with Picasso in 1909. So why is that? Why is that interesting to have this sort of isolated focus on this particular...? One, art is a particular kind of production and two, the modern. It's like, the Modern art museum.

I'm okay with museum, but modern art, I'm not sure that they're necessary now.

**CM:** So I'm curious, what would your ideal museum look like?

**CE:** Maybe have access to combine different collections in order to tell stories that have a longer trajectory than just the modern. So it could...in a way I wouldn't want to have like, you know, huge building as a museum that would encompass everything, but what it would like is this sort of idea that a museum is something you can walk into and you could see different kinds of things, and not only art. And also you could see different time periods because I think that maybe is more more appropriate to our current condition. Because we've become so culturally broad that there are different religions, different traditions, different ideas, that exist in society. And those ideas often live in their own bubble. And we're a public institution, a museum is a public institution. So shouldn't that be a place where these bubbles come together and they have sort of the problematics rubbing up against each other, meeting each other? The violence that can produce, or that anger, or the other dispute, or the arguments... But really that should happen in public, and it should happen here and the modern art museum is really telling one story for one group of people. And saying this is the story. I mean, that's even worse. It says, not only this is our one story, we're telling it, which would be something, but it's more "this is the story" and all the other stuff that's just rubbish.

**CM:** Okay, one last question, this one is more specific. I was hearing you talking about the individual mediation and it reminded me of a project you had a few years ago, called the Play Vanabbe. Can you tell me if you're planning on doing something like that again or if you're just incorporating that in your practices?

**CE:** Yeah yeah. It's interesting you bring it up, because I think often we find innovations and then we don't pursue them because we're busy with the next innovation. So I think I want to, for the next presentation of the collection, I want to stop that, and go back to maybe being more...maybe Using some of the old strategies that we did. So Play Vanabbe... I really liked it as a project, so the idea was playing Vanabbe, in the sense of like a record or something. But it would be that you would, you would take the collection as a basis for a series of four iterations in a way, where we would play out what the what the collection could tell us in different ways about itself. So play one, I won't go through all of them, but play one was was one I liked because it was the first time we reconstructed an exhibition from the 1980s, one to one, in the same rooms. It was a collection exhibition that one of the directors and done and what I found quite interesting was that it was probably the first time that there was a reconstructed exhibition. Now it's more common to do it. That was the first time. Because we still had all the works. So it was kind of not so difficult to reconstruct it. And then we did that put alongside it an exhibition of the works that we bought in the last four years or so, or three years, in 2007, to sort of say how times have changed. So you walked into the museum as though it was a sort of 1980s theatre in a way, theatrical presentation of the 1980s. So even with the labels being the same and everything, the mediation being the same as it was in the 1980s, so you kind of experience this historical moment in a certain way and see what it and see what it was like and then at the same time we made a contemporary version, to see



what the differences were, and how you would talk about it in different ways and things like that and then play four, where I was very happy with it, because there we made four roles, which were the flâneur, the tourist, the Pilgrim and the worker. And then when you came in you got one of the three roles as a sticker which you could choose so you could be a pilgrim and then you got certain mediation which was like a book that was almost like a religious book that you go through and had lots of information about the artworks, and we made a presentation of the collection which was quite nice but was sort of a presentation of the collection that you could imagine in a certain way, you know, some of the highlights, and then you were a Flaneur, you got a soundtrack so you could just basically wander around listening to music and just see what happens and things like that. The Pilgrim, the tourist, and the worker...and the tourist you got a map, and then you could sort of navigate the museum and you got little information but often little stories about the works, not really the sort of core art historical information but more like anecdotes or things like that on the map. So you had these sort of three tools that you could use to navigate the museum and then at the end you would come back and you could trace your journey on the screen and you get a printout of where you'd been so kind of like a memory of it and then you did everything and you took part in the whole project and things that you could get an extra sticker which was a work sticker, because then you became a worker.

**CM:** Like a professional.

**CE:** Yeah, exactly.

**CM:** That's pretty close to what you were saying about individual mediation, no? Wouldn't you think of keeping that up?

**CE:** Exactly. I think we'd like to bring it back! And I think it was one of the things that we did, and really liked but then I suppose I felt a bit embarrassed about keeping it going, I thought "oh we need to move on, we need to get something else done."

**CM:** As a visitor I would love to have that experience.

**CE:** I think we should bring it back, I think you're right. So that was definitely... So a lot of that was sort of playing with ideas of mediation, I suppose, in sort of consistent ways in this sense. And then we did other things with play, we looked at the provenance of the works and whether they come from Jewish heritage. There's quite a lot of the works that came after second world war and various other things that we looked at. In terms of the politics of collecting, in a way, how that relates to objects that we had.

**CM:** I think it seems very interesting, it seems like it was very transparent.

**CE:** Yeah, I think so, and we sort of brought some things back. In the Play we did this museum index which is this idea of the different statistics I suppose, that you can find. So now we've brought that back, about six months ago. So that's where those two maps come from. And also, right at the end of that corridor you'll see the man,

women, groups in the collection. You'll see three lines, one of which is hugely long, which is the men, one which is quite small, which is the women, and one which is a bit smaller, which are the groups. But yeah, it's terrifying. And also in my time we haven't been very good, I mean we have been a bit better but we haven't done 50/50, really, which is very embarrassing. But I mean that's true. We're working on it. We now have a condition, actually, in the collection where we have to spend 60 percent of the budget on women. So we are concerned with 50/50 in terms of the balance, but actually we realised that even when we were doing 50/50, the money was 70% for men and 30% to women because the prices are so much more expensive. So then we said okay we need to look at the actual money and we need to spend 60% of our budget on women.

**CM:** Ah okay.

**CE:** And that should result in having at least the same number of women as men but it's a it's a different sort of discipline.

**CM:** Alright, yeah, I think that's.

**CE:** Yeah? Good. I hope it was useful!

**Appendix C:**  
**Personal interview with Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy**  
**Curator and director at Witte de With**  
**7<sup>th</sup> of March, 2019**  
**Rotterdam, The Netherlands**

**Clara Mendes:** So, as I said, most questions are really broad because I want to get a good sense of your perspective. Feel free to share your own experience but also particularly your experience here in Witte de With.

**Sofia Hernández Chong Cuy:** Hm hm.

**CM:** So I was wondering: how do you see the role of curation in society and societal issues.

**SHCC:** That's an interesting question because generally...it's a question of the role within institutions and not within society which is such an expanded field.

**CM:** The institution was the next question. (laughs).

**SHCC:** (laughs) Ah, okay. The society... I would say... From my position itself right now or the other questions that I've had that have generally been at least for the past a decade and a half primarily sited at institutions... Is quite particular in the sense that they are not necessarily looking for example at public space but instead working at and within spaces, exhibition spaces and I think that there is a difference between those that will respond to you that work in public space and public art from those at work with exhibition spaces that have galleries and that a there's a destination to go and to attend, of course I've done and commissioned many projects in the public space but I think that the expanded role in society is responded differently when it pertains to public art versus exhibition displays, no? Now going to the question, I think that it depends on the second thing which is the type of institution that one is in. This an institution that has been receiving public subsidy, for example, since its foundation in 1990 and it receives other forms of funding as well but the majority of the funds come from there. So I think that there's a very strong responsibility to the public, not only to local constituencies, but also to a question around citizenship that pertains beyond those taxpayers, for example, or questions around nationality, and civic responsibility. And so as it pertains to Civic Responsibility, curators are at best those that are aware of a public responsibility, civic responsibility and that are interested in questioning value systems and also in producing not only knowledge but more specifically a resignification of meaning. So I think that that's the primary role, you know, the ones of the questions of larger value systems and the ones of being producers of questions regarding knowledge that should be spacialized and shared publicly but also the production of meaning.

**CM:** And how does this institutional setting influence that ability to produce knowledge and meaning?

**SHCC:** In many ways. The institutional setting has, it first of all, in the case of Witte

de With, the institutional setting it has numerous galleries. That's one of the things, in which it presents investigation and it presents artistic investigation, so it makes it public and it presents curatorial research that has already underlying threads and thesis, hypothesis, questions that it also presents publicly through staging of ideas, whereas that could be artworks, lectures, debates and so on. And its responsibility, as it relates to that, is to communicate them and to garner an audience and to generate meaning from the discussion that emerges there.

**CM:** How do you see the the relationship between Witte de With and the city of Rotterdam?

**SHCC:** There is a relationship that has existed for a long time since its foundation in 1990 and I would say that across the years it's changed. And it's changed where the... How can I explain this? This institution, unlike many institutions in the Netherlands, has a policy within that there's a director that changes and that brings their own vision every three to six years. And so each one that has led the institution has related to the city differently. So, my previous colleague, Defne Ayas for example, I think that one of the ways in which she related to the city quite strongly was by commissioning a series of projects that were long term and that involve artists locally. Before her, there was Nicolaus Schafhausen and he did a number of projects, one that took place within the city but another that invited artists specifically photographers from Rotterdam to do artist books about Rotterdam and the first director, I would say, is the one that to me is most exciting in terms of models of engaging with the city and its communities, its diverse communities. He commissioned, that also has to do with a kind of art that it was being produced at that time, which is in the start of the 90s and there were series of commissions that he conducted in the city inviting artists to engage with the community centers or homeless shelters or, you know, different organizations that had its own group of people and that were not necessarily audiences that would be audiences of the institution that was emerging. So I think that to me those are the most inspiring. How do you collaborate with an existing institution or community group that has already a cause and interests that are being developed through different ways. And how can you partner with them to engage them also with your own causes and research but to welcome them more significantly into your own program at the institution that you're running and the ways that you can grow together so that it's hopefully a participation that generates repeated visits. And as it pertains to that here, the previous director also brought in a an education team that still stands today and that has during my one year here grown, exponentially I would say. And it's a team that is devoted to engaging schools in Rotterdam and the greater area. And that means that if you begin working with secondary students and they have inspiring experiences here. The likelihood of them returning to Witte de With and feeling that this institution that is also theirs is higher. So that's in terms of structure. In terms of content, I think that one of the...How Do you engage with the city in terms of content? Many curators think about these issues thematically so that for example hip hop is important, which is true of Rotterdam or that spoken word is one of the artistic genres that is more experienced by younger people and that connects to different generations through, you know, oral history for example is through protest. In my curatorial thinking, I find that I'm more interested in creating the strategies so that it's structures that I have an

impact on. So for example questions around diversity and inclusivity are not just based on the content that you present in the galleries but on how the questions around that and the emergency or the urgency of having a inclusivity, being much more diverse in one's thinking, actually happens from within the institution in early stages of a process. And so for me it's important to consider that within the staff, and within our methodologies and the tools that we use to develop projects, those are already that idea of inclusivity and diversity, is already present.

**CM:** Comes from the structure.

**SHCC:** Yes. And not only the contents. So for me what's most important is not going and picking up a theme at the moment in my first year here what I've been trying to do is bringing people here that can form part of the team or of the decision process that come from a background that is representative of Rotterdam, in this case of an immigrant background. And so for me that's been one of the priorities at this institution, but the questions are actually brought in and developed here as well in the participatory process where voices that hadn't been heard here or voices that hadn't been having a platform to speak now have it.

**CM:** Yeah. That's very interesting and that's important.

**SHCC:** And that's been one of a of the strengths, I would say, of the team here that it seems that it's not only that I come with that interest I think that that's an interest that you have to have, or you have to have, meaning there's no possible change if you don't address that immediate local reality but also the programs are very serious in its philosophical visions but also very enjoyable in their day to day experience. And the program that we've been developing or the staff position to begin that we've been developing, is called collective learning, the space that we have been testing this first year as a kind of pilot has been downstairs, the space that we called Untitled. That's very ambiguous, that uses a gallery to become an exhibition space, a display room of archives, a classroom, a bookshop, a gathering site. It's a multipurpose space, so leaving away the context of the white cube to becoming much more of a community center of sorts.

**CM:** And would you say that within all of this process does the curatorial act become more collective rather than individual?

**SHCC:** Yeah it is totally. So it's led, it's directed, by, a you know by me, in the sense that I bring a kind of vision but that vision can only be implemented by a group of people. Right? And that vision is shaped by a global experience but also local interest and the people that directly get involved in shaping that are here. All right. So I think that that's the key.

**CM:** And besides just local connection and the focus on diversity, are there other topics that you as a curator and as a director intend to research more or is there any predominant urgent issues that you'd consider that curation has to engage with?

**SHCC:** For me, the programs here other than addressing the local and immediate

reality, that it pertains to how do you make the citizens of Rotterdam realize that this is one more institution that they have and can use, one of the main concerns that has been long standing curatorial has been, very much the fact of, I would even say defending, not defending advocating, which is very different. So it's not a defensive position but it's a proactive position. So I in my program, or through the program I want to advocate that there is a very important aspect of the visual arts, which is our specialty here, as a presentation institution and that is that it's a language of its own that has chosen to transform the world and re-signify it. And that it is different than speech. It's different than writing. And that difference is based on the fact that it can't just be spoken or read, that there is a question of encountering it and feeling it. So there is an element of sensuality or whatever that means in terms of the materials meaning of those materials can look cold or hot or they could look wobbly and soft or hard and, you know, delicate, it's just sensuality means how we encounter that very character of the work and how that adds to the meaning itself of the place and so that physicality, that physical encounter is one of the things that for me is very important to emphasize and much more at a moment in which the consumption of images through for example social media and advertising in general is so high. So what happens then when you think of visual arts? Okay, there's a presentation institution and there's an exhibition, the distinction that has to be made between that question around the consumption of images through social media or through the encounters of advertising is that here there are other elements to consider and those are threads in terms of a themes, umbrellas...Those Are a physical, perceptual, phenomenological experiences that happen actively within the space. There's a question of temporality in the sense that the thing is there and you're the one that moves rather than images move, as you stand still. And I think that those are things that are essential to feel, to be able to produce meaning. And that the public is here in a way to be able not to be taught, but to actually generate the meaning that we should learn also about. And so that is essential. For me, coming to the Netherlands and finding out that politically there's a debate around whether art is a hobby of the left, which is one of the... Have you heard this idea?

**CM:** I've been getting a sense of it but I haven't heard that verbalized.

**SHCC:** Ok. I'm quoting here. And to me, to say it like that, is a bit shocking, is to say that the work, particularly of the artist that I like to present and to follow is done after a very, very serious, very rigorous investigation and that investigation involves sometimes archives, sometimes bibliography, that investigation involves technical investigation, material investigation, site investigation. But the artists are serious workers and they have a chosen do have, in most cases, a precarious life to be able to be devoted to that artistic research. And so what we present here is a work that has been developed after much thought, after much investigation and after much transformation. So for me it's very important to emphasize that art, at least the one presented at Witte de With is an artistic investigation that is rigorous and that is here presented centrally. And I also position that as it pertains to conceptualism. So even if I'm coming from a school of conceptualism, From the south, The north, the east and the West, I do believe that at this time, one of the things that I want to put forward is to reconsider that the specialization of information that can occur in the galleries can be very didactic without having to be bookish. So I'm a little bit more critical of

exhibitions at the moment, of exhibitions that have tables and books. Because it's very clear that very few people actually sit down and see them within gallery spaces, you could create other kinds of spaces in which there is an engagement of those materials but within exhibition spaces I think that what we have as a challenge in cultural institutions is the whole mediatizations that occurs in other spaces of culture that include entertainment as well. So how do you create a sumptuous experience that is both essential and intellectual and certainly keeps the public engaged?

**CM:** Yeah.. How do you see the question of which and how much mediation should exist between the artwork and the public?

**SHCC:** I think it's related to that, I think that how you display is one. Meaning how you position artworks and how those artworks or that content, how you orchestrate the space or the ideas. Have you seen the exhibitions upstairs?

**CM:** Yes.

**SHCC:** So for example the exhibition in the third floor, of the phenomenon of dropping out, that's one example: so that's an exhibition that one could say is very didactic and at the same time one could say that's not an exhibition. Because where is the art? I mean...there's An artistic production everywhere. Mario García Torres is one of the most important visual artists today. Wendy Tronrud is an educator Sarah Demeuse is a writer and curator and having invited them to collaborate is a curatorial decision right? Creating a solar time, a color scheme within the gallery's is a curatorial decision, you know, all these things that involve orchestrating and staging the information so that you slow down and you think and that you feel alone, which is part of the emphasis of the exhibition, of withdrawal. All of those things are spatialized there. I'm less interested in just presenting something than putting it in relation and for me that's the first step in mediation, that the gallery space is used intelligently to know that ideas will be in relationship and that one idea can be constructed above another idea, and above another idea, to be able to make a cohesive experience and that experience can have disruptions and that experience can have spaces of boredom and engagement, but that it's rich in texture. So that's one, I'm very interested also in the uses of gallery didactics in the space. I think that that's the second aspect of mediation, is very important. So what kind of information do you collect when you're doing curatorial research and when you have conversations with artists, what kind of information as a curator allows us to better appreciate the work? And what kind of processes do we learn artists use and engage with to be able to develop the work. And again for us to value it more. And so, those gallery didactics for me are those spaces, not only declaring one's statement curatorial, but more so of sharing a knowledge that it has been accumulated and that allowed us to produce the value and the meaning when we encounter the work. And that helped us to identify those criteria for having it shown now. And so gallery didactics are a place for me to share that, for us as a team to share that type, accumulated knowledge and experiences, so that the public that's interested in engaging more with a work can read them in space and then reconsider the work again, ask themselves those questions that day that are posed to them. And so that's one more. And then of course events, public program, mediation tours...All that is organized in conjunction

to the exhibition, that we offer to the general public so that they can engage again closer with the work or if they feel that they didn't understand or don't get it. That's what people normally say or don't feel a comfortable or confident that their experience there alone is worthwhile visiting. Then we do a number of programs, weekly programs, that are offered to the general public and most of them free of cost, that allows you to engage with the material and more profoundly with the people that are producers, experts, and the artists, so there's a very very active a public program. And before we used to particularly focus on keynote lectures and speeches. And right now we have that but at the same time I'm like "No", we can do them ourselves as well, you know, it doesn't have to be just a couple of times a year with experts but instead be doing recurring programs, weekly programs, so that that community and that exchange is more easily... You Don't have to wait three months, but that if you say "okay what's happening this week?", that there's something there that you can engage with, so that mediation also has to do with it, it's not just a special activity, but something that you can access on a regular basis.

**CM:** I think one last question about what is the mark that you expect to leave in institution when you finish your four years?

**SHCC:** The mark... I don't have four years, I have less. The first a contract is first three years. So 18, 19, 20, are my first three years and there's a possibility to choose to stay for three more years. So a total of six, but anyhow, that's a technicality. What is the mark... My Hope is that the institution is an institution that, if didn't change its name, at least it changed the game. And by that I mean that it really... That it really keeps the quality of the exhibitions in terms of academic rigor. But it also becomes a space that welcomes other forms of knowledge that can only be brought in through the address of diversity and inclusivity, heads on. So my hope is that this becomes not just a presentation institution but also that it's considered directly a space of collective learning in every sense. So I think that those are things that are already underway through that amount of recurring programming and is to the very welcoming of change and in structure and hopefully there will be more of that in the next couple of years. So, more of a social space than just a presentation space. And I think that that's how collective learning, rather than education per-say could actually be produced.

**CM:** OK, thank you very much. Out of curiosity what is going on with the name is it changing is it not?

**SHCC:** Well we are a for now changing the structure and that's the most important thing. And my proposal was to hold on changing a kind of name that is just associated with an identity. And first really concentrate on changing the structure that the underlying critique was that we were not diverse and that the questions were coming from the outside and that we were defending ourselves instead of being advocating and being proactive in raising those questions ourselves. So for me it's more important that we first and foremost change the structures.

**CM:** Yes. Thank you very much.



