



Tools for Collective Learning
The Name Change Initiative of Kunstinstituut Melly, the institution formerly known as Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art



# Tools for Collective Learning

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#### 'Witte de With' museumboulevard



De straatnaamborden en de vlaggen liggen al klaar bij ondernemer J. Timmermans van het veilinghuis Tivannu, maar het zal nog enige tijd duren voor het zover is. Vanaf december krijgt de Witte de Withstraat in Rotterdam er nog een naam bij: museumboulevard.

Op initiatief van de ondernemersvereniging en de bewonersorganisatie zullen onder andere veertig vlaggemasten en twintig straatnaamborden de 'Witte de With' weer de allure moeten verlenen die het door allerlei werkzaamheden een tijdje heeft moeten ontberen.

In december zal er, als alle straatwerkers zijn verdwenen, ieder zondag een 'cultuurmarkt' plaatsvinden, die zich uitstrekt van het Maritiem Museum aan de Schiedamsedijk tot aan museum Boymans-van Beuningen. Met ingang van volgend jaar mei zal de cultuurmarkt waarschijnlijk iedere zondag een plekje krijgen aan de Witte de Withstraat.

## Name Isa Debt

UNTITLED

### A Name is a Debt Sofia Hernández Chong Cuy

On January 27, 2021, the institution formerly known as Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art was renamed Kunstinstituut Melly. The name change was premised on the criteria that our former name impinged upon a pursuit of social inclusivity, which is vital to the relevance and contribution of cultural practice in general. Our renaming was and is informed by local debates and international discussions; it is mobilized by ambitions that relate to social transformation, and by the felt responsibility in visualizing these changes, since our role as a contemporary art institution is presenting and discerning the present.

This book is about the arrival at such criteria and ideas, as much as it is about the intricacies involved in our institution's name change. It is put together by those who, like myself, have been working indefatigably on this transformative initiative since 2018. We write here keeping in mind artists and stakeholders, as well as our longstanding audiences and new communities, who have been with us both during the good times and during crisis. We have made this book for our allies and detractors alike, who are interested in carrying out institutional transformation or, at least, reflecting upon it; for those committed to public engagement, as is the case with most participating in the art field and cultural sector; for those who believe art has the power to create social change.

As suggested by the book's title, *Tools for Collective Learning*, our aim is for this publication to be more of a toolbox than a document. It is made with the conviction that all vital change happens through collective learning; that recording oral histories and discursively articulating embedded experiences can further this cause. It is published considering that anecdote, narrative, and storytelling play a crucial role in the art of our present; that in spatializing knowledges and socializing information—as we attempt to do with this book, and as we do in our exhibition galleries and through our activities—we foster a deeper comprehension of culture.

Throughout the book, we make explicit that our renaming is part of an intensive period of changing value systems in the Netherlands, where we are situated, as it is in other parts of the world. No less, our work in the superdiverse port-city that is Rotterdam is part of a wider movement promoting cultural inclusivity and anti-racism, locally and globally. For this reason, the renaming process itself is not an isolated activity at our institution. On the contrary. Our renaming is a step; one of many components within a larger and multifaceted roadmap, known within our

institution as the Name Change Initiative. This initiative has involved other transformative actions, which I summarize here further ahead.

Since our renaming, I am regularly invited to tell our story in my role as the institution's director, tasked with making a 'change of name' at the start of my tenure in 2018. It has been exciting to publicly share experiences, but this book best explains the work we've been institutionally realizing. It provides more voices, more viewpoints, more experiences, more information. It also speaks to what we are still working on and what we must yet accomplish. We surely endeavor to make this an easy and handsome book, to encourage others in regarding this complex subject and in analyzing the polemic surrounding our renaming and what has been, for us, for many, a difficult trajectory. The shape of this book couldn't have been achieved if it wasn't for the sensibility of its graphic designer, Julie Peeters, nor without the dedicated work of Jeroen Lavèn in compiling images, documents, and ephemera here included.

Through conversations analyzing the book's intent and its materials, we came to collectively structure and organize its contents. The penchant for that retrospective process aside, it would be a mistake to leave unmentioned that our Name Change Initiative has been as challenging and overwhelming for me as it has been for the entire team, the entire time. Certainly, it was particularly intense during the periods of both the name-change decision and the renaming process. During those time periods especially, there were disappointments and frustrations, sweat and tears. There were so many pressures, rarely pleasure.

Public critique and social media exacerbated these emotions. Rarely had many team members felt so vulnerable, myself included. Alas, public debate and the polemic in general reminded us that our renaming was socially relevant. And so, we focused even more on our transformation, with strong convictions to be responsive and not reactionary, and to promote both best practices and anti-racism in and through our work. For the most part, we made it through as a team and in community. One positive outcome of this intensity has been a powerful, connective energy amongst our team, board, and stakeholders—a meaningful bond to delight in and celebrate. I interpret this feeling as culture.

#### **Tools for Collective Learning**

This book includes an essay by Rosa de Graaf about the 2017 art exhibition and events that prompted a trailblazing open letter of institutional critique, and, soon after, the decision to change the name of our institution. Vivian Ziherl contributes an essay about the renaming process, undertaken in 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the internationalization of the Black Lives Matter movement. The design of the renaming process was purposefully public, however challenging given the pandemic lockdowns. The reports summarizing the findings and learnings of this process, which were written and published online after each day of public convening, are compiled in this book. These reports were instrumental in our institutional decision-making, from identifying the naming criteria and name selection to imagining and sketching out the graphic design for the chosen name. Relatedly, a text by Prem Krishnamurthy delves into the influential pedagogies used in collectively

creating the visual identity of Kunstinstituut Melly. Also included is a statement written by the graphic designers: Callum Dean, Wooseok Jang, Nina Schouten, Alexander Tanazefti, Emily Turner, and Yan Zhihan.

While the decision to change the name of our institution happened in a matter of months in the summer of 2017, and while the renaming process happened across a short span of time in the autumn of 2020, the institution's Name Change Initiative took several years to unfold between the decision and its fruition. Even now, the initiative continues to unfold. The reason for this—the perceived slowness, the ongoing work—is that the call to make a change of name was not handled as institutional rebranding; instead, it was approached as an opportunity for initiating a timely and systemic transformation at our institution.

Crucially, public engagement has been at the heart of our activities. This has involved myriad meetings and conversations, much deep listening, and also numerous efforts in making visible those being heard. These are the means as much as the qualities of engagements we value. While I will delve into public engagement activities further on, for now I want to draw on a specific aspect of this, namely community outreach and stakeholder management. Through the Name Change Initiative, we faced the challenge of involving a community in collectively carrying out meaningful change at the institution; for them, for us, and for the field.

And so, for this publication, two meetings with peers engaged in this process were organized and recorded for the purpose of being shared here. One of these conversations is moderated by Jessy Koeiman, and includes Yahaira Brito Morfe, Tayler Calister, Stijn Kemper, and Aqueene Wilson. They have all been participants of the annual arts education program we began in 2018, which we call CLIP, which stands for *Collective Learning in Practice*. At their meeting, they candidly speak of achievements and disappointments in and relating to our institution. In doing so, they mark new goals to set, or, at least, institutional aspirations and expectations to be aware of. The second conversation, organized by me, includes Teana Boston-Mammah, Alex Klein, and Rolando Vázquez Melken, all affiliated with universities. The point is to make palpable the larger institutional matrix from which our Name Change Initiative stems. In our conversation we address diversity and decoloniality to identify new political horizons.

These conversation pieces are meant to convey a multi-vocal podium, which our institution has been championing during these transformative years. They also bear in mind the porosity and textures of history as present experience. To make this more explicit, we invited one of our visitors, the scholar Boutaina Hammana, to elaborate a chrono-political diagram. Complex and yet more trustworthy than a regular timeline, this is a theoretical visualization of events and settings that have a bearing in our Name Change Initiative. It is published here with an accompanying text by the author. The book's inclusion of a piece like this takes to heart our institution's mission to present art *and* theory. Since our foundation, we have unapologetically favored new historic and field research in artistic and curatorial practices alike, as well as encouraged artistic experimentation and theoretical discussions.

This is also reason to publish here an illustrated script by the Rotterdam artist Michiel Huijben. Created after a 2019 research commission, and elaborated upon over the following two years through installation and performance at our institution,

this art project focuses on the repurposed nineteenth-century building that houses our institution. As his images and text elucidate, our building was originally designed in the 1870s as a school. And while the building is a precursor to modern educational architecture, its style was deemed too international according to the nationalist agenda of the time. In our joint research, we discerned that it was in the late nineteenth century when the country's seventeenth-century accomplishments would be widely revived and commemorated. Today, the expansionist work and symbolic revival made in those bygone eras is what is being questioned and, in certain instances, dismantled. Our institution's renaming is part of this probing. It is a sign of our times.

#### Dissonant Heritage

It was in the second half of the nineteenth century when street naming in the Netherlands was systematically formalized. The historian Rob Kooloos explains that among the practical factors driving this decision were the introduction of the postage stamp in the 1850s, new data-capturing administrative systems [a.k.a. the *bevolkingsregister'*], and advancing urban development. A central interest conveyed in street naming during that time period was the consolidation of the nation-state that the Netherlands was experiencing.<sup>3</sup>

Consider that the Netherlands had just gone through years of political conflicts, resulting in a new geopolitical order. Consider, too, that this consolidation went in-hand with new legislation (much of it fostered by Johan Rudolf Thorbecke) and, eventually, a formal political-denominational segregation known as 'pillarization' with three primary groups: Catholics, Protestants, and Humanists.<sup>4</sup> Outside of the country's mainland, changes were also happening. The Dutch legally abolished their part in the Atlantic 'slave' trade in 1814, and, in 1863, abolished slavery in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles; and yet, a practice of indentured labor in Dutch colonies immediately followed and continued well into the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, it was also in the late nineteenth century when the so-called Dutch Golden Age was revived and widely promoted—with literal references to it in city texts and public statues, visual references in stamps and currency, and a material re-emergence of Delft Blue ceramics, among other things. These are only a few instances of a larger array of irreligious cultural endeavors that helped forge the idea of a shared history within the new boundaries of the country. These were also symbolic ways to convey and normalize imperialism. Relatedly, Witte de Withstraat—the street we were previously named after, and where our building is located—was given such a name in 1871.

The namesake of this street is the seventeenth-century naval officer Witte Corneliszoon de With de With (1599–1658), who served in the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Dutch West India Company (WIC) during his lifetime. These companies were instrumental for the Netherlands' colonial expansion, and were integral to the Dutch involvement in the transatlantic 'slave' trade and in the workings of enslavement in the country's colonies. Alas, as the academics Kwame Nimako and the late Glenn Willemsen have explained, "the absence of a public anti-slavery debate

characterized most of the nineteenth century in the Netherlands ... It never became a social movement nor a subject that captured the heart of the entire nation".

The academic Laurajane Smith analyzes how dominant heritage discourse developed in the nineteenth century along with nationalist projects and liberal modernity; how ideas of progress took precedence at this time, legitimizing colonial and imperial expansions; how, in this process, ideas of race, ethnicity, and culture developed. It is no secret that for over a century, and more forcefully in recent decades, this understanding has been critically challenged by new historical analysis and cultural promotion, which frame contact, progress, and conflict in different terms. Struggles for representation are at the heart of this social project. Furthermore, in his study of the birth of nationalisms, the author Benedict Anderson coined the concept of "an imagined community" to explain how national identities were forged by using cultural strategies representing the new consolidation of nation-states. Anderson also explains that 'official nationalism', that is, set forms and traditions emanating from the state, were "from the start a conscious, self-protective *policy*, intimately linked to the preservation of imperial-dynastic interests".<sup>8</sup>

I reference Smith's and Anderson's work to draw a connection between the execution of political agendas, the uses of language in public space, and the creation of imagined communities. I also mention this because when a city text has a direct link to a social being or a historical reference, such as Witte de Withstraat, or Witte de With the man, or the (former) name of an institution, it is unavoidable that questions of heritage, timeliness, and relevance will surface at one point or another. These did for us in 2017. However, the critique was towards and about our institution, and not particularly towards the city regarding the street's name.

#### **Generative Rifts**

The online circulation and publication of an *Open Letter to Witte de With* in the summer of 2017 catalyzed a debate at our institution that resulted in our Name Change Initiative. The letter denounced our institution for not having critically regarded the colonial references of its name, then 'Witte de With', even while working, at that time, on an art project about decolonizing. This open letter was authored by Egbert Alejandro Martina, Ramona Sno, Hodan Warsame, Patricia Schor, Amal Alhaag, and Maria Guggenbichler; it was co-signed in support by many more people. The art project they referred to in the letter was *Cinema Olanda: Platform* by the then Rotterdam-based artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh, which was an extension of the artist's concurrent exhibition in the Dutch Pavilion curated by Lucy Cotter for the 57th edition of the Venice Biennale. Organized at our institution by its former Director and curator, Defne Ayas and Natasha Hoare, *Cinema Olanda: Platform* consisted of an event-based, offshoot exhibition presenting work by artists and cultural producers in the Netherlands, most of whom are associated with the country's active decolonizing movement.

The *Open Letter to Witte de With* publicly challenged the institution. Besides calling out the legacies implied in the institution's name, it called attention to the implicit inequality in the arts field, and the need to dismantle the longstanding

system of references and cultural mandates it promotes. It also called attention to the inherent inequity and embedded emotional labor when provisionally engaging Black people and people of color, which some of its authors had experienced at our institution. Both the *Open Letter to Witte de With* and *Cinema Olanda: Platform* amplified an existing debate on decoloniality in the Netherlands. Such a debate involves surfacing histories of slavery, advocating for anti-racism, and questioning the authority of Western worldviews, and, in our specific case, the probing of an art-historical canon and dominant institutional genealogies largely scripted from a European perspective.

From social media platforms to newspaper editorials to public discussions to informal conversations, deliberations were had as to whether the institution should change its name, or undo itself, or even react. Within a few months of the open letter's publication, the institution publicly announced that it would make a change of name—to much controversy. Detractors of our move towards renaming claimed we would be erasing 'history'. For some, that history translated to a respectful brand of contemporary art with a lineage of national and international standing; for others—the loudest—that history meant one of national achievements and venerated heroes, regardless of the costs. The polemic was jarring.

During the past decade, there have been other cases where art institutions have engaged with dissonant heritage in the Netherlands. I will here mention two prominent cases.

An early example is the debacle around a statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, governor general of the VOC in the seventeenth century. Erected in 1893 in the city of Hoorn, Coen's birthplace, the statue was at the center of a public debate between 2010 and 2012. This was triggered by a citizen's proposal to remove the statue, considering its personification of VOC genocides. The local Westfries Museum staged an exhibition as trial, literally; there, most voting audiences favored keeping the statue. Regardless of this purportedly participatory exhibition, at best pretentious, at worst a scam, Hoorn's city authorities had already decided to keep the statue anyway. The compromise reached was adding a plaque to describe who Coen was, ending with a brief line referring to the existing criticism that he "does not deserve to be honored." The heritage historian Lisa Johnson analyzes this performative exhibition as a way of cooling off a hot topic. Agreed. But in what way does this explicative text redeem wounds caused by colonialism? In what way does it include unwritten histories or acknowledge cultural disadvantages?

A more recent case was the polemic discussion surrounding the Amsterdam Museum's decision, in 2019, to change the denomination of their 'Golden Age' period galleries to simply 'Seventeenth Century'. This name change acknowledges that the material culture of the time period cannot be described as golden; the 'achievements' of one party came at the expense of another. This action was followed, in 2021, by an exhibition about and featuring The Golden Coach of the Dutch Royalty, a royal carriage which promotes coloniality, among other things, by depicting enslaved people. Involving original curatorial research by the museum, the exhibition's entrance gallery included a large mural with published quotes that illustrated the national polemic of whether and how to honor and critically contextualize material culture and imagery that champions imperialism and enslavement.

Elsewhere, name changes at other institutions were also taking place. I mention two recent cases that we studied closely.

In 2017, Calhoun College at Yale University, US, was renamed Grace Hopper College. That same year, Bristol's Colston Hall in the UK began its own name-change process; its renaming to Bristol Beacon took place only two weeks before our own institution decided on the name Kunstinstituut Melly. John Calhoun constitutionally defended slavery in nineteenth-century America. Edward Colston was a British sea merchant and slave trader in the seventeenth century. Both were politicians during their lifetimes.

Like us, this American University and British cultural center experienced polemics that mobilized their name changes, and their renaming processes were also years long. Yale's comprehensive report and advice to the University served us to set the basis for the kind of inquiries and work we would set forth in our Name Change Initiative. Determining their advice on namings and renamings were observations of the late Robin Winks, once faculty member at the University, who "identified a critical distinction between liberal and illiberal alterations of historical monuments", and who "wrote about two different concepts of history". The authors of the report summarize it this way:

In one conception, history is a record of things from the past that should not be forgotten. In this view, removing an item from the historical record is like lying; as Winks put it, such removals are akin to the work of the infamous "Great Soviet Encyclopedia," in which history became whatever the Party leaders wanted it to be at any given moment in time.

In a second conception, however, history is the commemoration and memorialization of the past. Commemoration, Winks noted, often confers honor and asserts title. It can also convey mourning and loss. Either way, commemoration expresses value. In this second conception of history, a change in the way a community memorializes its past offers a way to recognize important alterations in the community's values.<sup>13</sup>

Commissioned in light of the campus protests in 2015 and onwards, that document was ordered by Yale University's president to a team of scholars and was fully published online. It really laid the ground for our own work, and also motivated us to make this publication. For its part, the public components and actions of Bristol Beacon—particularly their website, their action, and the documentation of their name on the façade in 2020—were especially inspiring. Being a much larger institution compared to us, they had hired a specialist company to guide them through their renaming process and ongoing transformation. We were in the midst of the changes together, if apart, and we remain thankful to them for sharing information and expertise with us, especially during the summer of 2020.

Research, narrative, and anecdote may help elucidate the background of given names, of giving names, and of the meaning of names. These explorations are fundamental when a proper name is used for a cause. These are also relevant when a namesake is meant to communicate a particular vision. Now, the subset of questions

these statements raise are equally important in a process of re-signification: What lives and whose causes are being valued with a namesake? By whom and for whom is a particular life or a specific cause deemed meaningful, for what reasons and to what ends?

#### Site-Specificity: Our Former Name

When our institution was envisioned, between 1986 and 1989, it was referred to as Kunsthuis—an art house, a house for art—in all documents, including press. This is what we were called until a handful of months prior to the institution's public opening in 1990, under the name Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art. This final chosen name would point to the institution's whereabouts, on the Witte de Withstraat in the center of Rotterdam. Documentation of this early renaming process is nowhere to be found, to my experience, nor has anyone been particularly vocal about it yet, or taken credit during these past years of conducting field and archival research as part of our Name Change Initiative. In any case, the renaming was strategic. The outcome of a different naming typology altogether, Kunsthuis evoked a vocation, while Witte de With implied a location.

The name was ultimately given by one or more in a group of city administrators, policymakers, and cultural workers in Rotterdam, working to transform the well-known Witte de Withstraat from a nightlife and prostitution zone into a more day-oriented cultural corridor. This political agenda was motivated by the Rotterdam Art Foundation. Established in 1945, this foundation was an independent council of art advisors and policymakers in the Netherlands. It was originally tasked with helping to rebuild the city's cultural infrastructure after the Second World War, when Rotterdam's city center had been bombed and mostly burned down.

During the 1980s, under the direction of Paul Noorman, the foundation was interested in promoting the city as an international artistic hub, and in developing a cultural axis in the Cool district, right in the heart of the city center. Two institutions would be the geographical markers on either side of this axis: at the east end of Witte de Withstraat would be the Maritime Museum; at the west end of this street would be The New Institute. Also part of the axis were the already existing Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, next to the Museumpark, and within its gardens a new Kunsthal (which opened in 1992). Our newly conceived contemporary art- and theory-oriented institution was set along this axis, at the center of this street.

This development was promoted as a Museum Boulevard; however, such a name was more a project motto than a renaming proposal set in stone. Naming the newly conceived institution Witte de With over the option of Kunsthuis endorsed that effort. At that time—and to some extent, at present—naming cultural institutions after their location was a common trend. There are many examples of this in the art field. For instance, in the 1970s and through the 1980s, Rotterdam had the Lijnbaancentrum, a cultural center within the eponymous open-air pedestrianized shopping mall, which was an innovative urban development of the post-war years. Another case in point is P.S.1 Contemporary Art in New York City, established in 1971 in a repurposed school building; the acronym in its name refers to Public School #1.

For three decades under the name Witte de With, it is conceivable to believe that for some people, our institution had direct connection to the naval officer himself. Their conjecture has a basis: typically, when a museum bears a proper name, it usually makes reference to the fact that it is sited in that person's home, houses their collection, focuses on their legacy, or is built with their patronage. None of this was the case with our institution. It is also conceivable that to some, Witte de With is a respected figure, while for others Witte de With is just a popular street. For better or worse, the latter is likely the case. Plans for when and how to tackle these impressions and the street's name remain pending.

Regardless, the original aims of the municipality and the Rotterdam Art Foundation were achieved. The cultural axis they imagined is now thriving. What is certain is that the name Witte de With served their purpose. What is also certain is that, at present, our institution's name has to serve our purpose, and with this, that it has to respond to another set of developments in the city, more particularly cultural than urban. Rotterdam is incredibly diverse and its ethos is being shaped by a multi-vocal heritage, which is ultimately what makes the city and our immediate context so vibrant. This reality is locally relevant and globally meaningful.

#### Context-Specificity: Our New Name

A report published by the American Migration Policy Institute indicates that more than forty percent of Rotterdammers are foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent. The 2020 statistics of the *World Population Review* indicate that most of the foreign-born residents of Rotterdam come from Suriname. Residents of Turkish, Moroccan, and Dutch-Caribbean descent also contribute to the city's superdiverse population, which is made up of more than 600,000 residents in the city center and roughly one million residents overall. Another way to look at this is how the researcher and local politician Peggy Wijntuin describes it: "One in eight Rotterdammers is a descendant of an enslaved African person." One

How can we possibly continue to disavow this?

For good reason, 'disavow' is an operative term used by scholar Gloria Wekker. I use it here to advance the relevance of her work. Her book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* is probably one of the most influential books in the discussions on decolonizing in the Netherlands—and has been since its publication in 2016—and was certainly influential in the decision for the name change at our institution. In this book, Wekker makes a call to discontinue disavowing people; that racism is embedded in society. This is also what charged the Name Change Initiative into a task beyond renaming, for systemic change is needed for a resignification of marks and symbols to endure.

The latter became a core reason to turn our institution's only ground-floor 'white-cube' art gallery into a multi-purpose programming space. The room's huge windows onto the street had already been, for a handful of years, more closely connecting the institution's interior architecture with public space. Its dynamic and mostly free-admission programs have begun welcoming more general audiences to the institution. Standing for the face of a changing institution, this very room also

became the strategic site for developing new forms of public engagement and no less became a case study for our name change. We transformed the space into this in the spring of 2018. This space was briefly called Untitled. By the following spring, it was renamed MELLY by a group of emerging professionals in Rotterdam. They were the participants of the pilot edition of our work/learn arts education program in 2018–2019. This program is now called CLIP, as I mentioned earlier.

The name MELLY was inspired by *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, an artwork by Ken Lum. This artwork takes the form of a billboard, and it has been displayed on our building's façade since 1990. The group's choice to name the space MELLY was inspired, on the one hand, by a common experience evoked in the message and their personal familiarity with the 'poster', which they called a proto-meme. On the other hand, they were inspired by the artistic intent of this artwork, which concerns the immigration of the artist's grandparents from China to Canada to seek a better life for their families, even at the cost of working in the hard manual labor of rail-road construction.<sup>17</sup> In an oblique way, the work recognizes histories of migration, which repeatedly involve people's experiences of having dreadful occupations in order to make a living.

Now, when the time came to select a new name for our institution at large, the option of taking on the name Melly surfaced. This time, the name choice was inspired by that newly created public-engagement space that had been named MELLY. The space itself, its activities, its outcomes, its audiences, and its own naming process now stood as an example of ongoing institutional transformation—a concrete promise that could and would make the institution accountable for years to come. This is how the center's new name became Kunstinstituut Melly.

The impact of CLIP has been significant, particularly in terms of the diversification of our team by hiring or granting fellowships to former participants. In these roles, they come to program activities in our space and participate in decision-making at the institution, which for its part broadens our public, too. As I write these lines, we are preparing for CLIP's fifth annual edition. No doubt, the program remains experimental, which means that it is not perfect; there is certainly room for growth. In any case, as mentioned in my first paragraphs of this text, details on the renaming process and the voices of CLIP participants are provided by contributors and materials in this book.

What is imperative to include here are the following points:

Firstly, that we have begun scaling-up; the dynamism and openness experienced in MELLY, the ground-floor art gallery-turned-multi-purpose programming space, is being brought upstairs, throughout our building, into the institution as a whole.

Secondly, that the significance of the initial staging of this singular, ground-floor environment is partly due, in my mind, to its beautiful and meaningful design; to be specific, the environment was created by artists. It was prepared and is cared for with dignity, but never comes close to the refinement of a white-cube gallery, nor does it pretend to want to be this way.

Thirdly, that the relevance of its program is because of the quality of relations it involves; namely, the dedicated staff who work in MELLY on a daily basis are, for the most part, artists, or creatives trained as artists.

The fourth and final point, although I could continue, is that from this experiment and space now stems a series of events, research-based displays, and art

#### A Culture of Change

Since our institution's opening on January 27, 1990, as Witte de With, and still today, under the name Kunstinstituut Melly, we have had a disposition to evolve. We have been determined to catalyze; to be a gateway to the world of art and ideas from here and afar. The will to change, to experiment, and to adapt is part of our institutional mandate. This value is even prioritized by a stipulated time cap on the tenure of directors, ensuring the continual renewal of the institution's vision and networks. At times, this change in Director has also brought to our institution different leadership styles and administrative processes. This was certainly and incisively a case in point during my tenure.

In 2017, and from the onset of the Name Change Initiative, we realized the need to be a more inclusive and a more responsive institution; midway through the initiative, we also realized the need to be a more communicative institution, and to simply get better at it. We also began the initiative with the realization that for systemic change to happen, both towards and in parallel with our renaming, we had to improve our management procedures, from work culture to budget planning to recruitment practices, and even oftentimes our organizational vocabulary. So many decisions that impact the course of an institution happen in this arena, since it is no secret that management by and large determines the planning of where human and financial resources are sourced and invested, as much as with whom commitments are made.

Priority was first given to creating new positions in the programming team, including a Curator Collective Learning in 2018 and a Research and Programs Manager in 2019. Profiling and hiring for these new positions allowed us to acknowledge—and, soon thereafter, to systemically and programmatically include—different forms of knowledge and expertise beyond the histories and backgrounds, networks and references, and experiences and skill sets traditionally provided by the professional art and museum fields. These inclusions also came with restructuring our team, involving promotions, fellowship programs, and other staff hires. This happened in parallel with significantly increasing the once-called education budget. At present, we invest almost equally in exhibition production, which is our core business, as we do in public programming, which we consider simply necessary. These changes are reflective of our interest in social inclusivity and public engagement, and in what I constantly refer to as spatializing knowledges and socializing information.

These changes involved diversification of the team, as much as our immediate interlocutors in community outreach. The recruitment of new members to our institution's Supervisory Board also further diversified our work culture. Needless to say, team trainings and external consultants have been essential during these past years

of transformation, because change often comes with turmoil and pain, misunderstandings and disagreements, and because change makes us not only materialize our dreams, but also experience our limitations, ignorance, and flaws. However positively transformative our Name Change Initiative has been for our institution, and personally for many of us, the process has come with its trials and errors. The euphemisms for these have been 'situations' and 'challenges'. And there have been plenty of those.

For example, we had to correct or live with misunderstandings, and also deal with various challenging situations—a good compound to say that it got really trying—that surfaced through not communicating clearly or on time, or by being convoluted rather than concise. Texts or presentations with bullet points and tables really do work, we figured, but we learned this somewhat late in the process. My at times inefficient communication style or tempo was often deemed opaque or lacking transparency, sadly to the detriment of the team. The institution as a whole also learned that being effective at public engagement, which is where we have been investing, involves much more than having something interesting to show or tell. And its effectiveness is definitely not about style or packaging, as marketeers promote. We trust the educators on this one and, for sure, cultures of the Global South in general: it is about being convivial and hospitable, about being welcoming and building a network.

On a practical note, this has involved a learning process to improve our communication style as much as to raise the quality of attention we can confer to our public. For the past years, we made our events free of admission charges; we are unsure how much that worked. Then again, we thought, being accessible is about being receptive. (As it pertains to the design of our building entrance and its reception desk specifically, we have definitely not advanced yet.) Lately, the team proposed offering event tickets priced on a sliding scale, that is, in relation to income, as well as offering assistance in covering travel costs if there were financial limitations. Fundraising for the Name Change Initiative in particular, with so many disputes about its validity in the meantime, has been challenging too, to say the least; a similar difficulty was initially experienced in securing public subsidy for our institution, especially in 2020, while we were in a period of transition in our renaming process.

In any case, if staff training and courses on hospitality, communication, writing, and accessibility have been fruitful and come with palpable outcomes, the ones about unconscious bias, micro-aggression, anti-racism, and resilience have been confounding. The latter have been more disruptive than productive, causing more pain than creating tools to constructively articulate such experience. At least for now. Racism is far deeper embedded than we would think, and this doesn't come as a surprise. What is unclear, and has been often confounding, is the extent to which the pandemic lockdowns of 2020–2021, and subsequently the new forms of hybrid working we experimented with in 2021–2022, have actually influenced these pains and forms of embodied awareness or ways of learning. For now, I confidently say they've been difficult experiences.

There are some emergency blankets of sorts that have at least been good to have devised before implementing so many changes in staff and work culture. One is our institution's first Code of Conduct, which we drafted in 2019. Another is having drafted, that same year, a policy, *The Politics of Care*, for working within an

ecosystem-based framework, i.e. with partnerships as a basis, which we prepared to kick off along with our new name at the start of 2021. These may sound like basic or simple things to most, but the reality is that for us these two actions have been major endeavors to realize. These efforts have ultimately been essential in allowing us to conduct our work in safe ways and also with brave drive.

Systemic change is needed, at our institution and elsewhere, and symbolic changes are required to make visible the ongoing transformations we have undertaken, and will continue to develop, to become a more inclusive and welcoming institution. Our renaming is part of this effort. And, as an institution that focuses on the art and theory of our present, we are indebted to the changing society that wants and needs to be included and to feel welcomed in its cultural platforms and debates.<sup>18</sup>

While our renaming process and the abovementioned transformations have been unfolding as part of our Name Change Initiative, we have been emphasizing collective learning in and through our programs, and have been thus regarding our galleries as classrooms. Our changing exhibitions offer a unique and creative occasion for the public to experience changing value systems manifested by art and theory of our contemporary moment. Artistic, curatorial, and educational aims are intertwined in our activities, which are purposely made to spatialize knowledges and socialize information. The motivation for this is to ensure that cultural differences can be philosophically addressed, so that social inclusion can be artistically fostered. The effects of all of this also take time, of course. We are patient, and we are committed and diligent, too. Kunstinstituut Melly can indeed foment inclusivity and deepen public engagements in carrying out its mission of presenting art and theory of our present. I truly believe in this, and hope that you trust us on this, too.

Tools for Collective Learning
The Name Change Initiative
of Kunstinstituut Melly,
the institution formerly known
as Witte de With Center for
Contemporary Art

Editors Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, with Rosa de Graaf, Jessy Koeiman, Jeroen Lavèn, and Vivian Ziherl

#### Contributors

Veronika Babayan, Teana Boston-Mammah, Yahaira Brito Morfe, Tayler Calister, Callum Dean, Rosa de Graaf, Boutaina Hammana, Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, Michiel Huijben, Wooseok Jang, Stijn Kemper, Alex Klein, Jessy Koeiman, Prem Krishnamurthy, Nina Schouten, Alexander Tanazefti, Emily Turner, Rolando Vázquez Melken, Aqueene Wilson, Yan Zhihan, Vivian Ziherl

The cards with names and doodles, scattered around in this book, are ideas for names and braindumps created by the staff members of Kunstinstituut Melly in 2019 and 2020.

Editorial Coordinators Milou van Lieshout, Wendy van Slagmaat-Bos

Copy editors Annemarie van den Berg, Harriet Foyster, Rosa de Graaf, Milou van Lieshout, Alex Klein

Translators James Hannan, Milou van Lieshout, Marie Louise Schoondergang, Jet van den Toorn

Design Julie Peeters, with Laura Martens

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challenged graphic design conventions of the
era, bringing a holistic approach to designing
and teaching that consisted of philosophy, theory, and a systematic practical methodology.

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Kunstinstituut Melly Witte de Withstraat 50 3012 BR Rotterdam The Netherlands +31 (0)10 4110144 office@kunstinstituutmelly.nl www.kunstinstituutmelly.nl

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