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Shifting Museum Concepts: The Curatorial Shift in Contemporary Museums from White-Walled Galleries to Experientially Rich, Multi-Sensorial Environments.

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Shifting Museum Concepts:
The Curatorial Shift in Contemporary Museums from White-Walled Galleries
to Experientially Rich, Multi-Sensorial Environments.

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- Introduction -

Today in 2025, to walk into a modern art museum, such as Museum De Pont (Tilburg) or Museum Voorlinden (Wassenaar), is often to enter a space of white walls, smooth floors, sharp lines and corners, and bright overhead lighting (fig. 1). This setting in which gallery spaces resemble large white cubic spaces is referred to as the *white cube*.¹ It will become clear that the legacy of this so-called ‘white cube’ was the exhibiting framework that dominated the late twentieth century and continues to shape how art is presented and perceived. Yet, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the authority of the white cube is increasingly being questioned.

This thesis continues to question the ideology behind the white-walled configuration, which people have become so accustomed to, and asks whether white walls fit the current trajectory of contemporary museums. This thesis uses both the term ‘white cube’ as well as ‘white-walled’. While the terms can sometimes be used interchangeably, ‘white cube’ usually refers to the twentieth-century modernist concept of museum design, whereas ‘white-walled’ is used as a broader term to describe the general use of white walls in interior museum architecture.

Museums are beginning to feel pressured to diversify, democratise, and reinvent themselves, in response to demands from artists, audiences, and policymakers alike. Nowadays, a growing number of museums assume that museum visitors expect to see more than high quality art in clearly structured galleries. This assumption seems to coincide with the most recently established ICOM Museum Definition (2022):

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.²

Contemporary museum audiences are said to be seeking immersive museum experiences and to be steered towards new ideas to better understand the art displayed in museums. The larger-than-life installations of artworks by Van Gogh (1853-1890) at the Atelier des

¹ O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*.

² ICOM, “Museum Definition,” 2022.

Lumières in Paris (2025), for example, offer a new perspective on the existing works by enriching the visitor experience through animated scenography and soundscapes (fig. 2).³ Besides the assumption of expectations, museums compete for attention retention.

Museums not only compete with each other, but they also struggle to keep up with commercial entertainment (e.g. theatres, cinemas, sports venues, and (work)shops), digital platforms including streaming services (e.g. Netflix and YouTube) and social media (e.g. TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest), and greater global tourism, which specific ‘museums’ are a part of themselves. For instance, the internationally famous Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam) functions as a tourist hot spot, which is reflected in their visitor numbers. In 2024, the museum counted two and a half million visitors, of which about sixty percent came from abroad.⁴ Despite the number being smaller than some previous years, it still overshadows smaller Dutch museums, such as the Centraal Museum Utrecht, who in 2024 had a visitor total of around one hundred thirty thousand (over four hundred thousand in total together with the Nijntje Museum and the Rietveld Schröderhuis).⁵

Other forms of ‘edutainment’, especially digital online formats, are better equipped to change at the pace at which trends fall and rise as they often work with cheaper, algorithmic models that profoundly document the behaviour of its users. Besides, online platforms often work strictly with digital resources, which are easily modified based on user experience. The multi-year plans of big and small museum, from the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven), to Museum W (Weert) and RADIUS (Delft), illustrate the complexity of working with physical media and objects.⁶ It is no surprise then, that museums increasingly invest in their online presence, including their websites and digital mediation, such as podcasts and digital archives.

Besides the changes that new media instigate, calls for decolonisation and inclusivity coming from marginalised and underrepresented groups (e.g. the LGBTQIA+-community and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour)) demand that museums recontextualise their collections, acknowledge contested histories, and create spaces where multiple voices can be heard. The Rijksmuseum, for example, employs digital multimedia tours through the Rijksmuseum app.⁷ Through the application visitors in- and outside the museum get to explore histories that are less known or visible. For instance, the tour

³ Atelier des Lumières, “Van Gogh,” 2025.

⁴ Rijksmuseum, “Rijksmuseum in 2024.”

⁵ Centraal Museum, “Jaarverslag en jaarrekening 2024: Bezoekers en publiciteit.”

⁶ Centraal Museum, “Meerjarenbeleidsplan 2025-2028.”

⁷ Rijksmuseum, “Tours.”

“Women” focusses on stories about female makers and figures portrayed in art, while “Colonial Past” sheds a light on artworks and objects that are linked to the Dutch colonial past and its sore spots.

Against this backdrop, it will become clear that it seems only logical that the sterile neutrality of the white wall as discussed by art critics, including Brian O’Doherty (1928-2022) and Rosalind Krauss, seems to be an obstacle for dealing with the challenges presented by digitalisation, tourism, and the entertainment industry. On top of that, the white-walled display concept seems unfit to respond appropriately to societal demands, such as those related to the inclusion of underrepresented groups and the attention for diverse histories.

In the Netherlands, changing visitor demands have already resulted in visible changes in modern art museums, such as the Van Abbemuseum (fig. 3), but also in museums showcasing art from broader time periods, like the Centraal Museum Utrecht, which showcases art from as early as the sixteenth century up to the present day (fig. 4). Some other museums, such as the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, partially move away from their standardised, white-walled approach in temporary exhibitions by using contextual wall texts, item descriptions, and fitting colour schemes.

This thesis is concerned with precisely this shift: the movement away from white-walled galleries toward more complex, sensorial, and socially embedded curatorial environments. To understand what this shift entails, it is important to know what the curatorial concept of a white-walled gallery or the white cube aims to achieve. O’Doherty famously argued that the white cube was not merely architectural, but also ideological. To him, the confinement of closed white walls fostered an aura of unboundedness, meaning that within the borders of the white cube artworks were dislodged from the historical, cultural, and political context in which they were created and were presented as objects unmarked by time or social significance.⁸

In contrast to the richly decorated and socially embedded salons of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe (e.g. the Hôtel de Rambouillet in Paris and the Holland House in Kensington, London), the white-walled gallery centred around simplicity and stillness. With all architectural forms of distraction (ornamentation) removed nothing could distract the viewer’s focus from the artworks on display. Set apart from the noise of everyday life, the gallery was ought to become a sort of still and sacred space. This aesthetic of supposed

⁸ O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 14-18.

neutrality proved useful in an era of modernism that advocated for purity, formalism, and autonomy.⁹

However, it is crucial to note that every framework is always constructed and as such ‘neutrality’ can never be truly neutral. The whiteness of the gallery is not the absence of all contexts, but the instalment of one kind of context: one that privileges certain forms of art (e.g. abstract and minimalist art) or rather certain ways of looking at art while marginalising others, such as Expressionism and Impressionism. While expressive art is aimed to convey the artist’s emotions and impressions on the viewer through its form and content, the white cube prioritises the formal aspects of art (e.g. medium, colour, etc.). It can be argued that Minimalism, Suprematism, and Abstract art favour formalist looking practices, because they are not so much concerned with outside contexts, such as emotional expression and symbolism. Instead, artists including Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) and art historians, such as Mark Rosenthal, argue that these movements are focussed on purely visual (formalist) aspects, including colour, lines, and composition.¹⁰

Artist and critics, for example Donald Judd (1928-1994) and Alfred H. Barr Jr. (1902-1981), have argued that the supposed generality of the white cube’s admissible blankness minimises sensory, narrative, and social dimensions, reducing the experience of art to calm visual contemplation. The white-walled mode of display enhances focussed admiration, but due to a lack of external context it also leads to detachment, positioning the viewer as a silent, self-reliant observer.¹¹ It seems as if the very qualities that define the white cube have also made it vulnerable to critique. For some artists, critics, and curators, such as art historian Anna Chave, the white cube has come to symbolise sterility, alienation, and elitism.¹² To others, including curator and former museum director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History Nina Simon, the white-walled model appears increasingly unfitting for the contemporary (participatory) museum and thus the new question would be whether the white-walled model will aid or stagnate the evolution of contemporary art museums.¹³

This introduction is not aimed to frame the white cube as the central object of study, but as a departure point. While the first chapter of this thesis reconstructs the historical emergence of the white-walled display concept, the larger aim of this thesis is to chart the extent to which and how contemporary museums are moving beyond the white-walled

⁹ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 74-76.

¹⁰ Kazimir, *The Non-Objective World*, 68; Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century*, 178.

¹¹ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 216.

¹² O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 14-18; Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power,” 44-63.

¹³ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, Chapter 3-4.

display concept and what the implications of this shift are. As institutions seek to attract broader audiences and respond to social critique, they increasingly turn to sensorial, narrative, and participatory exhibition strategies. Sound, colour, digital media, immersive environments, and community programming all point to a profound reconfiguration of the museum's role. The shift away from white-walled neutrality toward multi-sensory complexity is not simply a matter of style; it appears to be symptomatic of deeper institutional transformations concerning authority, inclusivity, and relevance.

This thesis adopts a mixed approach, combining analysis of art historical critique and theory, and one empirical case study of the Centraal Museum Utrecht, which will be contextualised by references to other examples. The thesis unfolds in three chapters, each addressing a different dimension of the shift from white-walled display concepts to sensorial complexity. Chapter One traces the emergence of the white-walled gallery and the white cube, starting with earlier models of display. It uses the writings of theorists such as O'Doherty and the German art historian Charlotte Klonk to examine how neutrality, clarity, and autonomy became curatorial ideals and shows how the white wall became synonymous with modern exhibition practice.

Then, Chapter Two analyses the Centraal Museum Utrecht as a case study of institutional transformation and shows how the museum can serve as an example of how to reconfigure white-walled curatorial frameworks. The Centraal Museum is a valuable example, because of its remarkable transformation both in design and atmosphere, resulting from the recent (December 2023) redesign of its permanent collection presentation, as well as its temporary exhibitions. This chapter considers how the museum reintroduces external context, integrates social environments (e.g. cultivating co-creation with people of various backgrounds and organising workshops for schoolchildren), and embraces digital and experiential strategies. These practices illustrate how museums can move beyond neutrality while retaining their social and cultural relevancy.

Finally, Chapter Three examines the critiques that destabilised the white cube, focusing on its sterility, alienation, and ideological invisibility. This chapter pays attention to artistic interventions and curatorial experiments by twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists, including performer and critic Andrea Fraser (b. 1965) and artist Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967). These responses challenge white-walled spaces, further preparing the ground for a broader multi-sensory turn in museums. By using the case study results, artist interventions and comparisons with other museums, such as the Van Abbemuseum, this chapter delves deeper into what drives contemporary curators to move away from white-walled practices. Like

earlier chapters, chapter three engages with critical debates, drawing on the critiques of Chave, and art historian and critic Claire Bishop.

This combination of methods allows the thesis to provide insight into the move from the abstract ideology of the white-wall display concept to the curatorial practices in one specific ‘museum,’ of which the white cube is undeniably one as well. It acknowledges that while the white wall remains entrenched, the museum field is now defined by its negotiation with and departures from this model. The conclusion synthesises the research of this thesis by showing that exhibition design has evolved from the modernist white cube’s ideology of neutrality toward multi-sensorial, interdisciplinary, and socially engaged museum practices, without completely rejecting the legacy and the future potential of the white wall.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on transition. While many academics have analysed the white wall as ideologically loaded curatorial strategy, fewer studies have traced how museums actively reconfigure this legacy in practice, one key study being by Bishop (2012). By foregrounding the sensorial and participatory turn, this thesis highlights how institutions are redefining themselves in response to contemporary pressures. This matters for at least three reasons. First, it reframes the debate about museum display: not as a binary opposition between the white wall and its rejection, but as an ongoing negotiation between neutrality and engagement, detachment and immersion. Second, it situates exhibition design within larger questions of institutional identity and ideologies. How museums choose to stage art is inseparable from how they imagine their agency of the artworks in relation to audiences. Third, it offers practical insight into how one specific museum navigates this transformation, demonstrating both the possibilities and the challenges of reconfiguring entrenched frameworks.

Origins of the White-Walled Display Concept.

To understand how the white-walled display concept came to be, the first section of this chapter examines pre-modern display practices, focusing on exhibition design and practices from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. These environments reveal the extent to which exhibition design was historically tied to social hierarchy and institutional spectacle. This section also considers transitional moments in the nineteenth century, when innovations in lighting and architecture laid the groundwork for later developments.

Then, the second section turns to the twentieth century, tracing the emergence of the white cube as a defining feature of modernist exhibition practice. It explores how the aesthetics of neutrality and became institutionalised through architectural modernism, technological innovations, and the influential curatorial strategies of figures like the Museum of Modern Art New York's (MoMA) first director Alfred Barr. It also considers how avant-garde movements such as Bauhaus and De Stijl embraced pared-down environments, and how the minimalist art of the 1960s further reinforced the white cube's claims to neutrality.

Throughout this chapter it will become clear how the white-walled display concept has turned into convention, which then became so entrenched as to appear inevitable. The white wall matters because it is both ever-present and invisible. By tracing its history, this chapter seeks to denaturalise the white wall, revealing it not as a logical given, but as a specific construct shaped by modernism, museology, and ideology.

1.1 Pre-Modern Display Practices: Before the White Wall

Before the white- and blankness of the twentieth-century gallery became popularised, art was displayed in spaces that were richly decorated, socially coded, and visually overwhelming by today's standards. From the seventeenth century onwards, exhibition environments were defined by ornate decoration, coloured walls, and dense arrangements of artworks.¹⁴ Instead of presenting art as self-determined or unchanging, these practices embedded objects within a broader context of institutional authority, hierarchy, and spectacle. Understanding these earlier conventions is crucial, as they highlight how radically the white-walled gallery departed from previous conventions.

¹⁴ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 19-22.

The dominant model of display in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the so-called ‘salon-style,’ descending from Renaissance *Kunstammer* (and the medieval *Schatzkammer* or ‘treasure room’) and named after the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy for the arts (founded in 1648) in Paris, where teachers of the arts and students alike presented their artworks.¹⁵ From 1737 onwards, the Paris Salon was held in the Salon Carré of the Louvre. Here, paintings were hung densely from floor to ceiling on walls covered in richly coloured fabrics, often deep red or green (fig. 5).¹⁶ Artworks were arranged according to strict hierarchies, which were upheld by the Royal Academy. Large-scale history paintings, being considered as being part of the most prestigious genre in the academic system, were hung at eye-level, occupying the central positions. Smaller, less significant works, such as portraits and still lifes filled the sidelines. This system of hierarchical display was not only practical but also had ideological connotations. In the salons, the walls did not function as neutral backgrounds, but as intentional statements about artistic value, same as how the placement of paintings visualised the judgments of the Royal Academy, reinforcing its role of defining taste and status.¹⁷

Frames played an equally important role. The addition of ornament in the form of a gilded frame enhanced the total artwork and asserted the material and symbolic value of a painting.¹⁸ Beyond the artwork, architectural ornaments, such as decorated arches and lists between walls and ceilings, as well as permanent paintings referring to the history of art (e.g. the Classical era), further insulated and embedded the artworks on display. Art historian Francis Haskell notes that the frame functioned as an extension of the wall itself, embedding the work within a decorative ensemble rather than isolating it as a self-sufficient object.¹⁹ In this environment, paintings were part of a spectacle that was as much about institutional display as about aesthetic contemplation.

The early public museums of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used rich colour schemes and decorative interiors as well. The Louvre, opened to the public in 1793, retained the decorative traditions of the salon-style, with walls covered in fabrics or painted in saturated tones. The British Museum (London), while less lavish, likewise employed coloured backgrounds in its galleries, often red or blue, to provide contrast with paintings and

¹⁵ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 31-32; Bal, *The museum in transition*, 19.

¹⁶ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 31-32.

¹⁷ Ibid., 31-32.

¹⁸ Hammecken & Hansen, *Ornament and Monstrosity in Early Modern Art*, 18-19.

¹⁹ Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum*, 33-35.

antiquities.²⁰ Similar to the salons, these museum interiors reflected the political and cultural ambitions of museums as institutions. Art historian Carol Duncan explains how the nineteenth-century museum functioned as a civilising ritual, staging national identity and cultural authority by asserting the grandeur of the state and the authority of the canon through the museum's architecture and displays.²¹ In this sense, both museums and salons reinforced their ideological role through colour, ornament, and spectacle.

However, by the mid-nineteenth century complaints about the density of salon-style displays started to emerge. As art markets expanded and the number of works exhibited grew, walls became over-crowded, leading to criticisms that individual works could not be properly appreciated. John Ruskin (1819-1900), reviewing the 1858 Royal Academy exhibition in London, lamented that the rules of symmetry of the salon and the positioning of the paintings made meaningful engagement nearly impossible.²² Coincidentally, the emerging aristocratic public increasingly demanded conditions for private contemplation, leading to a shift in audience engagement.²³

According to art historian Charlotte Klonk, one of the most significant factors in the transition away from salon-style interiors was the development of new lighting technologies. In the eighteenth century, skylights became common in galleries, such as the Dulwich Picture Gallery (London), designed by Sir John Soane (1753-1837) and which opened in 1817 (fig. 6). The built-in ceiling windows provided more even lighting than conventional windows, while also reducing glares and harsh shadows, which allowed viewers to see paintings clearer.²⁴ Later in the nineteenth century, the invention of gas- and electric lighting further transformed galleries as they made it possible to control light intensity and distribution even more precise. Although it took a while for museums to fully switch over to gas- or electric lighting, due to distrust in the stability and safety of these new technologies, they played a part in lowering the threshold for new museum audiences, as evening openings could be attended by the working class who could now visit the museum after work hours.²⁵

As lighting improved, wall colours began to change. Whereas deep reds and greens had provided strong contrast under dim natural light, paler tones became more effective in brighter settings. According to Klonk, the shift started particularly in Scandinavian and

²⁰ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 19-22.

²¹ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 7-10; Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 21.

²² Ruskin, "Academy Notes, 1858," 217.

²³ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁵ Swinney, "Gaslighting in British Museums and Galleries," 115-118.

German museums, as their emphasis on uniqueness and personal expression prompted a departure from the eighteenth-century artistic canon and encouraged a renewed recognition of the variety of styles across historical periods.²⁶ For example, the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, designed in the 1890s by Leo von Klenze (1784-1864), adopted pale grey walls to harmonise with Old Master paintings (fig. 7).²⁷

The nineteenth century also saw a growing emphasis on the museum's educational role as the museum became a popular site for working-class audiences besides the aristocratic class.²⁸ The new role of museums encouraged clearer, less cluttered arrangements, with works hung at eye-level and grouped thematically by style school or in chronological order, rather than crowded together and spread over entire walls. By favouring clarity, order, and legibility, these renewed display practices foreshadow the modernist preference for sparse displays in which artworks are isolated and decontextualised. The anticipation was most likely unconscious and unintentional however, as these moves were still partial and inconsistent during the nineteenth century. Richly coloured walls and ornate frames remained common, and many institutions continued to value the spectacle of abundance over individual understanding, such as the British Museum, which displayed its collections as self-evident (fig. 8).

The pre-modern gallery was thus anything but blank; it was colourful, ornate, and its display represented a hierarchy. By the late nineteenth century, the pressure of visitor demands, museums becoming educational institutes, and new technologies like gas- and electric light were already pushing display practices towards simpler, less elaborate forms of display. Lighter walls, clearer lighting, and more restrained hanging practices signalled a shift from extravagance and hierarchy to tuned moderation and modesty, perhaps from an educational purpose. These incremental transitions formed the groundwork for the more radical developments of the twentieth century, in which modernist aesthetics and architectural innovation would institutionalise the white-walled gallery as the dominant model of display.

1.2 The Birth of the White Cube in Modernism: The Aesthetic of Neutrality

The term 'white cube' was popularised by Brian O'Doherty in a series of essays first published in *Artforum* in 1976. To him, the white cube is not simply a neutral background for displaying artworks, but an ideological model that stages artworks as being self-determined,

²⁶ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 41.

²⁷ Ibid., 49-50.

²⁸ Swinney, "Gaslighting in British Museums and Galleries," 47.

unbound to the passing of time, and detached from the social or political conditions of their production.²⁹ The whiteness of the gallery is thus both literal and symbolic: it produces an illusion of being without context while masking the fact that the white cube is a context in and of itself. In museological terms, the white cube can be understood as a break from earlier modes of display. However, Klonk argues that the transition from ornamented galleries to white-walled spaces was not abrupt, but gradual, developing through nineteenth-century experiments with lighter wall colours and new lighting technologies.³⁰

By the early twentieth century stylistic experiments had resulted in an aesthetic of restraint that aligned closely with modernist ideals of clarity and autonomy. It has become clear that pre-twentieth-century museums and salons were richly coloured, ornately framed, and densely hung, reflecting hierarchies of status and institutional power, such as the salon's authority in determining and upholding standards of artistic beauty.³¹ In contrast, the modernist white cube presented itself as self-erasure, stripping away all forms of ornament and context in order to enhance coherence and enable deep focus.³²

Ideally, within the walls of the white cube, artworks were to be presented as if they transcend time and space. Architectural historian and critic Mark Wigley has noted in his study of modernist architecture that whiteness had become associated with notions of cleanliness and rationality, which is particularly well documented in studies on racial whiteness, such as in *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (1997) by academic Richard Dyer.³³ Anna Chave argues that, in reality, art is situated within a specific ideological modernist framework in which self-evidence and timelessness are mobilised to naturalise the authority of the institution and its curators, while also erasing the cultural specificity behind the artworks.³⁴ In this sense, the white cube is not a neutral container, but an active agent in the production of meaning.

The rise of the white cube cannot be separated from the emergence of modernism in the visual arts. From the early twentieth century, artists and critics, mainly avant-gardists, such as Malevich and Bart van der Leek (De Stijl, 1876-1958), increasingly valued purity, simplicity, and autonomy, seeking to distinguish modern art from what was regarded as the

²⁹ O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 14-15.

³⁰ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 43-48.

³¹ Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum*, 20-27.

³² O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15.

³³ Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, 3-5.

³⁴ Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," 47-49.

traditions revolving either around representation or decoration associated with the nineteenth century.

Modernist art theorist Clement Greenberg argued that painting should focus on what makes painting unique (i.e. its visual qualities such as its two-dimensionality and colours), instead of trying to create the illusion of reality.³⁵ Within this framework, the gallery environment was expected to mute itself in order to offer a neutral stage upon which the ‘truth’ of the artwork could appear unmediated. Therefore, the white wall was not an arbitrary design decision, but the architectural expression of modernist ideals. Klonk argues that by removing decorative distractions, eliminating former hierarchies of hanging practices, and painting walls in neutral colours, the gallery was thought to allow the artwork to stand in its purest form.³⁶

In O’Doherty’s foundational critique of the modernist display paradigm, the white cube is described as a space that has a “limbo-like status” in which art “takes on its own life,” presented as self-sufficient, untouched by time, and detached from historical and societal contexts.³⁷ For O’Doherty, however, the white walls, controlled lighting, and smooth floors were not neutral, but deeply ideological: they created the illusion of neutrality precisely by erasing outside context. According to O’Doherty, the sanitised atmosphere of the white cube strongly resembles the logic of the church, with which he turns the gallery into a sort of religious space.³⁸ He explains that viewers are expected to adopt a posture of hushed contemplation, again reinforcing the authority of institutions and supposedly of certain artworks. This uneven distribution of power between the art and the audience enables institutions to naturalise the canon of art.³⁹ The ideological function of the white cube, then, was to naturalise the idea of art as something pervasive and permanent, while masking the cultural and historical specificity of those claims.

The rise in the white cube’s popularity came paired with broader developments in architectural modernism too. The principles of simplicity and functionalism promoted by architects such as Le Corbusier (1887-1965) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), translated readily into museum design. Under the directorship of Barr, the MoMA became the leading example of this new aesthetic from the 1930s onward. Its galleries, designed with white walls, clean lines, and uncluttered arrangements, set the international standard for the

³⁵ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 196.

³⁶ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 74-76.

³⁷ O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 14-16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

display of modern art.⁴⁰ The MoMA's early exhibitions, such as *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), demonstrated the ideological power of the white wall. Here, artworks were spread out and placed at eye-level, which resulted in a sense of independence and detachment from everyday life.⁴¹ It reinforced Barr's teleological view of modern art history (fig. 9), in which earlier art movements and styles, such as Neo-Impressionism and Synthetism,⁴² lead to abstract art that favours simple formalist rules, similar to Malevich's Suprematist 'supremacy of the square' and Neoplasticism's use of solely primary colours.⁴³

Like how technological innovations helped shape exhibition practices in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century electric lighting allowed curators to create evenly illuminated spaces, eliminating the irregularities of natural light. Climate control and new construction materials made it possible to build tightly sealed galleries, further reinforcing the sense of a timeless, decontextualised environment.⁴⁴ In this way, modernist architecture and technology provided the infrastructure for the ideological framework of the white cube.

The influence of European avant-garde movements also played a key role in the development of the white cube. Throughout its history, Bauhaus, founded by Walter Gropius (1883-1969) in 1919, promoted an aesthetic of clarity and functionality that aligned closely with the principles of simplistic and blank display practices through the combination of architecture, design, and fine art.⁴⁵ While they initially worked with wood, when moved to Dessau, Bauhaus showed an increase in the use of white walls, geometric forms, and modular arrangements, which influenced both museum architecture and curatorial design (fig. 10).

Similarly in the Netherlands, De Stijl advocated for radical reduction and balance in both art and design. Their insistence on primary colours, geometric abstraction, and the neutral white background as an organising principle directly shaped the aesthetics of exhibition spaces in the Netherlands and beyond as Dutch artists and collectors formed bonds with non-Dutch artists and vice versa.⁴⁶ One remarkable relationship is the friendship between artist Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) and wife and husband Mia and Martin Visser, for

⁴⁰ Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, 66.

⁴¹ Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, 70.

⁴² Synthetism is a Post-Impressionist art movement (ca. 1890) focused on the combination of the appearance of natural forms with the artist's emotional impressions, and purely aesthetic considerations of form, line and colour. The movement is recognisable by a move away from realism, instead favouring simplistic, flattened figures and shapes, bold colours, and strong dark outlines. Key artists include Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard.

⁴³ Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, 128.

⁴⁴ Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 92-95.

⁴⁵ Droste, *Bauhaus: 1919-1933*, 15.

⁴⁶ Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, 14.

whom LeWitt created multiple art pieces and of which some of the works ended up in various Dutch museums, including the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.⁴⁷

By the 1960s, the Minimalist Art movement strengthened the relationship between modernist art and the white cube. Artists such as Judd, Carl Andre (1936-2024), and LeWitt emphasised reduction, repetition, and industrial materials, rejecting metaphor and illusion in favour of literal, physical presence. For these artists, the gallery became an active element in the experience of their work. Judd argued that this new art should be understood not as painting or sculpture, but as ‘specific objects’ engaging directly with space and matter.⁴⁸ Such works demanded a space that would not compete with their material and spatial qualities, which the white cube matched well. The geometry and cleanliness perfectly mirrored the reductive forms of the artworks themselves, reinforcing their claims to objectivity.

By the mid-twentieth century, the white-walled display concept had become the dominant convention of modern and contemporary art museums in the United States and Western Europe. Modern art critic and historian Michael Fried famously condemned Minimalism for its ‘theatricality.’ He argued that Minimalist artworks depended too heavily on the conditions of display and the presence of the viewer.⁴⁹ However, this critique underlines precisely how inseparable Minimalism was from the white cube, as the neutrality of the gallery was integral to the aesthetic experience of Minimalist art. The invisible presence of the white wall in the twentieth century made alternative modes of display appear outdated. Thus, according to O’Doherty, the white cube was not only an architectural style, but a global cultural norm that structured the way modern and contemporary art was experienced.⁵⁰

1.3 New Conventions for New Times

As discussed above, the rise of the white-walled display concept in the twentieth century was a product of the intersection between modernist aesthetics, architectural innovation, technological developments, and avant-garde art movements. What began as an attempt to remove distraction and highlight the autonomy of art objects became institutionalised as the default exhibition paradigm. The white cube’s apparent neutrality masked its ideological

⁴⁷ Cuglietta, “Een Joodse kunstenaar,” 15.

⁴⁸ Judd, “Specific Objects,” 181-182.

⁴⁹ Fried, *Art and objecthood*, 153.

⁵⁰ O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15-17.

function, normalising the idea of art as self-evident while doing away with historical and social specificity.

By the mid-twentieth century, the white-walled display concept had become institutionalised as the dominant exhibition model, reinforced both by the Minimalist Art movement, which demanded uncluttered environments, as well as by architectural modernism's embrace of functionalism. The link between artistic innovation and architectural design ensured the white cube's ubiquity, transforming it from a radical break with European nineteenth-century conventions into the primary model for art display in Western contemporary art museums. Its power lay precisely in its invisibility: the more it claimed neutrality, the more effectively its values became normalised as general norms.

The history traced in this chapter should not be regarded as a linear progression toward a final stage in curatorial development, but the emergence of a dominant convention whose very dominance provoked debate. While the white cube was ideologically conducive for modernists such as Barr, it could be argued that the white cube also created an atmosphere that could be sterile and alienating. These contradictions opened the door for critique and resistance in the later twentieth century, as artists and curators began to question the claims of neutrality and explore alternative, context-rich approaches to display art.

Understanding how the white-walled gallery arose, from the richly decorated salons of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Europe to the Minimalist transcendence of the modernist museum, provides necessary context for examining the critiques and reconfigurations that will occupy the following chapters. Moving forward, the question is no longer how the white cube became dominant, but what caused museums to step away from it in search of other display practices.

Reconfiguring Established, White-walled Curatorial Frameworks

The previous chapter traced the emergence of the white cube as both an architectural and an ideological concept. It is clear that in practice the ‘aesthetic of neutrality’ that promised timeless encounters with art often severed the artwork from its spatial, historical, and social contexts.⁵¹ While the white cube became the core representative form of modern and contemporary art display at the end of the twentieth century, the early twenty-first century has witnessed a growing curatorial and institutional rethinking of this spatial model. In this context, the Centraal Museum Utrecht offers a particularly compelling case study. Founded in 1838 and housed within a historically layered architectural space, including a former medieval convent, the museum’s recent redesign (December 2023) reveals how institutions embedded in long histories can reconfigure their spatial and curatorial identities without disavowing their past.

This chapter examines how the Centraal Museum has negotiated its dual commitments to preserve and present a multi-disciplinary collection and to cultivate a contemporary sensibility attuned to the affective, spatial, and performative dimensions of exhibition-making. In an interview conducted for this thesis in October 2025, director of the Centraal Museum Bart Rutten emphasised that the museum’s guiding philosophy is to “invest in a better society” through collaboration with artists and publics, positioning the institution as an active agent, rather than a passive repository.⁵² This perspective resonates with the shift from ‘the museum as temple’ to ‘the museum as forum’ that research professor in Social and Cultural Theory Tony Bennett described, where the visitor’s interpretive agency and social participation become central to the museum’s function.⁵³

The Centraal Museum’s transformation can be understood as part of a broader post-white cube sensibility, in which the neutral gallery space gives way to an architecture of sensorial complexity and historical layering (fig. 11-12).⁵⁴ The redesign rejects both the homogeneity of the white cube and the theatricality of the nineteenth-century salon, opting instead for an approach that foregrounds what Rutten calls ‘celebrating differences’.⁵⁵ The museum’s interdisciplinary identity, instrumentalised through its vast and diverse collections,

⁵¹ O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 14-16.

⁵² Interview with Bart Rutten, conducted by Alannah Harijgens (author) [October 20, 2025, Utrecht].

⁵³ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 89-90.

⁵⁴ Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 41-42.

⁵⁵ Interview with Rutten.

embodies what Claire Bishop has termed ‘radical museology’: a reimagining of the museum not as a site of cultural preservation alone, but as a dynamic, reflexive space that “thinks with the present.”⁵⁶

The Centraal Museum is particularly interesting for its architectural constraints; the ‘squeaks and creaks,’ as Rutten describes them, of a nineteenth-century building attempting to accommodate twenty-first-century curatorial ambitions.⁵⁷ Far from viewing these limitations as obstacles, the design team used the building’s historic structure as a narrative device. Sightlines, glass partitions, and a central garden serve as orientational anchors, creating continuity across temporally diverse displays. Such strategies align with Professor of Museum Studies Suzanne MacLeod’s argument that museum architecture must increasingly be understood as a form of curatorial practice in itself: an active participant in meaning-making rather than a neutral container.⁵⁸

The Centraal Museum’s transhistorical curatorial model further distinguishes it within the Dutch museum context. By juxtaposing medieval artefacts with contemporary installations, the museum challenges the linear temporality that once defined modernist display. The goal is not to collapse history into the present, but to expose the resonances between them.⁵⁹ This sensibility is visible, for instance, in the combination of art from divergent time periods and style schools: a display logic that recalls Bishop’s observation that contemporary curating often operates through productive friction, rather than stylistic harmony.⁶⁰

From the interview emerged three main themes that explain the curatorial and exhibition shift at the Centraal Museum. The first section of this chapter examines how the museum articulates its public mission and self-definition in relation to broader shifts in museological discourse, including the new ICOM museum definition of 2022. Then, the second section analyses the architectural and curatorial decisions that reshape visitor experience, including the use of colour, materials, and spatial orientation as interpretive tools. Finally, the third section considers how the museum negotiates between cognitive and affective modes of engagement, hospitality, and accessibility, and how digital mediation expands these sensorial registers. Through these three lenses, this chapter argues that the Centraal Museum Utrecht exemplifies a form of curatorial hybridity. Rather than aspiring to

⁵⁶ Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 6.

⁵⁷ Interview with Rutten.

⁵⁸ MacLeod, *Reshaping Museum Space*, 2; 17-18.

⁵⁹ Interview with Rutten.

⁶⁰ Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 40-41.

the sterile clarity of the white cube, the museum embraces complexity, both historical, spatial, and experiential.

By analysing this case study, this chapter contributes to an ongoing revaluation of how contemporary museums negotiate between aesthetic autonomy and public responsibility. The Centraal Museum Utrecht demonstrates that rejecting the white-walled display does not mean abandoning its aesthetics altogether. It rather involves reconfiguring the conditions under which aesthetic experience is possible. It offers a living example of how the white wall, once a symbol of modernist clarity, can be reimagined as a surface of encounter, textured by history, materiality, and human presence.

2.1 Institutional Philosophy and Identity

The recent transformation of the permanent collection presentation of the Centraal Museum Utrecht reflects a deeper institutional philosophy. When asked to define the museum's underlying mission, Rutten responded not in terms of collection management or attendance figures, but in ethical and civic terms: "We want to invest in a better society through our collaborations with artists."⁶¹ This orientation situates the Centraal Museum within a growing movement of museums that reinterpret their civic role as one of social engagement, cultural participation, and collaborative authorship.

The museum's dual identity, as both a historical institution and a contemporary actor, produces a productive tension. On the one hand, it inherits the Enlightenment legacy of collection, classification, and preservation; on the other hand, it must respond to a twenty-first-century public that expects inclusivity, immediacy, and participation. Rutten acknowledges this tension directly, positioning the museum as an institution that collects for future generations while simultaneously engaging with the empty spaces between disciplines.⁶² His emphasis on interdisciplinarity (i.e. integrating art, design, fashion, and city history) (fig. 13) marks a significant departure from the separating curatorial strategies of earlier decades. This approach resonates with feminist art historian Hilde Hein's assertion that the museum is no longer a static site for the consumption of finished objects, but a space to produce meaning.⁶³ Hein argues that the modern museum, once designed to preserve cultural stability, now functions as a dynamic medium that negotiates the instability of contemporary life. The Centraal Museum exemplifies this shift: rather than offering definitive

⁶¹ Interview with Rutten.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Hein, *The Museum in Transition*, viii; 5.

narratives, it frames exhibitions as open-ended conversations between disciplines, objects, and audiences.

Rutten's insistence on celebrating the voids between disciplines gestures toward a transhistorical exhibition model, which is a curatorial strategy that juxtaposes artworks from different periods to reveal unexpected correspondences.⁶⁴ At the Centraal Museum, this approach serves both aesthetic and political purposes. By refusing the linear progression from the past to the present, it challenges the teleological narratives embedded in traditional museology (e.g. Barr's ideas on the evolution of modernist art). Instead, it invites visitors to perceive history as layered, dialogical, and perpetually rewritten.

The Centraal Museum's transhistorical mentality also reflects the intellectual climate of Dutch museology, where institutions such as the Rijksmuseum and Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (Rotterdam) are also experimenting with non-chronological displays. Yet, while those larger museums often approach trans-historicism through canonical frameworks, such as highlighting previously overlooked individuals in Dutch history (e.g. the Rijksmuseum tours highlighting women and colonial histories mentioned in the Introduction), the Centraal Museum's approach is considerably more intimate, since it is rooted in the local history of Utrecht and in the physical limitations of its building, as it was not originally build to hold a museum. Rutten's goal, he explains, is to shift from disciplinary separation (i.e. presenting painting, sculpture, textiles, applied art, and site-specific history on their own) to narrative cohesion by making the museum one collection (fig. 13).⁶⁵

The curatorial language that results from embracing differences, which is dense, layered, and sometimes contradictory, instead of accepting conformity encourages visitors to think relationally rather than sequentially. Visitors are invited to move between scales, materials, and historical registers, experiencing the collection as an interconnected fabric, rather than as a sequence of isolated objects. A clear example of this approach can be found in the *Pracht en Prijs* (Splendour and Price) room (fig. 4 & 12), where a seventeenth-century dollhouse functions as the conceptual anchor of the space.

Instead of isolating the dollhouse as a singular historical artefact (fig. 11), the curatorial team constructed the room as an expanded interpretation of the miniature interior itself.⁶⁶ Paintings with frames echoing those depicted inside the dollhouse, Delft earthenware, and domestic objects from the same period are arranged around it, not according to medium

⁶⁴ Musteata, "The Origins of the Transhistorical Museum," 4.

⁶⁵ Interview with Rutten.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

or hierarchy, but according to narrative resonance. The room operates as a three-dimensional translation of a domestic world, collapsing distinctions between fine art, applied art, and everyday material culture. This strategy further exemplifies Rutten's ambition to present the museum as one collection rather than a set of parallel disciplinary strands.⁶⁷ Here, meaning is produced not through linear chronology or stylistic categorisation, but through spatial storytelling and associative viewing.

The museum's evolving philosophy also aligns closely with the 2022 ICOM museum definition, which repositions museums as "inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and futures."⁶⁸ Although Rutten explicitly references this new definition, he also insists that the old definition, focusing more on collection and preservation, remains valid.⁶⁹ This dual alignment underscores how the Centraal Museum balances tackling contemporary calls for social relevance without abandoning its archival and historical responsibilities. In this respect, the museum embodies what Simon has called the participatory museum, which would be an institution that enables visitors to become co-creators of meaning rather than passive recipients.⁷⁰ While acknowledging that co-creation asks a lot of extra energy from staff, making full participatory integration is logistically impossible within the museum's current resources, Rutten states that the aspiration remains embedded in the museum's essence.⁷¹ The museum's collaborations with artists, educators, and local communities function as incremental steps toward the participatory horizon.

The museum's operational reality, balancing multidisciplinary projects with financial constraints, limited space, and heritage regulations, reflects a broader tension across the European museum landscape.⁷² Rutten's insistence that "every part of the museum helps each other – the café, the shop, the exhibitions" reveals a practical recognition of the museum's hybrid status as both a cultural and economic institute.⁷³ Although Bennett does not mention the economic aspect, this does connect to his argument that museums are educational instruments and social regulators, but also potential spaces for critical reflection.⁷⁴ The

⁶⁷ Interview with Rutten.

⁶⁸ ICOM, "Museum Definition," 2022.

⁶⁹ Interview with Rutten.

The previous ICOM Museum Definition (2007) is as follows: "A museum is 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." ICOM, "Museum Definition."

⁷⁰ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, "Preface".

⁷¹ Interview with Rutten.

⁷² MacLeod, *Reshaping Museum Space*, 12; Parry & Sawyer, "Space and the Machine," 39-40.

⁷³ Interview with Rutten.

⁷⁴ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 91.

Centraal Museum negotiates this ambivalence not by seeking neutrality, but by embracing multiplicity. Therefore, its identity is not that of a static temple of art, but of a living ecosystem, continually rebalanced through collaboration and critique. By celebrating the empty spaces between disciplines, the Centraal Museum reframes friction not as a problem, but as an opportunity to push renewing energy within an institution that is both historically conscious and forward-thinking.

2.2 Spatial Strategies and Design

If the Centraal Museum's philosophy articulates a shift from disciplinary isolation to relational openness, its architecture performs that shift spatially. The museum's layout, circulation, and visual language serve both as medium and metaphor for its curatorial approach. Situated mainly in the early fifteenth-century Agnietenklooster (a convent complex) (fig. 14-16), the building is structurally unsuited to the open, rectilinear expanses of the modernist white cube. Yet rather than treating this as a limitation, Rutten interprets the museum's fragmented architecture as a curatorial advantage: "Our building forces us to be creative."⁷⁵

With each room having its own character and history, it gives the curators creative rhythms to work with. This stance goes against the modernist assumption that the ideal exhibition space is neutral, timeless, and detached from context.⁷⁶ The Centraal Museum, in contrast, embraces diversity and receptiveness. Its multiple wings, uneven floors, and layered sightlines (fig. 16-17) resist the seamless perspective control that modernist museum architecture idealised.

At the Centraal Museum, this revelation is not merely architectural transparency, but a curatorial strategy, based on the notion that the museum's physical form participates in meaning-making. The museum's architecture, composed of interlocking wings, acts as a living archive of institutional history. The layering of premodern architectural foundations with modern interventions mirrors the museum's transhistorical curatorial strategy. Rutten acknowledges this reciprocity between space and narrative: "We are in a nineteenth-century building; it has limitations, but also personality. You walk through the museum, and you move through time."⁷⁷ By foregrounding its architectural discontinuities, the Centraal Museum invites visitors to experience the museum as a constructed space, not a transparent

⁷⁵ Interview with Rutten.

⁷⁶ O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 14-15.

⁷⁷ Interview with Rutten.

vessel for art. In this sense, the museum's layout performs institution reflexivity, as explained by Bishop as a curatorial self-awareness that acknowledges the museum's role as mediator, rather than an invisible frame.⁷⁸

An important manifestation of this spatial philosophy is the museum's partial departure from white walls. Rutten describes his deliberate rejection of the white cube aesthetic: "The white walls are not neutral; they create distance. We want people to feel something, to experience art in relation to the room they are in."⁷⁹ This sentiment resonates with architect Juhani Pallasmaa's argument that the dominance of visual neutrality in modern exhibition design impoverishes the full sensory experience of a space.⁸⁰ For Pallasmaa, the overemphasis on sight, as embodied by the white cube's luminous, antiseptic atmosphere, neglects other senses, such as touch, hearing, sensing temperature, and smell, all of which contribute to how meaning is constructed.⁸¹

In response to the flatness and lack of stimuli inside white-walled galleries, the Centraal Museum employs colour, texture, and lighting to foster distinct atmospheres across its galleries. Another look at the Splendour and Price room (fig. 4 & 12) shows how it utilises deep brown walls and gilded frames, evoking seventeenth- and eighteenth-century luxury and underscoring the theme of material value. Curiously, the museum's most valuable object, the richly decorated dollhouse made for Petronella de la Court (1624-1707), has undergone remarkable changes over time. In the early nineteenth century, a decade before neutral exhibition spaces were advocated for in the 1930s, the walls in the art room were painted white (fig. 18). As Chapter One has shown, early modern art rooms were richly decorated, confirming the strangeness of the dollhouse's situation.⁸² Thus, the walls of the most opulent room of the dollhouse were restored to their former, more period accurate condition (fig. 19).⁸³

Similarly, the *Smaken Verschillen* (Tastes Differ) gallery, which houses only a small part of the works collected by brother and sister Lambertus and Josephina van Baaren, uses busy wallpaper and dense hanging to recreate the intimacy of the Van Baaren's private home (fig. 20), inviting a contemplative yet personal mode of viewing. This shift from uniform neutrality to situational design marks a clear departure from the modernist ideal of universal

⁷⁸ Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 49; 53.

⁷⁹ Interview with Rutten.

⁸⁰ Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 41-42.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 19-22.

⁸³ Blokker, "Poppenhuiskamer krijgt makeover."

display, as it involves not simply a change of colour, but a rethinking of what exhibition environments communicate.⁸⁴ At the Centraal Museum, this rethinking aligns with the museum's broader mission to add context and make the visitor aware of their own position within the narrative. Colour thus becomes not decoration, but a means of engaging emotion, memory, and cultural association.

While the white cube aimed to erase the boundary between art and environment, the Centraal Museum makes that boundary visible through strategic use of glass and sightlines. Rutten highlights the glass walls overlooking the museum's garden as an essential aspect of its design (fig. 21).⁸⁵ He argues that the glass connects the museum to the outside world, preventing the feeling of isolation and disorientation that white cubes often create. This gesture shows the museum's aspiration to function as part of the city's social fabric rather than an enclave of cultural authority.

The use of glass as both barrier and connector recalls architectural historian Beatriz Colomina's reading of modernist architecture as an optical device that mediates visibility, framing, and surveillance.⁸⁶ Yet at the Centraal Museum, transparency serves a more dialogical purpose as it invites connectivity between interior and exterior, between art and life. This echoes Bennett's idea of the museum as a civic laboratory, where public culture is continuously produced through spatial negotiation.⁸⁷ The combination of transparency and reflection in Utrecht thus dramatises the museum's philosophical tension between autonomy and accessibility.

One of Rutten's most vivid metaphors for visitor experience is his description of the 'pinball effect' or the disorienting sensation of being bounced between disconnected rooms and exhibitions.⁸⁸ His curatorial strategy seeks to counter this fragmentation by creating rhythmic transitions between spaces, establishing narrative continuity even as visitors move across radically different contexts. For example, the permanent collection presentation is mostly chronological: as visitors go through the museum and up the levels of the building they move from the late medieval period to the present day.

The goal, as Rutten explains, is to enable "a natural flow of storytelling through space."⁸⁹ Whereas modernist museums sought to minimise distraction by creating

⁸⁴ Higgins, "From cathedral of culture to anchor attractor," 215-217.

⁸⁵ Interview with Rutten.

⁸⁶ Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity*, 234-238.

⁸⁷ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 101.

⁸⁸ Interview with Rutten.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

undifferentiated space, the Centraal Museum choreographs experience through spatial contrast. Tight corridors open into expansive galleries and dark rooms precede luminous ones (fig. 22). Thus, the building becomes a type of narrator, structuring how meaning unfolds temporally and sensorially.

Such spatial rhythm resonates with culture critic Mieke Bal's notion of the 'travelling concept,' which describes how ideas and concepts migrate across contexts, gathering new meanings by moving through different disciplines.⁹⁰ The white cube too can be understood as a travelling concept. Emerging from early twentieth-century modernist exhibition practices, it travelled from avant-garde galleries into museums, art criticism, and the commercial art market. By the late twentieth century, it can be argued that the white cube functioned less as a historically situated model and more as an assumed default, as its ideological foundations of neutrality and autonomy were often naturalised rather than questioned.

In contemporary museums, however, the white-walled display concept increasingly encounters resistance. As institutions engage with broader cultural debates around inclusion, decolonisation, and audience diversity, the white wall's claims to neutrality is re-evaluated. In this context, participation and co-creation emerge as travelling concepts as well. Originally associated with socially engaged art and community-based practices, they now circulate within institutional museum frameworks, such as those imposed by Simon in *The Participatory Museum* (2018), influencing exhibition design, mediation strategies, and spatial organisation.

At the Centraal Museum, these travelling concepts intersect. Rather than adopting participation as a purely programmatic add-on, the museum integrates co-creative principles into its exhibition logic through narrative layering, digital mediation, and collaborations with artists and external voices.⁹¹ This shift is spatial as well as conceptual: exhibition spaces are designed to accommodate different modes of engagement, from quiet looking to listening, reading, and social interaction. Multi-sensory elements, including colour, sound, material density, and digital interfaces, are introduced not to overwhelm the visitor, but to offer multiple entry points into the collection.

Ultimately, the Centraal Museum's architectural strategy can be read as a form of spatial relationality. Rather than offering the illusion of neutrality, it foregrounds context, materiality, and dialogue. The museum's complex maze-like structure, textured surfaces, and

⁹⁰ Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 14; 23-25.

⁹¹ Interview with Rutten.

colour-coded rooms invite not passive observation but active interpretation. This reflects a broader museological turn toward a contextual model of learning, in which meaning arises through the interaction between the visitor, the museum's environment, and its content.⁹² In this sense, the Centraal Museum could be interpreted as a spatial argument against the white cube. It demonstrates that complexity, texture, and history can deepen, rather than distract from, artistic experience.

2.3 Sensoriality, Mediation, and the Visitor

The Centraal Museum's emphasis on atmosphere, touch, and encounter redefines the visitor's role. Here, the visitor is not seen as a detached observer, but as an active participant in the production of meaning. Rutten makes this shift explicit when he insists that "[t]he museum is not a neutral container for art; it's too specific a space. Everything you encounter, from the people, the sounds, and even the air, becomes part of the experience."⁹³ This approach reframes curatorial practice from the modernist model of controlled visual contemplation toward the inevitable multi-sensorial experience described by Pallasmaa, in which the museum visit involves haptic, auditory, and affective registers beyond the eye.⁹⁴

According to Brian O'Doherty and Rosalind Krauss, the white cube conditioned a form of spectatorship grounded in optical distance, situated as a disembodied eye.⁹⁵ Within that context, the visitor was invited to contemplate art in silence, isolated from bodily awareness and from other people. The Centraal Museum explicitly disrupts this condition. Rather than suppressing sensory multiplicity, it invites it. The texture of wallpaper, the density of rooms, the reflection of glass, and even the sound of footsteps becomes integral to the exhibition's affect. Thus, the Centraal Museum's design, with its tactile materials, vivid colours, and layered lighting, can be read as an active, epistemic statement: meaning is not transmitted purely through vision, but through the full spectrum of embodied perception.

Rutten's attentiveness to sensory variety is not coincidental, but ideological. He situates the museum's atmosphere within a broader ethical aim: to lower the threshold of art experience. As he explains, "We spend a lot of time and energy on hospitality... most of the people you meet are volunteers. We want people to feel at home here."⁹⁶ This emphasis on warmth and approachability functions as an affective counterpoint to the modernist gallery

⁹² Falk & Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited*, 33-34.

⁹³ Interview with Rutten.

⁹⁴ Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 40-61.

⁹⁵ O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15; Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 216.

⁹⁶ Interview with Rutten.

which often was experienced as cold austerity. By designing the museum with the intent to encourage personal connections between people, art, and other people, the museum is transformed from a site of reverence to a place of welcome.

The affective and social dimensions of the Centraal Museum extend beyond design into the behaviour it encourages. Rutten identifies an under-acknowledged performative layer in visitor experience: “When you walk around in the museum, you too are watched. You become part of the spectacle. People want to show that they belong.”⁹⁷ This notion recalls Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. Butler argues that identity is not pre-given but enacted through social behaviour and repetition.⁹⁸ In the museum context, such performativity manifests in how visitors navigate space, which rooms they linger in, and which wall texts they choose to read. These gestures become small but meaningful performances of cultural literacy.

At the Centraal Museum, this performativity is made visible and is even embraced. By varying levels of mediation, from printed booklets to interactive screens, audio guides and mini workshops, the museum allows for different entry points to interpretation (fig. 23-24). Rutten describes this system as a layered architecture of understanding: “A-level (wall) texts tell the overarching story; B-level (object) texts offer more context; and C-level texts [such as audio tours] provide deeper insights.”⁹⁹ However, Rutten is aware of the social dynamics embedded within these layers. He notes that “people are performers inside the exhibition” and that “no one wants to be seen reading the beginner’s text.”¹⁰⁰ This observation highlights a paradox of contemporary museology: even as institutions strive for accessibility, cultural hierarchies of knowledge persist. By recognising and incorporating this performative behaviour into design, the Centraal Museum reveals rather than conceals the social theatre of art appreciation.

Rutten’s reflections on the role of digital media expose a tension at the heart of multi-sensory museology. On the one hand, he views digital mediation in the form of screens, audio guides, and interactive displays as a necessary tool to enhance accessibility and storytelling. On the other, he worries about its potential to overpower the artworks: “When the screens arrived, they were so big and bright we had to install shadow films. You start to wonder; can the artwork compete with the screen?”¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Interview with Rutten.

⁹⁸ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 7; 220-222.

⁹⁹ Interview with Rutten.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

This ambivalence reflects broader debates about digital mediation in museums. As educator Beryl Graham and curator Sarah Cook argue, digital interfaces can either extend the aesthetic field or displace the aura of the original artwork.¹⁰² The Centraal Museum's approach of using media to add onto the physical encounter situates it within what researcher Ross Parry terms a post-digital museology, where the goal is not to digitise experience, but to embed technology into the affective structure of the museum, that is, to enrich the experience of art by adding deeper levels of context.¹⁰³

Crucially, Rutten's metaphor of the visitor as a performer, underscores how digital mediation reshapes social visibility. Standing before a screen becomes an act of display, a moment of self-presentation. Performance scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte would recognise this as the feedback loop of performative experience, where spectatorship and participation collapse into each other.¹⁰⁴ The museum thus becomes a stage not only for artworks, but for visitors themselves.

Through its layered mediation and sensory design, curators at the Centraal Museum acknowledge that perception is not merely visual cognition, but an embodied negotiation with space, temperature, proximity, and social atmosphere. Rutten's vision of the museum as 'a place you travel to' encapsulates this notion.¹⁰⁵ The museum's structure demands physical movement and spatial awareness; its rooms shift mood and scale; its staff shape the tone of encounter. Even fatigue and orientation become part of the aesthetic experience.

The Centraal Museum's spatial and mediatory strategies physically affirm that the museum's mission is not to isolate art from the world, but to weave art into the visitor's lived sensorium. By viewing the museum as a sensory ecology, rather than a visual archive, the Centraal Museum Utrecht holds a position at the forefront of a the earlier identified and described shift in contemporary curatorial thought: the movement from white-walled neutrality toward sensorial complexity.

2.4 Curatorial Tensions and Reflections

The Centraal Museum's curatorial philosophy is defined by a productive tension: between experimentation and tradition, accessibility and expertise, questioning and confirming. These dualities are not signs of incoherence but of a self-aware institution negotiating its place within contemporary museum sphere. As Rutten reflects, "If museums provide a lot of

¹⁰² Graham & Cook, *Rethinking Curating*, 199-200.

¹⁰³ Parry, "The End of the Beginning," 24.

¹⁰⁴ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 38

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Rutten.

contexts and have socially driven goals, there should be a middle ground between questioning and confirming.”¹⁰⁶ Here, Rutten potentially captures the contradiction at the heart of curatorial work today. On the one hand, museums are expected to act as critical spaces, interrogating established narratives, hierarchies, and power structures. On the other hand, they are repositories of cultural heritage, charged with maintaining continuity and authority. Rutten’s formulation suggests that Centraal Museum aims to operate within this tension rather than resolve it.

The museum’s transhistorical and interdisciplinary approach embodies this balance. By weaving together city history, design, and contemporary art, the institution resists the modernist impulse to isolate disciplines into closed-off categories. Instead, it constructs what Claire Bishop explains as a layered temporal structure where past and present coexist and inform one another.¹⁰⁷ Rutten explains that this interdisciplinarity is not an aesthetic gesture, but a political one: “We want to make connections ourselves and at a high level.”¹⁰⁸ The museum’s decision to adopt a chronological flow, from medieval art to contemporary installations, ensures narrative coherence.

However, the museum’s openness to dialogue between periods generates interpretive friction, for example by having seventeenth-century Caravaggisti paintings share a space with a twentieth-century sculpture (fig. 25), allowing historical and contemporary artworks to speak across time.¹⁰⁹ While the white cube, in O’Doherty’s analysis, exists outside history as a timeless chamber where art’s eternal value is presumed, the Centraal Museum foregrounds temporality and contingency.¹¹⁰ It insists that artworks are embedded in evolving social, material, and institutional contexts.

A comparable institutional example can be found in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven (fig. 3), which has long positioned itself at the forefront of critical and experimental exhibition practices in the Netherlands. Like the Centraal Museum, the Van Abbemuseum actively interrogates the assumptions embedded in modernist display conventions. Rather than presenting its collection as a stable, linear canon, the museum repeatedly reconfigures its displays through thematic, transhistorical, and discursive frameworks that foreground context, politics, and institutional self-reflexivity.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Rutten.

¹⁰⁷ Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 19.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Rutten.

¹⁰⁹ Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 14; 23-25.

¹¹⁰ O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15.

¹¹¹ Van Abbemuseum, “Collectie: Dwarsverbanden.”

Projects such as the *Museum of Arte Útil* (2013-2014), *Play Van Abbe* (2009-2011), and the permanent collection display *Dwarsverbanden* (Delinking and Relinking) (2021-2026) exemplify how the Van Abbemuseum approaches exhibition-making as an ongoing research process rather than a fixed presentation.¹¹² These projects incorporate archival material, artist interventions, and participatory formats that challenge conventional hierarchies between artwork, mediation, and audience. In doing so, the museum transforms exhibition space into a site of inquiry and debate, where meaning is produced relationally rather than through isolated contemplation.

While the Van Abbemuseum operates within a purpose-built modernist architecture, unlike the historically layered structure of the Centraal Museum Utrecht, both institutions exemplify a broader curatorial shift away from white-walled neutrality toward socially embedded, process-oriented, and multi-sensorial museum environments. This comparison underscores that resistance to the white cube is not solely driven by architectural constraint but reflects a wider epistemological transformation in contemporary museology.¹¹³

A recurring motif in Rutten's thinking is the idea of accessibility, not as simplification, but as empathy. He likens museum-going to developing a palate for taste. Visitors must gradually learn to appreciate the complexity of art, just as one might progress from simple meals to refined cuisine.¹¹⁴ This analogy reframes accessibility as an educational and ethical process: the curator's role is to create pathways for learning without condescension. Here, Rutten aligns with Simon's argument that museums can act as participatory platforms where visitors are not passive recipients of knowledge but active co-creators of meaning.¹¹⁵

However, unlike Simon's model of radical inclusivity, the Centraal Museum retains a degree of curatorial authorship. Rutten acknowledges the necessity of expertise and selection, warning that "if we focused only on co-creation, we would lose so much of our core values [of collecting and preserving art and history] and publics."¹¹⁶ Still, the museum's hospitality strategy, including working with volunteers, encouraging warmth, and designing sensorial spaces, can be read as a curatorial form of care, encompassing attentiveness, responsibility, and competence. By emphasising the interpersonal and emotional aspects of the museum

¹¹² Museum Arte Útil, "What is Arte Útil?"; Buskirk, "Play Van Abbe;" Van Abbemuseum, "Collectie: Dwarsverbanden."

¹¹³ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 243-247.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Rutten.

¹¹⁵ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, "Preface."

¹¹⁶ Interview with Rutten.

visit, the Centraal Museum reframes curation as an act of, in a way, caring for both artworks and audiences.

Rutten's reflections on the white cube are particularly revealing. He neither dismisses it outright nor romanticises its alternatives. He argues: "The white cube is still functional and valid, just not for us," speculating that it may even make a resurrection as it caters to audiences that do favour the calm and bright structure of the white-walled gallery.¹¹⁷ This measured response departs from the polemical tone of critics such as O'Doherty and Anna Chave, which will be addressed in the following chapter.

Rather than viewing the white cube as an ideological adversary, Rutten sees it as one aesthetic option among many within the broad selection of exhibition formats.¹¹⁸ For Rutten, the goal is not to abolish the white-walled display concept but to expand the range of possible experiences. In a way, this way of thinking acknowledges that no single spatial ideology can confine the multiplicity of contemporary audiences.¹¹⁹ The Centraal Museum thus becomes a node in a broad network of institutions, each representing different modes of encounter: from the contemplative clarity and whiteness of Voorlinden, to the monumental modernism of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam's minimalist large scale galleries, and the Centraal Museum Utrecht's sensorial hybridity.

Such reflexivity positions the museum as an institution that exhibits not only objects, but whose methods of display are equally transparent. Rutten's assertion "I want people to come here not just to see what we do, but how we do it" underscores a performative transparency in curatorial practice.¹²⁰ The museum stages its own processes, inviting visitors to witness the negotiations behind display, mediation, and design. This visibility functions as a quiet form of institutional critique, echoing Andrea Fraser's call for museums to expose rather than conceal their mechanisms of cultural production.¹²¹

Alongside the idea that the white cube will experience a revival because of the need for different modes of representation, Rutten extends his argument to ecological and economic concerns. He notes that "the white cube is cheaper and more sustainable," acknowledging a conflict in contemporary curatorial innovation: sensorial and complex displays often demand greater resources.¹²² The Centraal Museum's small scale and limited

¹¹⁷ Interview with Rutten.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions," 105.

¹²² Interview with Rutten.

display capacity, with less than two percent of its holdings of around 70.000 objects visible at once, compel it to work creatively within constraints. This scarcity fosters curatorial creativity and aligns with the growing discourse around sustainable museology, which advocates for adaptive reuse, energy efficiency, and moderation over expansion.¹²³

Rutten's call for a new building is not a rejection of these principles but a recognition of architectural limitation. The museum building's listed status as a monument (historic convent) restricts structural change, yet this very constraint has shaped its distinctive spatial character, defined by intimacy, texture, and human scale. Such intimacy can foster experiential authenticity, where the museum's imperfections enhance, rather than diminish, its creative atmosphere.

Taken together, interdisciplinarity, hospitality, reflexivity, and sustainability position the Centraal Museum as a manifestation of the contemporary museum's evolving identity. It embodies the transition from temple to a social hub, without discrediting the legacies that made it possible. In contrast to the modernist white cube's supposed rhetoric of clarity and self-evident art, the Centraal Museum's approach affirms heterogeneity, dialogue, and embodied presence. Its commitment to multiplicity, both spatial, temporal, sensory, and social, situates it as an inspiring model for reconfiguring established curatorial frameworks.

2.5 Reconfiguring the Museum Space

The history traced Chapter One culminates, perhaps inevitably, in the tensions embodied by the Centraal Museum Utrecht. If the white cube represented the apex of modernist ideals (i.e. clarity, autonomy, and universality), then the Centraal Museum reflects the contemporary condition that follows, including a search for plurality, added context, and sensorial complexity. The transition is not one of rupture, but of reconfiguration, meaning that the museum does not reject the white cube all together. Instead, the museum tests its principles against the demands of a more diverse and reflexive public culture.

As shown in Chapter One, the white-walled gallery emerged alongside modernist belief in the autonomy of the art object. O'Doherty famously described the gallery as a chamber where the outside world must not come in.¹²⁴ The Centraal Museum's practice demonstrates how the idealist modernist framework has evolved into a more relational one. Here, artworks are not isolated but contextualised; not self-sufficient but interconnected. Through the integration of city history, design, and contemporary art, the museum performs a

¹²³ Janes & Sandell, *Museum Activism*, 114.

¹²⁴ O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 14.

curatorial grammar in which artworks communicate across temporal and disciplinary divides. Where the modernist gallery sought to create an illusion of timelessness, the Centraal Museum invites visitors to experience artworks as situated within histories, communities, and material environments. This return of temporality is crucial as it allows the museum to act not as a static archive of art's past but as a living participant in cultural dialogue.

Equally significant is the museum's investment in sensorial design. Here, colour, light, and texture are not mere aesthetic embellishments but epistemic tools that engage the visitor's body as well as their intellect. This move redefines curatorial authorship. In the white cube, authority was vested in the eye, since the visual dominated all other senses. In the Centraal Museum, curatorship becomes a balancing act between seeing, feeling, and moving. The shift from optic to haptic engagement transforms the visitor from detached spectator into active participant. Viewed this way, the museum is no longer a neutral container but a sensorial ecosystem that reclaims the bodily and emotional dimensions suppressed by modernist exhibition practice.

At the level of institutional philosophy, the Centraal Museum's emphasis on hospitality and care signals an ethical turn. Rutten's assertion that museums must find a middle ground between questioning and confirming encapsulates the postmodern museum's moral complexity.¹²⁵ The task is not simply to display or critique, but to care for artworks, audiences, and the social world they inhabit. Such ethics of care extend beyond interpersonal interaction as they touch on the institution's relationship with its own history. By acknowledging its architectural limitations and embracing constraint as a creative catalyst, the Centraal Museum stages itself as one museum among many, situated rather than sovereign.

This reflexivity differentiates the museum from both the sterility of the white cube and the populist openness of the 'experience economy.' Instead of aiming for neutrality or spectacle, it occupies a deliberately negotiated middle ground. The museum exposes its processes, such as its interpretive layers, its mediations, even its compromises, and thus aligns with Fraser's call for institutions to reveal rather than obscure their internal mechanisms of value-making.¹²⁶

The Centraal Museum's practice does not mark the end of the white-walled gallery. As the white cube remains functional and valid as a spatial model and as an ideology that

¹²⁵ Interview with Rutten.

¹²⁶ Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions," 105.

continues to shape what newer museums define themselves against, Rutten notes that it does not fit the Centraal Museum.¹²⁷ This refusal to declare obsolescence is instructive. The Centraal Museum's sensorial heterogeneity gains meaning precisely through contrast with the legacy of modernist neutrality. Each new generation of curators redefines what constitutes relevance, accessibility, and authenticity, not by discarding the past but by reinterpreting it. The Centraal Museum exemplifies this dynamic of integrating the visual discipline, which is so prominently present in white-walled galleries, with a contemporary emphasis on context, care, and multiplicity.

The case of the Centraal Museum Utrecht bridges the historical analysis of Chapter One and the critiques that will follow in the next chapter. It demonstrates that moving beyond the white wall does not mean abandoning its virtues of focus and clarity, but rather integrating them into a richer, more humanly attuned sensorial atmosphere. This case study therefore sets the stage for the next and final chapter, where the critique of neutrality and the ideological underpinnings of the white cube will return in sharper focus. The Centraal Museum's example demonstrates again that the move away from white-walled curatorial practices is not simply an aesthetic evolution but a philosophical one. It represents a shift from distance to relation, from singularity to plurality, and from authority to care.

As the next chapter will argue, this reconfiguration is both necessary and fraught. The challenge curators and institutions are facing is how to keep museums open, sensorial and self-aware without collapsing into relativism or spectacle. The Centraal Museum's model suggests that such a balance is possible, though always provisional as an ongoing conversation between history and the present, between the white cube's lingering ghost and the embodied museum yet to come.

¹²⁷ Interview with Rutten.

Stepping Away from Neutrality

By the late twentieth century, the white-walled gallery, which was the result of a gradual development in display and design practices to some (e.g. Klonk, Bauhaus) and a radical experiment in clarity for others (e.g. Judd, Barr), had become an orthodoxy. The white cube's seamless surfaces and measured silence, originally intended to centre aesthetic contemplation, came increasingly to signify the viewer's exclusion and detachment from the art on display.¹²⁸ As museums sought to become more socially inclined in the late twentieth century, the supposed neutrality of the white cube became an object of critique, rather than the supposed guarantee of purity.

The problem, as Chave and O'Doherty have pointed out, lies not in the colour white itself but in the ideology of erasure it would represent. O'Doherty identified the gallery's timeless vacuum as a space that pretends to be disconnected from history while quietly reproducing institutional power.¹²⁹ Chave sharpened this critique, arguing that Minimalist aesthetics and their spatial outcomes mask social hierarchies beneath a rhetoric of objectivity.¹³⁰ It has already been established in Chapter One that to be neutral is never to be without context, but to adopt a context so pervasive that it passes as natural.

By the 1990s, it seemed that such neutrality no longer satisfied curators and audiences. Museums faced pressure to acknowledge social specificity, embodiment, and participation. Unlike many American museums, which are privately owned and funded, Dutch and other European museums are often (partially) governmentally funded. In the Netherlands specifically, the central government's arts and culture policies grant basic and additional subsidies for cultural institutions based on their artistic and substantive quality, their social significance on both a local and national scale, and their accessibility.¹³¹ That means that political parties have both ideological and financial leverage over what museums decide to share with their audiences.

The sterile, contemplative white cube, which was designed for the idyllic lone, disciplined viewer, seems increasingly out of place within Western cultures which are attuning to multiplicity and affect. Artists whose generations were entrenched in cultures

¹²⁸

¹²⁹ Ibid., 14-18.

¹³⁰ Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," 44-63.

¹³¹ Rijksoverheid, "Kunst- en cultuurbeleid."

permeated by pop-culture and public entertainment, such as Fraser and Eliasson, began producing works that directly addressed or disrupted the authority of the gallery space (although not always specifically focussed on the white wall). Similarly, curators including Simon experimented with colour, sound, and interactivity as new modes of mediation.

This chapter examines three strands of critique that collectively mark the departure from neutrality, including the critique of sterility and alienation, an analysis of whiteness as a structure of institutional power, and the emergence of artistic and curatorial practices that deliberately resist the white wall's aesthetic and ideological assumptions. While there are more factors that affected the developments of the modern and contemporary art museum, these three strands trace the transition from the modernist ideal of art as self-evident and autonomous to the contemporary conception of the museum as a multi-sensory, socially entangled environment.

3.1 Sterility and Alienation

Across the history of aesthetics, theorists and critics, such as art historian Meyer Schapiro, and philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), have debated whether and to what degree elements outside the artwork contribute to its meaning. Kant argued that the *parergon* (i.e. things attached to an artwork as ornamentation) was merely an obstruction or distraction from the *ergon* (i.e. the artwork itself).¹³² Kant's separation of the art and its surroundings continually proved to be a valid critique in modernist attitudes, such as those inspired by Louis Sullivan's (1856-1924) notion that form should follow function and not be concerned with pure aesthetics.¹³³

However, Derrida argues that the *parergon* is a continuation of the artwork, ultimately making it limitless and meaningful.¹³⁴ Like Derrida, Schapiro argues that so-called non-mimetic elements, such as the frame, the ground, the boundaries of the pictorial field, and even empty space, possess a latent expressiveness that shapes how art content is perceived, positioned, and valued within an image.¹³⁵ In this sense, what surrounds an artwork is not neutral but semiotically charged as it conditions scale, hierarchy, movement, and affect, thereby contributing to the artwork's meaning without directly representing anything itself.

The first major critique of the white cube concerned its supposed affective and psychological effects. O'Doherty has argued that the ideal, white-walled gallery removes all

¹³² Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §14.

¹³³ Guggenheim, "Form Follows Function."

¹³⁴ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 42-43; 63.

¹³⁵ Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art," 11-12.

forms of distraction that interfere with the illusion that an artwork is just that, an artwork, while in reality art never exists in a vacuum.¹³⁶ The result, however, is a space emptied not only of distraction but of life itself. The uniform light, smooth surfaces, and absence of texture produce what Krauss describes as a regime of opticality, which is a purely visual field that discredits the human body.¹³⁷ In this setting, the viewer is reduced to an eye suspended in neutral air, disciplined to regard art as autonomous and self-contained.

Philosopher Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) writings on spatial control in institutions resonate here: the white cube, like a hospital or prison, structures the behaviour of silence and automatic acceptance through its very architecture.¹³⁸ This presumes that the architectural design of museums also disciplines the audience's view in a way. As demonstrated in the Centraal Museum Utrecht, discussed in Chapter Two, the white wall's claim to neutrality becomes untenable in institutions where historical architecture, dense hanging, and narrative mediation are foregrounded, rather than concealed.

The effect of white cube spaces can then be regarded as a double alienation. First, from the social and material contexts of the artworks themselves and second, from the embodied experience of spectatorship. Because the controlled environment of gallery spaces is considered to favour the sense of sight, it lacks the ability to facilitate sensorial encounters through sound, smell, taste, and touch that make art affective.¹³⁹ The neutrality that promised universality thus produces estrangement.

By the 1980s and 1990s, curators and artists began to respond to the affective sterility of the white-walled display concept, implemented by curators and theorists including Barr, through interventions that re-sensualised exhibition space. Olafur Eliasson's *Room for One Colour* (org. 1997) flooded a gallery with monochromatic yellow light, transforming viewers' perception of their own bodies and of the architecture around them (fig. 26).¹⁴⁰ Although the gallery spaces in *Room for One Colour* were practically empty besides the yellow light, rather than focussing on the elimination of other contexts, Eliasson foregrounded the viewer's physiological entanglement with it.

Likewise, Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist's (b. 1962) immersive video installations in- and outside the gallery space envelope audiences in colour and sound, rejecting the quietness of

¹³⁶ O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15.

¹³⁷ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 216.

¹³⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 171-173.

¹³⁹ Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 40-61.

¹⁴⁰ Olafur Eliasson, "Room for One Colour."

the white wall in favour of sensual overabundance (fig. 27-28).¹⁴¹ These divergent practices expose the white cube's implicit hierarchy of the senses. Its visual bias that favours the aesthetic of emptiness, privileges intellectual over corporeal engagement, reproducing a split between mind and body. By destabilising this hierarchy, some contemporary artists re-opened the museum to touch, movement, and affect, revealing that perception is always embodied and relational.

3.2 The White Wall as Power

By now it should be clear that the white wall is not simply blank; it is coded. The whiteness that once signified purity and focus came to evoke sterility, detachment, and clinical control.¹⁴² If the point of sterility is a critique of the white cube's sensory deprivation, the question of power targets its ideological structure. The white cube's brightness connotes cleanliness, order, and moral virtue. According to Richard Dyer, these qualities were historically associated with bourgeois modernity and, more specifically, with whiteness as a racialised aesthetic norm.¹⁴³

Bennett illuminates the way the white wall has been used through his notion of the museum as part of the 'exhibitionary complex'. The exhibitionary complex can be understood as a way for a state to exert subtle disciplinary control by using institutions such as museums, but also department stores and public transport stations, to push certain ideas that help to organise and instil social order and control.¹⁴⁴ Again, this is specifically true for museums, such as the Centraal Museum, that are largely dependent on government funds and subsidies, which are altered based on political considerations.¹⁴⁵

Bennett also argues that public display operates as a form of governance, producing disciplined citizens through regimes of visibility. These regimes include being made aware of one's own way of looking and how they are seen by others, and those exercising control over the viewer showcasing their supposed ideals of civilisation. Within this framework, the white cube operates as a technology of authority, naturalising the museum's power to define cultural value.

Chave's feminist reading of Minimalism further underscores this dynamic. She argues that the large, industrially manufactured sculptures of for example Judd and Andre, often

¹⁴¹ Boijmans Van Beuningen, "Pipilotti Rist," 2021.

¹⁴² Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 216; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 171-173

¹⁴³ Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, 19-23.

¹⁴⁴ Bennet, "The Exhibitionary Complex," 95-96.

¹⁴⁵ Rijksoverheid, "Kunst- en cultuurbeleid."

exhibited in white spaces, perform a rhetoric of power and control that mirrors patriarchal and institutional dominance.¹⁴⁶ According to Chave, the white gallery amplifies this rhetoric, aestheticising authority under the veil of neutrality. Moreover, the economic logic of the contemporary art market reinforces the white cube's ideological status. As sociologist Sarah Thornton observes, the pristinely polished gallery is a device for branding and commodification as the white backdrop transforms artworks into luxury goods, excluded from social reality.¹⁴⁷ The architecture of neutrality thus becomes an architecture of value, legitimating price through cleanliness and clarity.

Claire Bishop has argued that this system in which art and even the experience of art becomes commodified, produces a passive spectator. Bishop states that when art is displayed in white-walled models it encourages viewers to compliantly take in art visually (cognitive) rather than actively participate in the experience of art (affective).¹⁴⁸ Against this critique, participatory and relational art practices seek to redistribute agency, challenging both the physical and symbolic authority of the white cube. By revealing its power dynamics, critiques such as those of Bishop and Chave invite museums to rethink their role not as temples of art, but as social laboratories where meaning is negotiated rather than imposed. In this regard, the Centraal Museum is exemplary as it makes mediation explicit instead of masking its institutional authority behind optical neutrality. In this way, the museum reframes authority as negotiable, rather than absolute.

3.3 Resistance Against the White Wall

By the late twentieth century, artists and curators began to move against the ideology of neutrality that had come to define the modern gallery. The white cube, once a symbol of aesthetic purity, was increasingly seen as an environment that staged art as autonomous while renouncing the social, political, and sensorial realities in which both art and viewers are embedded. Like the emergence of the white wall around the late-nineteenth century, resistance to the white wall did not emerge as an instant shift. Instead, resistance came in the form of different practices scattered over time, including interventions inside gallery spaces, challenges to curatorial authority, and experiments in embodiment that sought to expose, deconstruct, and even abandon the museum's claim to universality.

¹⁴⁶ Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," 47-49.

¹⁴⁷ Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, 81-88.

¹⁴⁸ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 11-13.

Early post-modern gestures against the white cube often took the form of spatial interventions. Artists and curators alike began to colour, disrupt, or reconfigure gallery architecture to make visible the supposedly neutral frameworks that shaped aesthetic experience. French artist Yves Klein's (1928-1962) monochrome blue paintings (from ca. 1955-1962), for instance, bathed rooms in his signature International Klein Blue, collapsing the distinction between artwork and environment through the colours 'hypnotising' effect.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Brazilian sculptor and visual artist Hélio Oiticica's (1937-1980) *Penetrável Filtro* (1972) invited audiences to move through multi chromatic and tactile installations, replacing detached contemplation with sensory immersion (fig. 29). Artistic interventions such as these asserted that the experience of art was inseparable from its spatial and bodily conditions.

By the 1970s and 1980s, institutional critique emerged as a more theoretical approach. Artists such as Hans Haacke (b. 1936) and Michael Asher (1943-2012) exposed the economic and political structures that sustained museums. Haacke's *MoMA Poll* (1970) directly involved the audience in questions of institutional complicity, asking visitors to vote on whether they supported Nelson Rockefeller's political stance on the Vietnam War.¹⁵⁰ Asher, through his subtle displacements of ordinary structures and architecture, such as removing partitions or revealing skeletal storage systems and ceiling constructions (fig. 30) demonstrated how the gallery's architecture itself encoded systems of inclusion and exclusion.¹⁵¹

The temporary exhibition *Willem de Rooij – Valkenburg* at the Centraal Museum Utrecht (from September 13, 2025, to January 25, 2026) performs a similar exposure of architectural and curatorial conventions. Upon entering the otherwise white and polished gallery, visitors are met with the backside of a display panel (fig. 31). It is only when visitors walk further into the room that the artworks on display are visible (fig. 32). Here, the white wall appears not as an inherent architectural condition but as a temporary, contingent, and constructed surface. Much like Asher's interventions, this exhibition momentarily exposes the backstage mechanisms of display. The juxtaposition of finished portrait paintings against visibly provisional wall structures draws attention to the contrast between the permanent completeness of art objects and the adaptable nature of the spaces that hold them.

While this exposure does not operate as a direct institutional critique in the manner of Asher's site-specific works, it nonetheless produces a moment of architectural reflexivity.

¹⁴⁹ Klein, *Overcoming the Problematics of Art*, 39-42.

¹⁵⁰ Jameson, "Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism," 45-46.

¹⁵¹ Asher, "september21-october 12, 1974," 151-153.

The visitor becomes aware that exhibition spaces are not neutral containers, but constructed environments shaped by practical, economic, and spatial constraints. In doing so, the museum aligns with a broader curatorial shift toward transparency and spatial self-awareness.

In the same vein, the external architecture of Centre Pompidou in Paris, which houses the collection of the Musée national d'art moderne, invites audiences outside the museum to see the internal workings of the museum and to show what is beneath the perfect utopia of its white-walled interior (fig. 33). The four colours represented on the outside of the building outline the structure of the museum, with the colour blue signalling the flow of the air-conditioning, yellow for electricity, green for water circuits, and red for pedestrians, including escalators and elevators.¹⁵²

Yet, where artist like Haacke and Asher tended to work on the institution, other artists in the late 1980s and 1990s transmitted their critique through it, examining not just the museum's structure but the subjectivities it produced. Among these, Fraser occupies a pivotal position. Her practice reveals that the ideological force of the white cube operates not only through walls and lighting but through language, behaviour, and professional decorum.

In *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), Fraser performed as 'Jane Castleton,' a professor at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, guiding visitors on what appeared to be a conventional tour. At first, her language seems standard (refined, reverent, and steeped in art-historical authority). Gradually, however, the script unravels: Castleton starts praising the museum cafeteria, water fountains, and restrooms with the same tone directed at canonical paintings.¹⁵³ The performance exposes how institutional discourse assigns value not through intrinsic artistic quality but through rhetorical and behavioural codes. By treating common fixtures as masterpieces, which strongly resonates with the thought behind the unmodified Readymades of the early twentieth-century, Fraser demonstrates that the museum's authority lies in its power to designate certain objects, and by extension certain social groups, as culturally legitimate.¹⁵⁴

The power of *Museum Highlights* lies in its precision: Fraser mimics the tone, vocabulary, and affective discipline of institutional authority to reveal how ideology is reproduced not through the physicality of architectural whiteness but through performative whiteness, which is a mode of speech and comportment that naturalises exclusion under the guise of professionalism. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues, taste functions as a social

¹⁵² Centre Pompidou, "An iconic architecture."

¹⁵³ Fraser, "Museum Highlights," 105-110.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

distinction that masks hierarchy as disinterested appreciation.¹⁵⁵ Fraser's professor embodies this dynamic, performing the museum's invisible labour of legitimisation while making its mechanics legible.

In her later writing, particularly "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique" (2005), Fraser asserts that there is no position external to the institution. Artists, curators, and audiences are all participants in its reproduction, whether through compliance or in critique.¹⁵⁶ The task, then, is not to destroy the museum but to make its mechanisms of value visible. This insight marks a profound evolution in the critique of the white cube: from analysing its architecture to diagnosing the subjectivities it engenders. It now becomes clear that the neutrality of the white wall is a set of learned stances toward art, authority, and space.

Fraser's performances anticipate later developments in participatory art, where the site of artistic experience shifts from the static object to the social encounter. Bishop argues that such practices shift where meaning and value are created, often turning the gallery into a space of negotiation (social) rather than contemplation (individual).¹⁵⁷ Works like Rirkrit Tiravanija's (b. 1964) *Untitled (Free)* (1992), in which the artist cooked and served Thai curry to visitors inside a gallery, transformed the sterile neutrality of the white cube into a zone of hospitality and exchange. Similarly, Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003) created for the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in London, invited collective immersion in a sensorial environment, replacing the reverent silence associated with modernist gallery spaces with a communal experience of light and atmosphere (fig. 34).¹⁵⁸

What links Fraser to these later practices is the shared recognition that critique must not just be written, it must be acted out. The white cube cannot simply be rejected; it must be used differently. In Fraser's case, inhabitation means turning the institutional voice back on itself, forcing its rhetoric to reveal its exclusions.¹⁵⁹ In Eliasson's and Tiravanija's cases, it means reconfiguring space to reawaken the body's participation in perception. Across these gestures, the white wall ceases to be a static symbol and becomes a mutable field; a site of ongoing negotiation between visibility and power, neutrality and affect.

The movement away from white-walled neutrality reflects broader epistemological changes in curatorial thought. Contemporary museology increasingly emphasises relationality, co-creation, and multi-sensory engagement. Curator and educator Nina Simon

¹⁵⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 2-5.

¹⁵⁶ Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions," 104.

¹⁵⁷ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 12-15.

¹⁵⁸ Tate, "Tate Report 2002-2004," 276; Olafur Eliasson, "The Weather Project, 2003."

¹⁵⁹ Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions," 105.

argues that the museum could be evolving backwards to a time in early modernity, when the experience of art was considered to be a social act, privileging interaction over contemplation.¹⁶⁰ The visual dominance of the white cube gives way to complex sensory environments that encourage visitors to touch, listen, and move, centring forms of knowledge production that disrupt the ocular bias of modernist display.

Resistance against the white wall, then, is not a singular rupture but an evolving process of ‘re-sensualisation’. Artists and curators have sought to reintroduce warmth, context, and multiplicity into exhibition practice, dissolving the illusion of pure form. This shift signals a broader epistemological reorientation: from the detached vision of modernism to a multi-sensory, embodied understanding of experience. The critique of the white cube thus becomes a point of departure toward new forms of curatorial imagination that embrace complexity rather than deny it.

3.4 Beyond White

The critiques explored in this chapter reveal that what was once considered a universal mode of display was in fact historically and culturally conditional. Sterility exposed its sensory limitations, power analyses uncovered its ideological biases, and resistance practices demonstrated the possibility of alternative spatial imaginaries. By diversifying sensory registers and social voices, today’s museums move toward environments that are dynamic rather than static, contingent rather than timeless. In this sense, the Centraal Museum exemplifies how critiques of the white wall have become embedded within curatorial and institutional practice. Its exhibition strategies do not abolish the white wall, but recontextualise it within a multi-sensory, historically aware, and socially situated framework.

In the ambivalent movement between white-walled and hyper-sensorial concepts, museums are starting to reclaim their role as sites of negotiation. Colour, texture, and sound are not threats to artistic integrity but extensions of it: they are media through which the institution can engage more fully with its public. The white wall, once a symbol of purity, now appears as a limit to be crossed: the threshold between a modernist conception of art’s autonomy and a contemporary recognition of its entanglement with the world.

The white cube’s decline is thus an ongoing transformation. Its surfaces are being re-imagined rather than merely repainted. In abandoning the rhetoric of neutrality, contemporary curators and artists are not outright rejecting modernism but reconfiguring its spatial logic to welcome multiplicity, participation, and embodied experience. Of course, resistance is rarely

¹⁶⁰ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, “Preface.”

total. Economic and conservationist imperatives continue to favour white spaces for their flexibility and perceived cleanliness. The white cube persists not because it remains ideologically unchallenged, but because it remains institutionally convenient. The contemporary museum thus occupies an ambivalent position: oscillating between the legacy of modernist purity and the demand for sensorial and social complexity.

- Conclusion -

The Unknown Future of Museum Spaces

This thesis set out to examine how and why museums are moving away from the modernist, white-walled configuration toward more interdisciplinary, multi-sensorial modes of display, and what this has practically resulted in thus far. The evolution of exhibition design, from the private treasure rooms of the medieval period to the salons of the eighteenth-century nobility, to the austere modernist white cube and, more recently, to the complex sensorial environments of contemporary public museums, reveals an ongoing revaluation of how art, space, and audience interact with each other. This thesis has traced that trajectory, showing how the white-walled gallery, once a symbol of modernist clarity and autonomous art, has become a subject of contention and transformation. Through its critical reception and reactive interventions, the white wall has become a mirror reflecting broader shifts in art, ideology, and society.

Brian O'Doherty's stance on the white cube has been used as one of the core arguments within this thesis. He argued that the environment of the white-walled gallery is not neutral but ideological as it constructs art as autonomous, timeless, and universal while concealing its historical and cultural contingencies. The critiques and resistance that the white cube generated helped to shape current debates in museology and curatorial practice. The experienced harshness of the white cube resulted in a repositioning of the museum's dual function as both a space for aesthetic contemplation and a mechanism of cultural regulation. The white cube's promise of neutrality paradoxically revealed itself as a form of control. What emerged in its wake, through artistic and curatorial critique, was an effort to reintroduce complexity, sensory richness, and social presence into the museum environment, without shunning the white wall altogether.

In examining the Centraal Museum Utrecht, this research has identified a particularly revealing case of institutional evolution. The museum's philosophy and curatorial strategies, anchored in transhistorical display, participatory engagement, and spatial integration, demonstrate how the legacy of the white cube can be reimaged without being entirely rejected. The white wall persists, but it is now a boundary that can be reinterpreted, softened, and socially animated.

While the urgency and intensity with which museums aim to move away from the white wall exist on a spectrum, from small partial changes to complete overhauls, pointing to a shift that can be interpreted both as temporary and permanent, these spaces are making way

for ideas that engage with visitor experiences and welcome the idea of audience participation and co-creation. They gesture that the now standardised white-walled display concept's reduction of noise and narrow focus on sight adds too little to the visitor experience, whereas authenticity and pluralism bring more meaning to the museum experience.

The multi-sensory turn in museums was not accidental. It aligns with broader shifts in how institutions imagine their audiences. Where the white cube assumed a solitary, cultivated viewer, contemporary museums must address diverse audiences with varied backgrounds and expectations. Exhibition design increasingly functions as a medium, shaping not only how art is seen but how it is felt, heard, and inhabited. As institutions adapt to contemporary demands, the imagined sterile neutrality of the white cube is giving way to spaces that are sensorial, participatory, and socially embedded.

Although the legacy of the white-walled gallery remains dominant and powerful, it is now one among many possible curatorial tools rather than the unquestioned default. This thesis argues that understanding this shift requires both historical perspective and attention to contemporary practice. By tracing the history of the white wall within the context of museums, engaging with its critiques, and analysing how museums like the Centraal Museum Utrecht are reconfiguring display, this research aimed to illuminate not only where the museum has been, but where it might go. While the future of exhibition design is uncertain, one thing is clear: the era of unquestioned white walls is passing. What comes next will be shaped by the interplay of tradition and innovation.

In line with Andrea Fraser's understanding of the museum as a stage upon which institutional and visitor identities are mutually constituted, Bart Rutten's reflections also foreground the performative dimension of museum visiting, where the visitor's presence is part of the exhibition's social choreography. In Utrecht, hospitality, consisting of volunteers, the café, and the friendly nature of staff, becomes an extension of the exhibition's affective architecture. The museum, in this sense, is not merely a space for viewing art but a social sensorium; a site where aesthetic, emotional, and social experiences converge.

The Centraal Museum's approach exemplifies this evolution. Its transhistorical displays, juxtaposing contemporary artists such as Marlene Dumas (b. 1953) with early modern masters such as Joachim Wtewael (1566-1638), invite dialogue rather than hierarchy. This method challenges the modernist impulse to isolate artworks in neutral contexts, instead revealing how meaning is generated through time, context, and cultural exchange. Still, the museum's architectural structure imposes its own challenges. The building's historical structure and compartmentalised galleries do not easily accommodate expansive, immersive

installations. Curators must therefore work within the boundaries they are given, turning limitation into opportunity.

By embracing this negotiation between space, narrative, and participation, the Centraal Museum positions itself as both a product and a critique of museological modernism. Its programming incorporates community co-creation, participatory design, and performative events that activate the building as a lived environment rather than a static container. In doing so, it redefines accessibility not as simplification but as inclusion, inviting visitors to co-author meaning.

Resistance against the white wall, then, is not a singular rupture but an evolving process of reintegrating multi-sensorial features. Artists and curators have sought to reintroduce warmth, context, and multiplicity into exhibition practice, dissolving the illusion of pure form. This shift signals a broader epistemological reorientation, from the detached vision of modernism to a multi-sensory, embodied understanding of experience. The critique of the white cube thus becomes a point of departure toward new forms of curatorial imagination that embrace complexity rather than deny it.

In cultural terms, museums now compete not only with each other but with immersive digital media, festivals, and branded experiences. The white cube, once a symbol of cultural authority, risks alienating audiences accustomed to such interactive and affective activities and spaces. Against this backdrop, the move toward sensorial and participatory exhibition design can be understood as both an aesthetic and economic adaptation. No longer a passive observer, the visitor becomes a participant in a network of sensory, emotional, and social relations. Museums like Centraal Museum Utrecht operationalise these ideas through design choices that foreground atmosphere, tactility, and presence. Their strategy aligns with a broader turn toward embodied museology, which views the museum not as a repository of objects but as a living interface between people, histories, and materialities.

Moreover, the museum's social integration through its embrace of hospitality, education, and co-creation reflects a broader cultural shift toward collaborative authorship. In an age of decentralised knowledge and participatory culture, authority within the museum is becoming distributed. The Centraal Museum's curatorial stance acknowledges this reality, positioning the institution not as the only figure of authority in the creation of meaning but as a facilitator of dialogue. Yet this evolution also carries its own tensions. The pursuit of accessibility and experience risks sliding into spectacle, where the embrace of participation can blur into performative inclusivity. The challenge for museums moving forward is to

balance engagement with critical depth to create spaces that are sensorially rich without surrendering intellectual rigour.

Taken together, these developments reveal that the museum's evolution is not a linear progression away from the white cube but a cyclical reimagining of its conditions. The white wall's conceptual clarity remains valuable as a backdrop for contrast and as a historical memory, but its ideological rigidity is dissolving. What emerges in its place are hybrid spaces that integrate sensory design, social exchange, and contextual storytelling.

In the case of the Centraal Museum, this hybridity manifests as a delicate balance between architectural constraint and curatorial experimentation. The building's historical layers and compartmentalised spaces compel curators to think relationally, to stage artworks as parts of a wider spatial and social choreography. This approach exemplifies how institutions can evolve not by abandoning their foundations but by reinterpreting them. Still, the direction is clear: the white cube is no longer the unquestioned paradigm of artistic display. It has become one curatorial tool among many; a foil against which new forms of museum-making define themselves.

Ultimately, the story traced across this thesis is one of transformation through critique. The white cube or the white-walled gallery, once a symbol of modernist ideals of autonomy and clarity, has evolved into a benchmark for rethinking what a museum can be. Its historical emergence illuminated the relationship between form and ideology; its critique revealed the limitations of neutrality; and its reconfiguration, as seen in the Centraal Museum Utrecht, demonstrates the museum's capacity for renewal within constraint. Through recognising how its apparent emptiness can serve as a ground for multiplicity, sensoriality, and social encounter, the museum's future lies not in rejecting the white wall but in learning from it. The evolution of the museum, therefore, is not toward a single new model but toward a field of possibilities: dynamic, responsive, and alive to the complexities of contemporary life.

- Illustrations -



Fig. 1: Seoul: White Cube; white wall gallery from the exhibition 映遠 – *Far Sights* (2024) by Minoru Nomata.



Fig. 2: Immersive experience *Van Gogh* at Atelier de Lumières in Paris from July 7 to September 20, 2025.



Fig. 3: Multi-sensorial gallery from the collection presentation *Dwarsverbanden* (Cross connections) on the ground floor of the Van Abbemuseum. Photograph by Joep Jacobs.



Fig. 4: Multi-media gallery *Pracht en Prijs* (Splendour and Price) (detail) in the renewed (December 2023) collection presentation *Collectie Centraal*. Photograph by Gert Jan van Rooij, 2024.



Fig. 5: François-Joseph Heim, *Charles X distribuant des récompenses aux artistes exposants du salon de 1824 au Louvre, le 15 Janvier 1825, 1827*, oil on canvas, 286cm x 209cm (including frame) Paris: The Louvre, inv. 5313; C 245. Photograph by Philippe Fuzeau, 2015.



Fig. 6: London: Dulwich Picture Gallery; salon-style gallery with prominent skylight feature.



Fig. 7: Munich, Alte Pinakothek; students in front of *Fable of the Satyr and the Peasant (Aesop)* (1620-1621) by painter Jakob Jordaens, hung on a light grey wall. Photograph by Anke Thomass, 2007.



Fig. 8: The British Museum displaying an abundance of objects, tightly packed together. Ethnographical Galleries (view of Asia Section), British Museum, London. Photograph by Donald Macbeth, 1908.

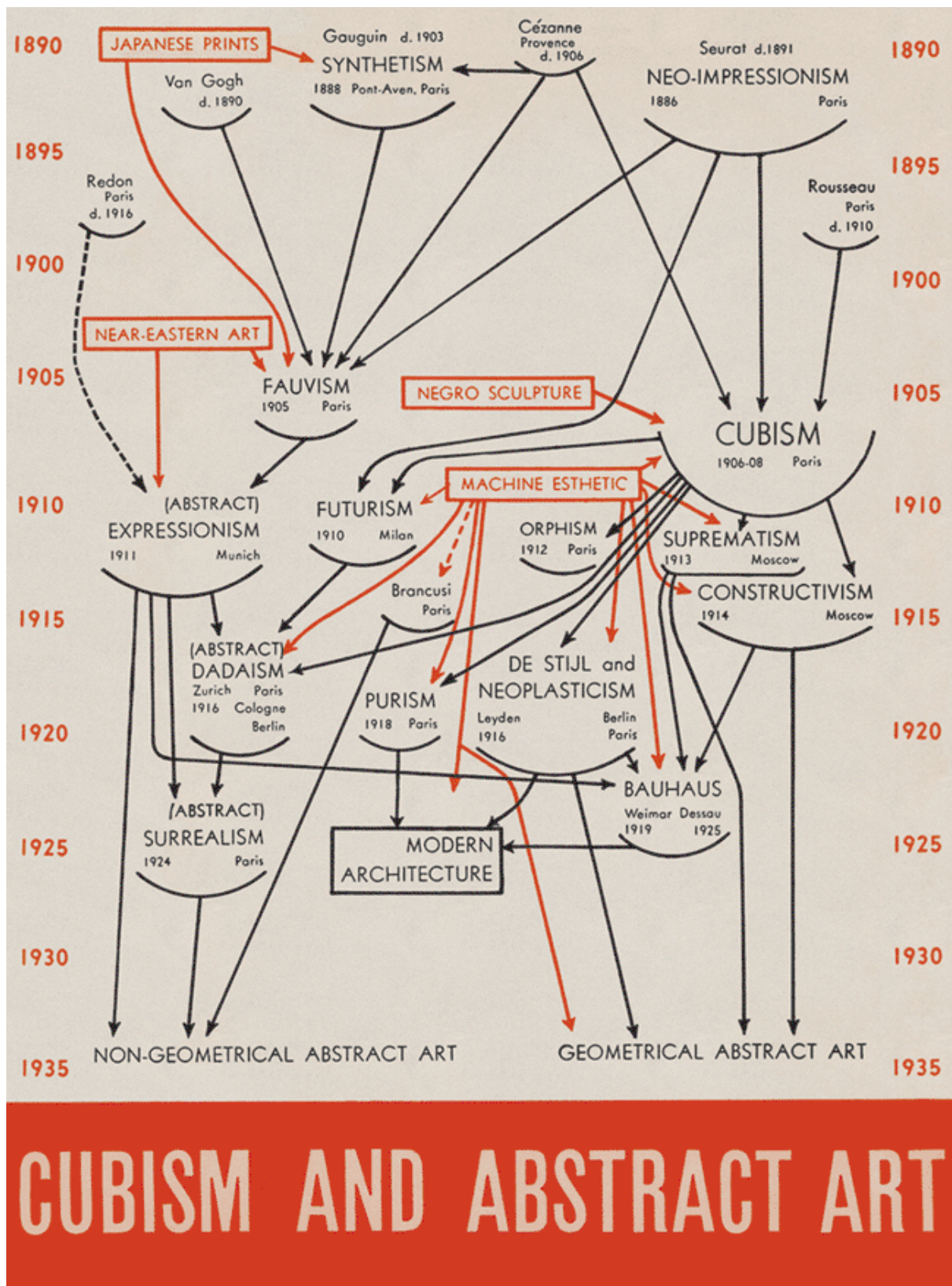


Fig. 9: Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s Flow chart diagram of art movements, from the front page of the catalogue for the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York.



Fig. 10: Dessau, *Bauhaus-Building Dessau*, workshop wing photographed from the South-West, original 1925-1926, Walter Gropius, reconstructed in 1976, modernised between 1996-2006. Photograph by A. Savin.



Fig. 11: Two children in a white-walled gallery looking at *Dollhouse* (1670-1690, mixed wood, 208.5 x 189 x 79cm (Centraal Museum Utrecht, inv.nr. 5000)). Photograph taken between 2019-2022.



Fig. 12: Multi-media gallery *Pracht en Prijs* (Splendour and Price) (detail) in the permanent collection presentation *Collectie Centraal* (December 2023). Here the seventeenth-century dollhouse is situated amongst relevant period pieces, including earthenware vases and framed paintings. Photograph by Gert Jan van Rooij, 2024.



Fig. 13: Introduction gallery of *Collectie Centraal* (permanent collection presentation), Centraal Museum Utrecht. The 'entry room' gives an impression of the multi-disciplinarity of the museum's collection presentation. Photograph by Gert Jan van Rooij, 2024.



Fig. 14: Utrecht, *Agnietenklooster*, 1420, main collection building of the Centraal Museum Utrecht since 1838 photographed from the West. Photograph by Vincent Zedelius, 2012.



Fig. 15: Utrecht, aerial view of the city canal (bottom), the Nicolai church (centre) and the Agnietenklooster housing the Centraal Museum Utrecht on the right.

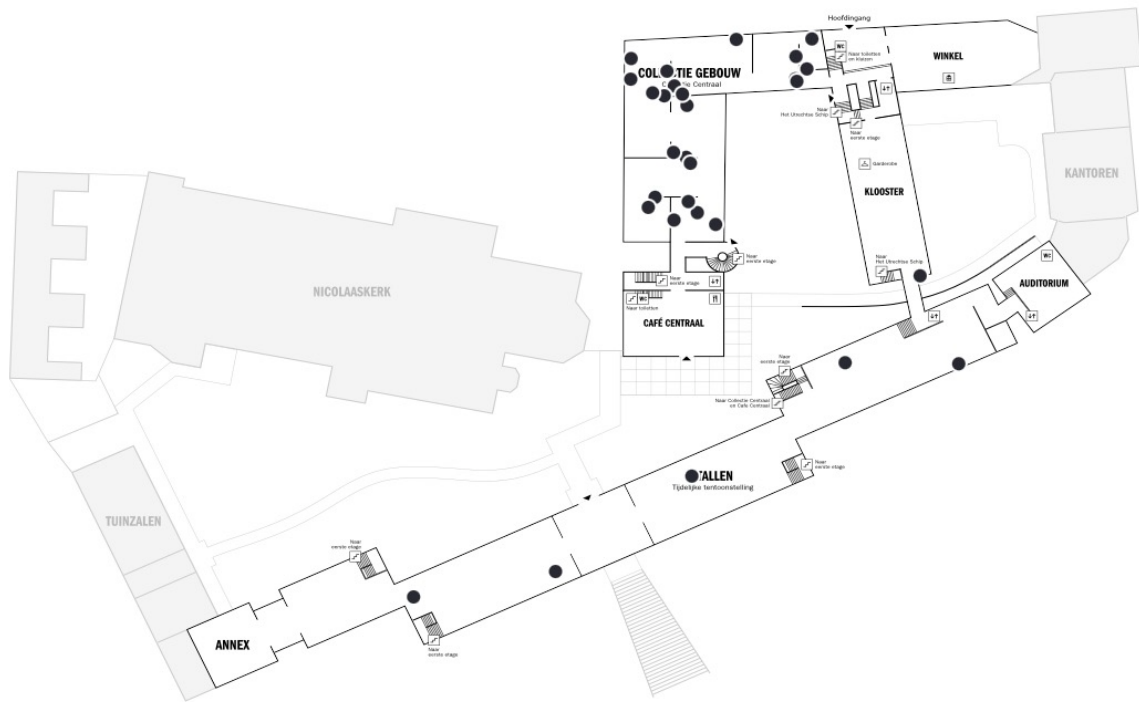


Fig. 16: Floor plan of the ground floor of the Centraal Museum Utrecht. Screenshot (author) from mobile museum map.



Fig. 17: Three glass panes of varying size functioning as windows, creating a sense of openness in the gallery space using sightlines at the Centraal Museum Utrecht. Photograph by author, 2024.



Fig. 18: *Dollhouse* (detail), 1670-1690, mixed wood, 208.5 x 189 x 79cm (Centraal Museum Utrecht, inv.nr. 5000). Art room of the Centraal Museum Utrecht's seventeenth-century dollhouse with flat white walls.



Fig. 19: *Dollhouse* (detail), 1670-1690, mixed wood, 208.5 x 189 x 79cm (Centraal Museum Utrecht, inv.nr. 5000). Art room of the Centraal Museum Utrecht's seventeenth-century dollhouse restored with period accurate wallpaper.



Fig. 20: *Smaken Verschillen* (Tastes Differ) or 'Van Baaren' gallery, part of *Collectie Centraal* (permanent collection presentation), Centraal Museum Utrecht. Photograph by Gert Jan van Rooij, 2024.



Fig. 21: View from inside a gallery toward the central garden at the Centraal Museum Utrecht. Photograph by author, 2025.



Fig. 22: Large luminous gallery space opening into a darker space at the Centraal Museum Utrecht's temporary exhibition space the Stallen. Photograph by author, 2025.



Fig. 23: Digital mediation in the form of a large interactive screen in the middle of a smaller gallery part of *Collectie Centraal* (permanent collection presentation), Centraal Museum Utrecht. Visible on the upper left had side is another large interactive screen playing a video podcast. Photograph by author, 2025.



Fig. 24: Mediation in the form of a mini workshop (detail, one of three) in a smaller gallery part of *Collectie Centraal* (permanent collection presentation), Centraal Museum Utrecht. Photograph by author, 2025.



Fig. 25: Duane Hanson's *Derelict Woman* (1973, polyester and fiberglass, 54 x 79 x 131 cm (Centraal Museum Utrecht, inv.nr. 28871)) situated amongst Caravaggist paintings (and two late twentieth-century photographs by Rotimi Fani-Kayode) in the *Vol Overgave* (With Utmost Devotion) gallery part of *Collectie Centraal* (permanent collection presentation), Centraal Museum Utrecht. Photograph by author, 2025.



Fig. 26: Olafur Eliasson, *Room for One Colour*, 1997, mono-frequency lights, re-installation at Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, 2022. Photograph by Ela Bialkowska, 2022.



Fig. 27: Pipilotti Rist, *Het Leven Verspillen Aan Jou*, 2021, environmental video light installation designed for the exterior of the Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn, 2021.



Fig. 28: Pipilotti Rist, *Het Leven Verspillen Aan Jou* (detail), 2021, environmental video light installation designed for the exterior of the Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen. Two people are seen smiling with light projected onto their bodies and surroundings. Photograph by Aad Hoogendoorn, 2021.



Fig. 29: Hélio Oiticica, *Penetrável Filtro*, 1972, mixed media, 250 x 807.5 x 607.5 cm, installed at Galerie Lelong, Art Basel, 2019.



Fig. 30: Michael Asher, no title, 2008, steel, installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, California.



Fig. 31: Backside of the first exposition panel seen upon entering the temporary exhibition *Willem de Rooij – Valkenburg* at the Centraal Museum Utrecht from September 13, 2025, to January 25, 2026. Photograph by author, 2025.



Fig. 32: Frontside of the first exposition panel of the temporary exhibition *Willem de Rooij – Valkenburg* at the Centraal Museum Utrecht (September 13, 2025 – January 25, 2026), displaying four portrait paintings from between ca. 1680-1720 by Dirk Valkenburg (1675-17210). Photograph by author, 2025.



Fig. 33: Paris, *Centre Pompidou building*, 1977, Renzo Piano & Richard Rogers, collection building of the Musée national d'art modern. Photograph by dalbera.



Fig. 34: Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003, mixed media (mono-frequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, scaffolding), created for the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, London. Photograph by Tate Photography (Andrew Dunkleu & Markus Leith), 2003.

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