

Linda Del Rosso

Tutors: Heidi Sohn, Suzana Milinovic, Rufus V... n Ban

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Index

Introduction	1
A sense of protest: Disrupting the Traditional Museum	7
New Feminist Logics of the Museum	19
Reclaiming The Myth of the Muses	45
Grounding:House of the Muses	55
Sewing the Manifestations	63
Rereferences	74

Introduction

The beginning

House of the Muses is a personal and collective project born from a profound sense of protest and powerlessness. These emotions were stirred by the oppressive structures governing our society and its educational institutions, including museums. Museums have long been revered as guardians of knowledge and spaces for education.

Being raised in an upper-middle-class family in Milan, Italy, I developed an early affinity for museums through frequent childhood visits while growing up. However, it was only during my Master's program in Museum Studies that I began to critically question their role. I realized that my education had not truly prepared me to think critically, and that the knowledge museums provide is far from neutral. Rather, it was constructed and curated by those in power and addressed to them.

As Michel Foucault reminds us, knowledge and power are inseparable. Like schools, museums are discursive institutions that actively produce culture, not merely reflect it. They determine which histories are preserved and which are erased. Under the guise of neutrality, museums perpetuate the logic of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism (Foucault, 1972).

This research argues that by questioning the legacy of museums, heritage and cultural memory are revealed to be curated narratives, not objective truths (Otero-Pailos, 2016). The decision of what to preserve, display, or discard is inherently political. Many communities are excluded from museums due to barriers such as limited opening hours and entry fees. They are also excluded because they do not see themselves reflected within these walls.

Despite decades of feminist and anti-colonial critique, museum practices and the architecture and infrastructures that house them remain largely unchanged (Assman, 2011). Architectural permanence reinforces systems of power, and the dominance of white male architects continues to shape spatial norms that exclude most vulnerable communities and minorities. The need to rethink the ideological and architectural structures of museums has never been more urgent. As Cameroonian writer and critic Simon Njami bluntly observes:

“I’m fed up with your idea of inclusivity. I don’t want to be included in your thing. I just want to be who I am and be accepted for it. Full stop.” (Simon Njami, 2023).

Many anti-colonial feminist thinkers, including Françoise Vergès, Grace Ndiritu, and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, call not for inclusion but for “systemic transformation.” They critique not only collections and exhibitions, but also the governance, labor practices, spatial design, and societal role of museums.

Research question

Following this trajectory, House of the Muses seeks to radically disrupt the logic of the conventional museum. It asks:

How can feminist pedagogies reshape the traditional museum and its practices of collecting, curating, and archiving?

How can feminist logics be translated into architectural form and spatial expression?

Inspired by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s idea that we must change those who will change the world, not the world directly (Freire, 2012), this project positions the House of the Muses as a post-museum, an alternative educational space. Here, individuals who have been historically excluded from cultural institutions can engage, participate, and generate knowledge. The museum becomes a living space for collective transformation, not a static container of the past.

Feminist values and the post-museum House of the Muses proposes feminist pedagogies as a method of critique and

creation. Rather than focusing solely on gender inequalities, feminism as a framework expands into postcolonial, ecological, and anti-capitalist frameworks. It becomes a tool for reimagining power, knowledge, care, and collectivity. The project rejects replicating museum norms under the banner of diversity, and embraces feminist values, such as dialogue, relationality, participation, community engagement, spirituality, and imagination.

Setting

To ground these ideas, the research takes place in Rotterdam, where I currently live and work. Rotterdam’s history as a major port city makes it a place of cultural exchange, migration, and transformation. It is a place where the local meets the global, and many artistic and cultural initiatives are hidden behind the shiny, monumental facades of its architecture.

Positionality

Each chapter of this thesis begins with a personal reflection, a dialogue between two versions of myself. Perhaps it is between my past and present selves, the listener and the speaker, or the person I am and the person I could have been if I had not started this journey.

I realised that in order to disrupt and reimagine the museum, I first had to unlearn and reimagine myself. As a white woman raised in an upper-middle-class European family, I had to confront my positionality, as a lived reality influencing how I move, listen, and act in the world. This is because true transforma-

RESEARCH

tion begins with the self.

Some might argue that academic work should not focus on the self. But what is the “self” if not a node in a vast web of relationships? I evolve and change through my encounters with others, materials, and histories. Recognizing my positionality has helped me act consciously, while using my privilege with care and intentionality. This can be applied to this project, but will also continue to shape my future practice.

During the project, I had the opportunity to work on two curatorial projects: “The Sacred Life of Plants” at the Van Eesteren Museum in Amsterdam and “Pillow Fighters” at Kunstbar in The Hague. In these projects, I attempted to reflect feminist values. Textiles became a powerful medium and message that made the personal visible within the social and vice versa.

Methods

Rather than adopting a linear research method, this project weaves together feminist methodologies.

FORAGING

“Going from place to place searching for things that you can eat or use while respecting the surrounding ecosystem.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024)

Foraging is an alternative to collecting. Rather than extracting, it listens. I foraged for conversations, lectures, workshops, and encounters. Engaging with artists, designers, and cultural workers offered insight into what is already being reimagined and gave me hope for what could be.

TANGLING

To tangle is to become a form; to make a mass of thread. This messy, nonlinear, entangled narrative structure describes the tangling of this research. The research, as well as the writing of this paper resists fixed conclusions and embraces complexity. Each thread - be it a memory, an exhibition, or a conversation - interweaves with the others to form a mutable whole.

THE CARRIER BAG

Borrowing from Ursula K. Le Guin’s metaphor (Le Guin, 1986), the “carrier bag” is not a weapon but a vessel. It gathers spiritual experiences, political beliefs, aesthetic sensibilities, and embodied knowledge. This thesis is itself a carrier bag: an open archive of gathered fragments that is always in motion and always incomplete. The research is transdisciplinary, extending beyond academic and architectural boundaries. Rather than positioning myself as an expert, I sought inspiration from happenings, people, and beings without hierarchy. This resulted in a physical booklet of conversations and a collection of fragments referenced at the beginning of each chapter.

Plan of the Paper

The paper is divided into thematic chapters, explore the interplay of research, theory, and embodied practice.

The first chapter establishes common ground for understanding the problem of the museum as a patriarchal, colonial, and elitist institution. It delves into the institution’s history and genealogy, examining how this legacy manifests in the

RESEARCH

logic and practices of collecting, exhibiting, archiving, and architecture.

The second chapter asks what possible feminist alternatives to the museum can be, examining feminism as an intersectional framework deeply intertwined with decolonial critique, anticapitalism, and ecology. It enlightens the values and virtuous characteristics of museums and explores how traditional logics can be transformed into logics of care, conflict, dialogue, and multivocality. Initially, based on Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's theories, the concept of care is analyzed in its contradictions (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). It claims that, for centuries, the elite have used care as an excuse for control and oppression. Therefore, it is important to be aware of this paradox when thinking about the conservation of objects in the museum. Then, the chapter follows Marisol de la Cadena's idea of "uncommoning", advocating for a place and society in which different values can coexist, in contrast and dialogue with each other (De la Cadena, 2019). Based on these concepts, new feminist logics are proposed as alternatives to traditional museological practices. The two exhibitions I curated during these months serve as examples of how these values can be implemented. A new concept of art is imagined, in which art is a healing, communal activity, and the artist is a facilitator of creativity and a healer.

The third chapter proposes the House of the Muses as an alternative to the traditional museum, grounding it in spirituality and the power of imagination. The myth of the Muses is reclaimed as the

Muses transition from passive, inspiring figures to active creators in a cyclical movement of inspiration and expression. Myth is not viewed as a means of acquiring power or achieving canonization; rather, it is seen as something personal and profound that can empower us and make us feel connected to something greater than ourselves. If we let go of the pressure of success, we can take agency over our lives and actions to create a better future.

In the fourth chapter, the house is also reclaimed, not as a domestic space to which women are confined, but as a political space of resistance. Referring to bell hooks, the "homeplace" consists of a space in which future generations are grounded and formed (hooks, 2008). Cooking, which has also been used to segregate women, is reclaimed as a way to create a space of care and collectivity where diversity comes together in both conflict and dialogue.

Finally, the fifth chapter proposes a poem of transformational "manifestations" as opposed to a static manifesto. It starts from an attempt to summarize the core learnings from the muses that have accompanied this research and personal growth. The manifestations are then "embodied" by sewing them onto a long piece of cloth. The chapter includes pictures of the process, demonstrating how sewing and crafting deeply connected me to my muses, not only intellectually, but also sensorially and spiritually.

Sara Ahmed described in a lecture at Het Nieuwe Instituut, a "shadow project"

RESEARCH

is a set of values that quietly shapes our paths (Ahmed, 2024). Similarly, House of the Muses is a “shadow project” that I have nurtured throughout my studies and will continue to carry with care and commitment.

This research paper will never hold conclusions. It embraces transformation, the stretching of time, and new beginnings. The House of the Muses is in a constant state of becoming, in constant “now”.

A sense of protest: Disrupting the Traditional Museum

Where did the project begin?

During the first week of Explore Lab, we were asked to share what we were fascinated by. Looking back, however, I realize that my project didn't begin with fascination; it started with a protest. It was an inner protest against the societal structures we live in and a critique of how museums, the art world, and even architecture reproduce those systems. What is your personal connection to museums?

Growing up as a white woman in an upper-middle-class family - with a father who was a university professor and a mother in the creative industry - I was exposed to museums from a young age. This early exposure grew into a passion. In-between my studies in architecture, I also pursued a master's degree in museum studies at Leiden University. Despite the institutional limitations, it was the first time I encountered critical thinking, a tool often missing from my Italian education and architectural training.

How did this experience change your perspective on museums?

It shifted my view of museums, heritage, and societal values. I began questioning who defines heritage, how it's preserved,

and for whom. In Western contexts, there's a tendency to glorify the past, art, and monuments without addressing the violence embedded within these institutions: violence against women, racialized communities, and lower classes. The museum's "inclusive" rhetoric often masks these underlying structures. Another form of cultural violence is how Christian spirituality has historically erased other belief systems and contributed to patriarchal oppression, as frequently mentioned in the writings of Silvia Federici.

So, this is the inner protest you mentioned?

Yes, along with a deep sense of powerlessness. The more I learned, the angrier I became. As a young woman, I kept asking myself, "What can I do in the face of such long-standing systemic violence?" However, as journalist A. L. Kennedy wrote, "In hopeless times, we cannot afford to lose hope." That resonated with me. Instead of suppressing my anger, as I was often told to do, I chose to "stay with the trouble," as Donna Haraway puts it, and channel it into research and soft forms of activism.

REFLECTIONS

How did you do that?

I started connecting with others who shared similar concerns: how can we direct our shared anger against the system and care for a better world to make a change? A turning point came during a three-day movement and dancing workshop themed “Transforming Anger” by Amenti in Rotterdam. We learned that anger isn’t an emotion in itself but often a surface reaction to deeper vulnerabilities. The workshop taught me to understand anger and vulnerability and use it as a generative force for myself and the world.

Where was your anger coming from?

From a place of vulnerability. As a woman, I realized the historical and ongoing oppression that we face, especially within cultural institutions. In museums, women have mostly been depicted as passive subjects. Until recently, they had little access to professional artistic expression. Textile work, traditionally associated with women, was considered “low art.” Even today, women have a harder time being recognized as artists or leading museums. For instance, female museum directors remain rare.

A feminist protest. But doesn’t your project also touch on decolonial theory and ecology?

Exactly. My personal experiences were merely the starting point. Through listening and empathy, I began to connect with the struggles of others. After all, that’s the core of feminism: solidarity

through shared vulnerabilities. I spoke with artists, curators, and architects about how they address these issues in their work. It became a collective effort, which will result in the final project.

Given your background, how do you approach anti-colonial and anti-elitist work?

It’s a difficult but crucial question. I was nervous at first. During my first conversation with the Italo-Dominican artist Raziel Perin, I thanked him for sharing his perspective with someone like me. He replied: “Yes, we’re different. But I see this as an alliance to create a new language for the future.” That moment changed me. Ten months later, we’re still close friends, sharing ideas and experiences. It helped me realize that, rather than striving for “diversity” or “inclusion,” I want to emphasize common ground and mutual care.

Has it gotten easier with time?

“Staying with the trouble” is never easy, and often our egos resist acknowledging our shadows. But we are not alone in this. Organizations like White Awake focus on anti-racist education for white people. What’s their first step? Acknowledging that whiteness carries inherent biases due to the environments in which we grow up. To be a good ally, I must face and heal those parts of myself. Moreover, White Awake highlights how unprocessed trauma affects everyone: both colonizers and colonized. If left unhealed, it can harm our mental and physical well-being. Recognizing and

REFLECTIONS

addressing this trauma is part of building a more compassionate future.

So are you saying that you are racist and elitist?

Yes, I am aware I've said things (often unconsciously) that reflect racism or elitism. I try to stay aware of my biases, write them down, and treat this process as a long journey of deconstructing.

This project is part of what Sara Ahmed calls a "shadow project": a set of values and lessons that will follow me throughout my life and career.

A sense of protest: Disrupting the Traditional Museum

Problem Statement

Disrupting - to prevent something such as a system or process from continuing as usual or expected. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025).

Today, many museums claim to be “open to the public, accessible, and inclusive,” as stated in the latest ICOM (International Council of Museums) definition (ICOM, 2024). Yet, a deeper look into their genealogy and institutional practices reveals how these promises often mask entrenched structures of patriarchy, colonialism, and elitism.

Following Foucault ideas that power is linked to knowledge (Foucault, 1972), this research recognizes the importance of museums as institutions of power. They are sites where dominant narratives are legitimized, canons maintained, and alternative worldviews rendered invisible. This chapter critiques the museum as a product of Enlightenment rationalism and colonial extraction, examining its historical formation, role in nation-building and empire, and its alignment with capitalist modes of ownership and accumulation. This disruption is necessary in order to be able to imagine possible alternatives.

According to Foucault there is a possibility of changing the people in power, and creating change not by rejecting institutions, but by unsettling their foundations and reorienting their functions (Foucault, 1972).

Changing the definition of heritage and who is responsible for creating it is crucial to reorient the museum. For example, Jorge Otero-Pailos, an American and Spanish artist and critic, argues for an expanded definition of heritage that includes care, experimentation, and critical thinking (Otero-Pailos et al., 2016). Genealogy of the Museum and its Patriarchal, Colonial, Elitist Roots
Understanding the traditional museum’s exclusionary logic requires tracing its genealogy. From early collecting practices in the 18th century to modern public institutions, the museum developed within patriarchal, religious, colonial, and elitist frameworks that equated knowledge with control.

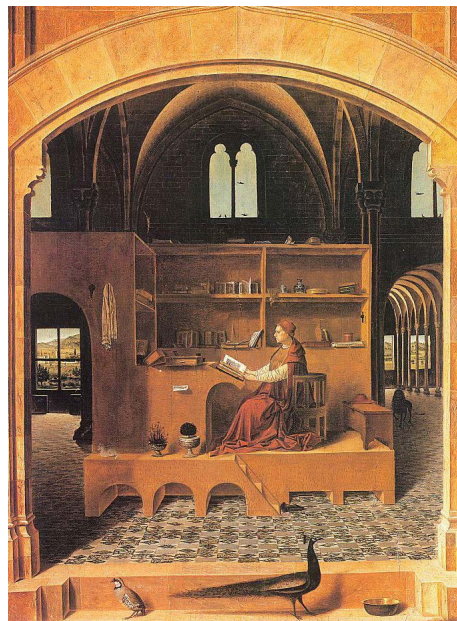
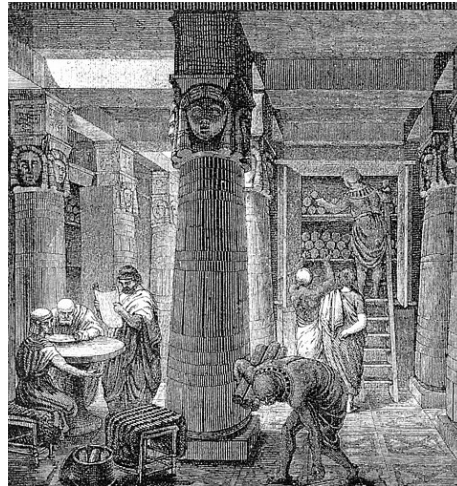
To start from its etymology, the word “museum” originates from the Greek “museion,” which was a temple dedicated to the Muses. Though seemingly benign, feminist scholars have noted that the Muses were portrayed as passive female figures whose role was to inspire male

RESEARCH

genius. Thus, this etymological root encodes a patriarchal worldview that frames the feminine as secondary and supportive rather than creative or authoritative.

One of the earliest known examples of a museum-like institution is the Museion of Alexandria, which was established around 300 BCE. Far more than a mere collection, the Museion aimed to house all human knowledge in written form. Though it was eventually destroyed, it laid the groundwork for understanding collecting as a form of power: the aspiration to own, control, and preserve knowledge within the confines of a single, elite institution.

During the Middle Ages, the practice of collecting became intertwined with Christian spirituality. Relics, icons, and sacred objects were gathered in churches and monasteries, thereby reinforcing religious authority and divine hierarchy. This spiritual framework was displaced during the Renaissance when humanism supplanted religious devotion as the dominant cultural paradigm. The concept of the “cabinet of curiosities” emerged during this time. These were private rooms where aristocrats and scholars displayed natural specimens, artifacts, and artwork. They embodied a new relationship to the world: one of classification, conquest, and visual consumption. These collections were not neutral. They were deeply exclusionary, accessible only to the elite and almost entirely male. Women were largely barred from collecting, studying, or even viewing these displays.



[Top] Baldassarre Peruzzi, *Dance of Apollo and the Muses* (1481-1536), [center] O. Von Corven, *Artistic rendering of the Library of Alexandria* (19th century), [bottom] Antonello da Messina, *St. Jerome in his Study*, The National Gallery, London (1475)

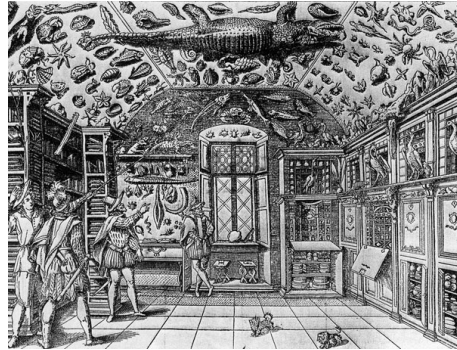
RESEARCH

As colonial expansion began, collecting became even more violent and extractive. European empires looted objects from colonized lands through theft, coercion, or force. Paintings from this period depict enslaved people as elements of display, to celebrate colonial conquests, further entrenching the museum as a space that naturalizes racial hierarchy and exploitation.

By the late eighteenth century, public museums such as the Fridericianum in Kassel (founded in 1779) and the British Museum in London (opened to the public in 1759) emerged, ostensibly democratizing access to knowledge. However, these were still deeply elitist spaces. While admission was technically free, entry was governed by unwritten codes of behavior and rigid architectural formalism that signaled exclusivity. Built on wealth derived from colonialism and slavery, these museums functioned as instruments of the state, projecting imperial grandeur and national identity.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw even more grotesque displays of racial and colonial domination, known as “human zoos.”

International exhibitions, including the infamous “Negro Village” at the 1889 Paris Exposition, featured people from colonized nations as live exhibits, often presented in fabricated “native” settings. These spectacles dehumanized their subjects and reinforced pseudoscientific notions of racial difference and Western superiority. They underscored how museums and exhibitions served to collect, classify, discipline, and display bodies



[Top] Ferrante Imperato, Woodcut of the Wunderkammer room “Dell’istoria naturale...” (1599), [Middle] Unknown Dutch school artist, The Paston Treasure Norwich Castle Museum, England (circa 1663), [Bottom] The pond of the “Senegalese Village,” Universal Exposition of Liège, Belgium, (1905)

RESEARCH

according to imperial logic.

This brief historical overview demonstrates how museums have been patriarchal, colonial and elitist since their foundations, and this reflects until now. Diving deeper into the problem statement, the next section answers to some important questions. Decolonising the museum means shifting who holds power: who decides what is collected, how it is displayed, and whose voices are heard. As Françoise Vergès argues, decolonisation involves disorder, which is not chaos but an intentional disruption of what has been framed as “order.” (Vergès, 2024)

Why is the traditional museum patriarchal, colonial and capitalistic?

GENDERED PARTICIPATION

Early collectors and curators were elite men. Women were often relegated to the domestic sphere and not allowed to visit or contribute, with few exceptions.

REPRESENTATION - Women were depicted as passive subjects, muses, or exotic figures, rarely as creators. (Hessel, 2022)

CANON AND CURRICULUM - Art history and museum narratives overwhelmingly feature male artists, omitting women, queer individuals, and non-binary creators. (Hessel, 2022)

ARCHITECTURE - Museums are modeled after temples or palaces, embodying control and hierarchy. Feminized practices, such as textiles and crafts,

ELITISM - Linked to the rise of the nation-state, museums reinforced cultural and civic norms associated with class. (Ndiritu, 2023)

ACCESSIBILITY - Entrance fees, academic language, and behavioral expectations may discourage visitors from working-class, migrant, or disabled backgrounds. As Grace Ndiritu notes, this dimension of class is often overlooked in museum discourse, yet it is essential to address this issue. (Ndiritu, 2024)

COMMERCIALIZATION - Museums now function like marketplaces, selling tickets, souvenirs, and blockbuster exhibitions. Art becomes a commodity, and critique is muted. As artist Ingrid Jejina remarked in our conversation, artists themselves are turned into “blockbuster” celebrities for consumption. (Jejina, 2025)

TRADITIONAL LOGICS OF COLLECTING, CURATING AND ARCHIVING -

The traditional logic of collecting, curating, and archiving is deeply rooted in colonial and patriarchal structures. What began as a human impulse to preserve and understand the world, transformed into a tool of domination as collecting practices became the domain of elite white men, who excluded women, people of color, and other marginalized communities, as argued by Ursula Leguinn in “The carrier bag theory of fiction” (Le Guin, 1989).

Curating, often masked by the language of neutrality and expertise, has historical-

RESEARCH

ly shaped narratives that elevate dominant worldviews while silencing others.

Similarly, archiving has privileged written and visual records aligned with Western epistemologies, systematically excluding oral histories, embodied memory, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Driven by the colonial urge to categorize, possess, and control, the archive became a space of not only preservation but also erasure and epistemic violence, as mentioned by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung in the “Apoptotic archive” (Soh Bejeng Ndikung, 2020).

How do these traditional museum logics reflect in the architecture?

Rethinking the museum is closely tied to rethinking its infrastructure and architecture. Although academic discourse is beginning to embrace new perspectives, most museum buildings still reflect top-down, colonial, and patriarchal values. Their architecture often emphasizes monumentality and resembles imposing temples that symbolize authority and control, rather than openness or dialogue. Architectural change is slow, in part because buildings are long-lasting. Most museums were not designed with accessibility, plurality, or care in mind.

As a result, even progressive curatorial practices are often constrained by physical forms that resist the very transformations they aim to enact.



[Top] British Museum, London, UK (1789) [Bottom] Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany (1779)

CONVERSATIONS

Museums, in general, are not suitable spaces for a certain kind of artistic potential, and artworks are flattened in this sterile context. My works are connected to my African cultural heritage. They are not meant to be placed in a showcase but need to be activated and used within a community.

[...]

At this point, I think that art museums are mostly frequented by people from the field and artists, who see them as an opportunity for access, reputation, or career advancement. There are schools, but few private ones—art is a niche.

Raziel Perin, artist

I'm at a point in my life where I'm asking myself if I really want to make a living out of it and be part of that. I don't think this money-making system suits me and I try not to be dependent on it. Because I make art for myself, and I really like to share it with others, but it loses a lot when it becomes just about money. Art and the financial system are two completely different things. Art is about the soul and expression and feeling better. Marketing people don't really understand that and make it very difficult to deal with.

Emma Steenma, artist

Museums tend to have strict rules about exhibiting food and organic materials because they can attract pests or cause damage to collections. For example, in my exhibition at the Stedelijk, I wanted to display tortillas—like the ones we were making on Sunday—but there were rules against food in the museum due to concerns about pests and contamination. Similarly, there are strict regulations about bringing soil into museums because it might introduce insects or create issues with preservation. But if more and more artists are working with natural materials and exploring urgent themes around ecology, then museums will need to adapt their spaces and policies to accommodate these practices.

[...]

I also think that in terms of architecture, a museum, or at least the building itself, is not a place where you feel comfortable. Maybe it works for the art itself, but as a visitor, the design isn't really meant for your body to feel welcome or comfortable. Of course, I know museums are changing, but I still don't feel that shift. Many of these new art forms that deal with community, happenings, and workshops always seem to happen outside the museum.

Clara Aramburo, artist

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I think the biggest challenge is understanding the reality of what an institution is. You touched on this earlier—institutions, especially large museums, carry significant responsibilities. The larger the museum, the greater its accountability across multiple levels: financial responsibilities, insurance obligations, responsibilities toward the communities it serves, and even responsibilities toward the objects it houses and preserves.

Britte Sloothaak, curator at Stedelijk Museum

The idea of “filling the gap” is a colonial urge—completeness of the archive doesn't exist. Often, documentation from marginalized communities is unorthodox—missing papers, drawings, or models. It's important to witness and honor those practices.

Setareh Noorani, architect and curator at Het Nieuwe Instituut

For me, everything is interconnected – it's all art. Fine art that isn't activist is just bullshit. Contemporary art museums often turn artists into heroes or pop icons, like celebrities in blockbuster shows. Take Anselm Kiefer for example: his work is relevant now because we're living in a pre-war time, and he addresses war trauma. But at some point in his career, he found a formula and just repeated it over and over again. It's boring.
[...]

Audioguides stop you from experiencing the artwork directly. They only highlight one interpretation and select certain pieces – it becomes a form of selective storytelling, which isn't inclusive. It's just random art historian stuff. Instead, I want people to ask: What am I learning? What am I remembering?

Ingrid Jejina, performance artist

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As an artist, I need a space to exhibit and share my knowledge. But often, museums don't have a budget, and then we have to figure it out together. Artists often don't know how to apply for subsidies or funding. And many museums are still stuck in traditional ways — focused on specific paintings or artists. Some don't offer space for other types of knowledge, like textiles.

Roua Alhalabi, textile artisan and researcher

CONVERSATIONS

I think the biggest issue is that museums are mostly indoor spaces, and for me, that's always been a problem. I believe museums should have a lot more outdoor areas. That would be a simple yet significant change, especially as more artists are working with ecological thinking. The indoor museum is really the antithesis of nature—it's the opposite of ecology. You can't have anything alive inside a museum. So even when there are exhibitions about nature, they're only displaying dead things. It's kind of sad.

[...]

Most museums are sterile and lifeless. Especially for me, when I work with wood—if I use construction wood, it's fine. But if I use natural wood, like local trees or volunteer trees, they literally have to freeze it and then put it in a gas chamber. I'm not joking—they kill everything alive in that piece of wood. Because they can't risk any living beings entering the museum. And I do understand it to some extent—if there's a Rembrandt hanging in the next room, you can't exactly have mushrooms growing on your sculpture. But at the same time, a lot of these exhibitions about nature have nothing to do with nature itself—they're just representations.

[...]

Museums operate on this capitalist, production-oriented timeline that's completely at odds with the artistic process. Art isn't linear—it's emotional, spiritual, intuitive. Things emerge in their own time.

Müge Yilmaz, artist and researcher

One of the things that you often don't really see is who's actually working in these institutions. Where are they?

[...]

Not everybody wants to come inside these imposing museum buildings, because of the architecture of these buildings and also because people might have a lot of institutional trauma and don't feel comfortable to come inside

[...]

And also sometimes there's this weird feeling where sometimes you also feel complicit in it, because then you're bringing people into the museum into these spaces that are actually quite hostile. So what does that mean? So I also find it a difficult position sometimes.

Rita Ouedraogo, curator at Buro Stedelijk

New Feminist Logics of the Museum

This is my big question: how can I make a museum structure – which has a certain ancient tradition that goes back to nineteenth-century industrialization and this whole obsession of collecting and organizing, and putting things in frames and categories – become a liquid thing? That would be wonderful, no? (Van Cauterén, 2023)

In line with Van Cauterén's comments, the research asks: How can feminist pedagogies reshape the traditional museum and its approaches to collecting, curating, and archiving? How these new feminist logics translate into the architectural expression?

To begin with, it is essential to clarify that feminism, as understood in this chapter, extends beyond the pursuit of gender equality. Feminism here is intersectional: it actively engages with broader social struggles, including decolonial critique, ecological justice, and class inequality. As much of the literature affirms, feminism is rooted in the

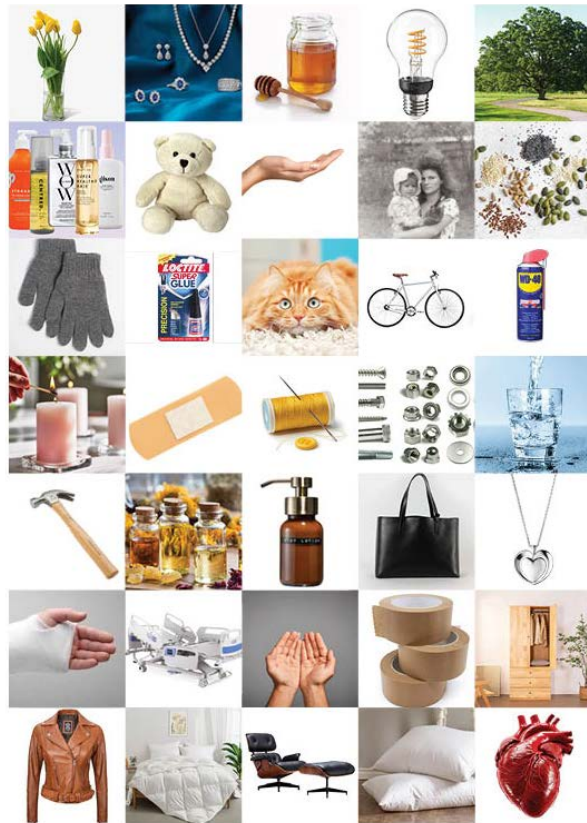
values of care, empathy, sharing, and the amplification of underrepresented voices. These principles can serve as the foundation for reimagining institutions like museums, which have long functioned through hierarchical and exclusionary systems of power.

Care as an Ambivalent Concept

Museums can be considered as “institutions of care” because they are spaces that preserve heritage, safeguard knowledge, and tend to cultural memory.

To grasp the common understanding of the concept of care, in February 2025, I conducted research with 40 of my friends and family members. I asked them: “What object do you associate with the concept of care?”. Through their responses, some of which were echoed by different people, it became clear that the concept of care has different meanings for everyone.

RESEARCH



Objects of Care, survey conducted in February 2025.

María Puig della Bellacasa, in her book “Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-Than-Human Worlds” (De la Bellacasa, 2017), explores the contradictory dimensions of care. She notes that while care can signal empathy, solidarity, and responsibility, it can also function as a tool of control, that reinforces hierarchies by deciding what is worth preserving and who gets to decide. This critique is particularly relevant to museums, which traditionally exercise authority by choosing what to collect, display, and narrate, often under the guise of neutral preservation. Such control is typically enacted from a top-down perspective, often by a limited minority of experts, curators, and collectors, shaping the museum’s content and form. In this light, “care” becomes a mechanism of gatekeeping, determining whose stories are told and whose are omitted.

Confronted with these contradictions, I began exploring the idea of the artistic commons, as articulated by scholars like Pascal Gielen in “Trust: Building on the Cultural Commons” (Gielen, 2024). The cultural commons suggests a more horizontal model where communities co-govern cultural resources, resisting the market-driven and authoritarian logics of the traditional museum. However, while this model is more participatory, it is not without its limitations. Commons are not inherently egalitarian; they are often based on shared values and internal rules, which can themselves become exclusionary. Upon deeper reflection, it became clear that even so-called “common” spaces can

unintentionally reproduce hegemonic norms.

Uncommoning the Museum: Embracing Conflicts

To address these limitations, I propose a more radical approach: “uncommoning” the museum. Inspired by anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena, this concept challenges the assumption that the commons is a universally inclusive space. De la Cadena’s notion of “uncommoning” exposes how even collective or participatory frameworks can perpetuate structures of dominance. (de la Cadena, 2019)

Uncommoning does not mean rejecting community or collectivity. Rather, it requires us to acknowledge and maintain spaces of difference where conflicting viewpoints, identities, and knowledge systems can exist alongside one another without being forced into a single narrative. For museums, this means actively creating spaces for discussing and representing alternative epistemologies, including non-Western, more-than-human, embodied, and affective ways of knowing.

A feminist museum, therefore, is not defined only by who runs it, but by how it operates horizontally, embracing multiplicity, ambiguity, and ongoing negotiation. Care, in this redefined context, becomes a shared responsibility, practiced through conflict, dialogue, and co-creation. It involves asking: **What is worth exhibiting? Who decides? Who is invited in, and who is left out?**

Conflict, far from being an obstacle, is recognized as central to the museum's function. By embracing it, the museum becomes a dynamic space where multiple (even contradictory) perspectives can coexist. This makes space for ongoing negotiation between curators, artists, communities, and audiences, allowing historically marginalized voices to be heard. As Dutch architect and curator Setareh Noorani noted in our conversation, exhibitions and programming can intentionally provoke dialogue and disagreement, shifting the museum from a site of authority to one of exchange and re-evaluation (Noorani, 2025).

This ethos aligns with Donna Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble": to remain with complexity and discomfort as part of the feminist commitment to transformation. Repair does not erase tension but works through it, acknowledging pain, contradiction, and shared responsibility as necessary components of change. (Haraway, 2016)

Posthumanist thinkers such as Bruno Latour (Latour, 2017) and Rosi Braidotti (Braidotti, 2021) echo this view, cautioning against idealized notions of community. Instead, they propose collectivity as a space of ongoing negotiation — a framework that is essential for building a museum that is not only representative but responsive.

A New Notion of Art

Unfortunately, nowadays most contemporary art museums often reproduce many of the structural issues found in traditional institutions, such as exclu-

sivity, hierarchy, and market-driven curation. However, this research argues that they also hold potential as spaces for reimagining and redistributing power. They can become sites of transformation where dominant narratives are questioned and alternative modes of knowing are explored. Through their focus on living practices rather than fixed canons, they offer a platform to highlight the positive, generative aspects of care and to enact them in both content and form.

Many contemporary artists are already working within feminist, decolonial, and ecological frameworks, drawing attention to histories and perspectives that have long been silenced or ignored. As Kathy Hessel notes in *The Story of Art Without Men*, contemporary art can serve as a powerful tool to address inequality and bring underrepresented voices into the public realm. (Hessel, 2022)

Philosopher and artist Erin Manning offers the resonant concept of art as "a way of doing," which is derived from the original translation of the Latin word "ars". (Manning, 2021) Art is considered as a process rather than a product. According to Manning, artworks are relational objects that emerge through interaction, engagement, and coexistence, not static objects meant for distant contemplation. Moreover, artworks facilitate new relationships between the artist and the audience, as well as among audience members. This shifts the focus of art away from being a symbol of individual genius or exclusive ownership and toward something more participatory

and collective. (Manning, 2021)

This perspective aligns with Walter Benjamin's concept of the loss of the "aura" of the artwork in the book "Art in the age of mechanical reproduction". This loss can be seen as a liberating opportunity: art can be "given back" to the people, no longer confined to elite spaces or sacred status (Benjamin, 1935).

Art is to be used and experienced, to put people and things in relationship with one another. Giorgio Agamben furthers this idea through the concept of "profanation", as the act of returning something from the realm of the sacred back into the sphere of common use (Agamben, 2019). By profaning art through play, experimentation, and collective engagement, its meaning is no longer dictated by institutions of power and capitalistic drives, but it is continually shaped by the artist and its audience. In this way, art can become open, mutable, and alive.

This redefinition also opens up the possibility for art to act as a form of healing. Artist Grace Ndiritu speaks of the "artist as healer" or a "shaman", where artistic practice becomes a spiritual and social process. In this view, art is not just about representation but about repair: of memory, community, and the self. It becomes a tool for mending the damages of colonialism, patriarchy, and ecological devastation through presence, ritual, and deep attention (Ndiritu, 2023).

Together, these perspectives challenge the traditional boundaries between artists and viewers, artwork and objects,

and museums and communities. They advocate for a fresh interpretation of art, viewing it not as static, sacred, or elite, but as fluid, collective, and rooted in care.

Similarly, the practices of collecting, curating, and archiving must be disrupted and transformed into feminist alternatives, as discussed in the following sections.

FROM COLLECTING TO HOSTING

For centuries, Western museums have defined themselves through collecting. Objects were taken (often by force) from their original contexts, preserved under climate control, and displayed as symbols of power, knowledge, or taste. Feminist scholar Françoise Vergès critiques this logic, describing collections as "cemeteries of objects," lifeless repositories that detach artifacts from their original purposes and relationships (Vergès, 2024). Similarly, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung calls museums "freezing chambers," where objects are frozen in time and unable to follow their natural lifecycle (Soh Bejeng Ndikung, 2020).

This colonial collecting practice, rooted in conquest, classification, and control, has long ignored the spiritual, relational, and affective dimensions of art and objects. Many indigenous cultures, for example, believe that objects possess souls or spirits. This worldview, known as "animism", contrasts sharply with Western materialism, which views the world as inert and dead. Grace Ndiritu

asks, “If we think the Earth is a dead planet, why should we care for her?” (Ndiritu, 2023) In this way, the logic of collecting, as preserving lifeless things, mirrors the broader cultural disregard for living systems and nonhuman life. This mindset is so ingrained in Western thought that most people engage in it without realizing it. For example, when I started working on my architectural proposal, I visited a potential site and began creating a herbarium, or a collection of plants.

However I received some critical feedbacks, pointing out that this approach reflects a hegemonic view of nature as passive and subject to human control. Because of these comments, I realised that I had to develop an even more radical critique of the concept of collecting, in line with the post-humanist theories of Bruno Latour (Latour, 2017) and others.

A feminist and decolonial alternative to collecting is hosting. Rather than acquiring objects to own and exhibit indefinitely, the post-museum temporarily hosts people, stories, and artworks with the possibility of their eventual return. Hosting implies respect, dialogue, and reciprocity. Rather than being possessions to be controlled, objects are guests to be listened to. This approach aligns with “Object-Oriented Ontology” (OOO) principles, which challenge traditional philosophy’s anthropocentric focus and assert that objects have agency and meaning beyond human interpretation (Grace Ndiritu, 2023).

Hosting also changes the role of the



Herbarium of plants and flowers foraged in the Harbour of Rotterdam during a site visit for finding a location for the project (march 2025)

artist. Moving away from the celebrity model of the individual genius, the artist becomes a healer, mediator, or guide: someone who creates spaces for reflection, connection, and transformation. This concept is similar to practices in many non-Western cultures, where artists are considered spiritual leaders. Artistic engagement becomes an act of care, not a commodity.

In order to manifest this healing characteristics of art, the post-museum needs spaces for contemplation rather than consumption. It should welcome all forms of creative expression, not just “high” art, as long as they serve the community and foster relationships. In this space, art is not about ownership or prestige, but resonance. Visitors may come to heal, grieve, reflect, or connect with something larger than themselves, rather than to accumulate knowledge or social prestige.

By shifting from collecting to hosting, the museum redefines itself as a living, breathing space of encounter rather than a gatekeeper of culture. It makes room for the soul of the object and the visitor to have a dialogue.

FROM CURATING TO STORYTELLING

In regard to exhibition curation, traditional Western museums have long presented curating as a neutral and objective practice: one that simply selects and displays artworks to provide context for understanding them. However, as discussed in earlier chapters, museums and educational institutions are far from

neutral. They reflect dominant cultural norms, power structures, and exclusions in their selection of exhibits and framing of them.

Therefore, I realised that curators are not neutral facilitators, but rather active mediators between art, audiences, and institutions. This role demands responsibility, self-awareness, and a critical understanding of one’s own positionality. Recognizing the subjective nature of curating is crucial for fostering multivocal or transformative practices.

Binna Choi, director of the Casco Art Institute in Utrecht, argues that “virtuous curating” does not aim to erase individual experience but rather works through collective curatorial processes (Choi, 2024). This approach reveals broader, interconnected visions in which we recognize our mutual dependence, shared responsibilities, and relational ways of knowing. Curating becomes a practice of care, collaboration, and multivocality.

Inspired by these ideas, this research embraces the concept of curating as storytelling and connecting threads. It resists the idea of a singular curatorial voice, inviting a plurality of perspectives to coexist instead. Through this lens, curating is about more than just making exhibitions; it’s about weaving different forms of knowledge, voices, and experiences together, both inside and outside the museum.

One powerful outcome of collective curating is the ability to reach and engage people who may have felt excluded or harmed by institutional spaces. Alterna-

tive initiatives that take place outside of traditional museums can provide healing and a sense of belonging to communities with institutional trauma. A compelling example of this is *ruangrupa*, an Indonesian collective that curated Documenta 15 in Kassel. Their approach centered on decentralization, resource sharing, and collectivity. While the exhibition sparked vibrant participation and dialogue, it also faced intense backlash from German institutions and media, revealing the resistance that mainstream systems have to decentralizing curatorial authority (O' Neill, 2024).

In the Netherlands, several organizations are experimenting with collective curating as well. I had the opportunity to speak with Rita Ouedraogo, a curator at Buro Stedelijk. Our conversation, which I developed into an article for the Italian magazine *Artribune*, for which I write as a foreign contributor, explored how collective practices are reshaping the Dutch cultural landscape and connecting organizations within museums to external initiatives (Ouedraogo, 2025).

Beyond interviews and case studies, I have also begun to understand curating through my personal professional practice. Over the past few months, I have curated two exhibitions: one at the Van Eesteren Museum of Architecture and Urbanism in Amsterdam and another at the Kunstbar Gallery in The Hague. These experiences provided firsthand insight into curating with care, incorporating multiple perspectives into the process, and navigating institutional constraints that continue to influence

our cultural landscape. They also served as a reminder to consider the target audience, which is mostly connected to the location in which the exhibition is held and the community brought by the artists.

FROM ARCHIVING TO SHARING

After reimagining the logic of collecting and curating, it is crucial to also reimagine how art and exhibitions are archived. Viewing the museum or archive as a place of preservation means submitting to a logic of stasis and rigidity. Traditionally, archives store objects and knowledge to preserve them for future generations, thereby perpetuating dominant narratives that dictate what is worthy of remembrance. However, if knowledge is power, as Michel Foucault argued, then it is also political and at risk of being weaponized or withheld (Foucault, 1972).

This chapter explores an alternative relationship with the archive, viewing it not as a sealed container of truths but as an open-ended, evolving practice of storytelling and sharing for the future. This approach recognizes the instability of knowledge, the plurality of experience, and the necessity of making space for stories, even when they are incomplete, disorganized, or unrecorded.

One episode that gave me a lot of food for thought occurred on my first day of work at the Van Eesteren Museum. When I arrived, the entire staff and the director were in panic because the

roof had leaked and damaged all the documentation. We worked for two days trying to save as much as possible from the archive, but we had to throw away much of the documentation. On my first day, I experienced how the archive, despite being an abstract quest to organize knowledge of the past, has a strong material existence. Therefore, it will decay or be damaged one day. It will never be eternal.

The carrier bag and the archive
In “Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” Ursula K. Le Guin offers a radical reimagining of storytelling and archival logic. Rather than centering on the weapon or the hero’s journey, she centers on the bag: a humble container of memories and objects found along the way. It is a vessel for collecting, holding, and gathering that which is often overlooked (Le Guin, 1986).

This metaphor enables fragmentary, oral, somatic, and nonhuman knowledge to coexist. It highlights the ways knowledge is stored in bodies, textiles, rituals, and landscapes, which are often dismissed or devalued by traditional documentation systems.

Beyond written knowledge

In regard to this, one of the fundamental tensions in traditional archives is their reliance on written documentation. But as decolonial dance collective “Amenti” reminded me during one of their workshops, knowledge is also oral, embodied, and performed. In the context of my project, audio conversations, textile-making sessions, and somatic gestures form the archive. These practices

resist easy categorization, but they are no less vital. They often feel more honest, acknowledging emotion, contradiction, and vulnerability as forms of truth.

Dutch Architect and curator Setareh Noorani reframes archival “gaps” as “different perspectives,” refusing the colonial impulse for completion. Her notion of the archive as a livingroom (a space of intimacy, hospitality) and co-presence, she introduces the figure of the “archival care-writer”: one who collects, annotates, and holds memory not for ownership but for activation (Noorani, 2025).

The Apoptotic Archive

Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung offers another powerful intervention with his notion of the “apoptotic archive”. Drawing from the biological process of “apoptosis” (programmed cell death necessary for the life of an organism), he reimagines the archive not as an immortalizing force but as something that must also learn to die (Soh Bejeng Ndikung, 2020).

In this framework, the archive is not only about accumulation, preservation, or safeguarding; it is also about letting go and accepting death and decay as regeneration. Apoptosis enables the body to remain healthy by shedding parts of itself. So too must the archive recognize when certain knowledge, objects, or systems of memory must be released, made space for, or transformed (Soh Bejeng Ndikung, 2020).

This idea resonates deeply with feminist and decolonial modes of care. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway dis-

RESEARCH

cusses our role as gardeners in creating “compost” from the past to cultivate a better future (Haraway, 2016). What if the role of the archive is not only to protect, but also to mourn, decay, and regenerate?

The apoptotic archive calls for the discontinuation of harmful narratives. It allows for death and incompleteness to be part of the story: not as failure, but as an intentional choice to leave space to the future generations.

“The Sacred Life of Plants” at Van Eesteren Museum, Amsterdam

The exhibition

Drawing on ecofeminist and posthumanist theories, the exhibition “The Sacred Life of Plants” explored the relationships between plants and the people living in Amsterdam’s Nieuw West neighborhood, focusing on cultural rituals and spiritual connections.

What do trees, plants, and flowers mean to them? What can we learn from different religions, spiritual practices, and cultural traditions regarding our interactions with plants? How can personal stories influence our understanding of and care for plants?

Nieuw-West is the greenest district of Amsterdam. Urban planners Cornelis van Eesteren and Jakoba Mulder recognized the importance of green spaces for the mental and physical well-being of residents. Their idea that no one should live more than ten minutes’ walk from a park or garden highlighted nature’s functional benefits for health and happiness. However, the changing demographics of Nieuw-West since the 1970s have altered the relationship between residents and plants over the past few decades. This exhibition explores the deep-rooted connections between people and the

natural world and the ways in which plants are nurtured and honored in daily life. These stories teach us how to develop relationships with the natural world that transcend aesthetics and utility. These relationships create symbols of resilience and tools for healing, building bridges between people and communities.”

The process

Presented at the Van Eesteren Museum of Architecture and Urbanism in Amsterdam, “The Sacred Life of Plants” I co-curated the exhibition with my colleague Mijke Tonnon.

While working at the museum for six months, I was very inspired by the director’s commitment to engaging with the local community through workshops, events, and supporting neighboring initiatives.

For the exhibition, Mijke and I spent two months conducting research in the neighborhood and asking people to share their stories. Sometimes it was difficult to find people willing to talk, which made me realize that people often don’t feel comfortable interacting with anyone from a museum, even a small one.

CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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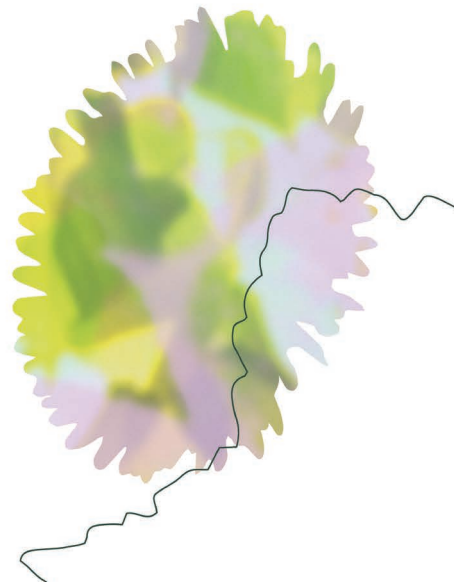
The Sacred Life of Plants



Verhalen van
planten

(en
mensen)

in Nieuw-
West



 Van
Eesteren
Museum

Exhibition Poster

CURATORIAL PRACTICE

One day, for example, we went to a community garden and asked a woman if she wanted to share a story about her plants. She said she would rather not talk, so we said goodbye and walked away. Then she came after us and gave us some fresh sage. For me, this was such a beautiful gift, and I felt taken care of by this woman through nonverbal communication.

There were also some challenges and negotiations that needed to be addressed during the project. For instance, due to the exhibition's limited budget, we could not offer monetary compensation to the participants. This resulted in complaints and conflicts from some artists. Despite the challenges, the exhibition was a great success and many people from the neighborhood came to visit the museum for the first time.

CURATORIAL PRACTICE



[Top] Panoramic view of the Exhibition installation, [Bottom left] One participants of teh Indigo Natural Dye Workshop by Atelier Roua, [Bottom right] Exhibition installation.

“Pillow Fighters” at Kunstbar, Den Haag

The exhibition

Pillow Fighters is a collective exhibition that explores softness, care, and intimacy as forms of resistance. In a culture that often prioritizes toughness, productivity, and performance, the exhibition highlights the political and social value of tenderness.

It approaches feminist thinking as practices of care, mutual support, and collective healing. Rather than presenting art as neutral, the exhibition treats it as a way to reveal overlooked experiences and develop new ways of understanding relationships, bodies, and community. Through sculpture, textile, gesture, voice, and movement, Pillow Fighters asks: What happens when play is taken seriously? When touch becomes a form of communication? When care becomes visible and public?

The exhibition transforms the gallery into a space that foregrounds vulnerability, play, and interdependence. It challenges the idea that strength must oppose fragility or that softness is a weakness. Instead, Pillow Fighters proposes tenderness and care as important tools for imagining new ways of living and supporting one another.

The process

I came up with the idea for the exhibition at the beginning of my Explorelab research. I wanted to create an art exhibition that embraces care and vulnerability as strengths and invites contemporary artists to interpret this theme. After presenting the idea to my friend Nicola, we found an opportunity to hold the exhibition in a gallery through another friend, Almira. Everything fell into place, and we contacted artists we knew personally or through connections.

Obviously, the context of the gallery was very different from that of the Van Eesteren Museum. However, it was valuable to learn how to navigate the gallery’s capitalistic concerns and make people and artists feel comfortable in this hostile environment. Additionally, my curatorial collective and I learned a great deal because it was our first time curating an exhibition with ten artists. The exhibition design and the program

I sewed the entire text of the introduction panel to make visitors feel embraced and to give them a multisensory, soft experience from the very beginning.



06.06 — 28.06
Exhibition

*Pillow
Fighters*

Artists
Ana Maria Suso
Emma Steensma
Julie Hyunkyung Cheon
Laura ġi
Mattia Papp
Miranda Devita Kistler
Nora Taher
Raziel Perin
Sofiiia Dubyna
Studioderluminaire
Zoya Sardashti

Curators
Almira Tanrikulu
Linda Del Rosso
Nicola Caporaso

Noordeinde 152A, Den Haag
www.kunstbar.nl

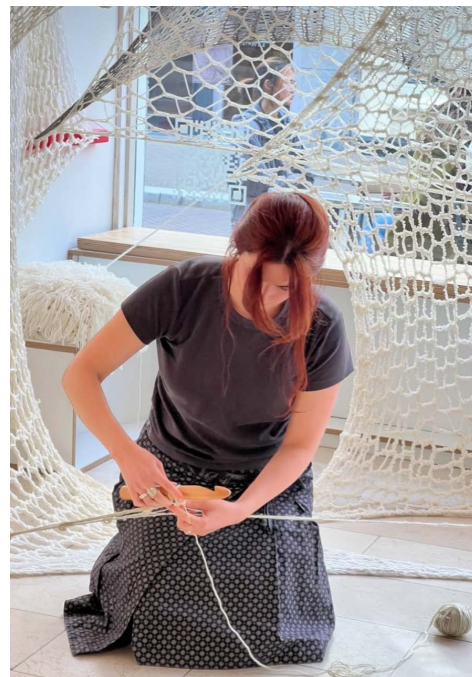
Opening Event
06.06 // 18:00 – 22:00

Instagram icon [kunstbar_den Haag](https://www.instagram.com/kunstbar_den Haag)

kunst

Exhibition Poster

CURATORIAL PRACTICE



[Top and Bottom Left] The exhibition opening, [Bottom right] Ana Maria Suzo performing and crocheting a cocoon installation during the opening.

CURATORIAL PRACTICE



[Top Left and Right] The gallery Cafe' Before and After a Pillow Fight organized for the Exhibition Finis-
sage, [Bottom Left] Dinner by art and food collective Goja, [Bottom Right] "The Drawing Experience"
Workshop by artist Raziel Perin

“Elisa Tan: A Container of Distance” at MCAD, Metro Manila

The exhibition

During my apprenticeship at MCAD Manila, I worked on the exhibition “Container of Distance”, dedicated to the life and work of Filipino-Chinese feminist artist Elisa Tan. Known for her conceptual and minimalist practice, Tan explored themes of language, migration, and belonging through simple materials such as envelopes, text, and artist’s books. Her work often used repetition and everyday gestures to reflect on communication, distance, and the experience of living between cultures. The exhibition presented a selection of her envelopes, artist’s books, and performative works, tracing the evolution of her practice from painting to text-based conceptual art developed during her years in the United States and Europe.

MCAD Commons

The exhibition was organized within the programme of Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) through MCAD Commons, an initiative that expands the museum’s activities beyond its main gallery. Conceived as an off-site exhibition platform, MCAD Commons presents projects in alternative venues across the city and beyond, allowing con-

temporary art to reach wider audiences.

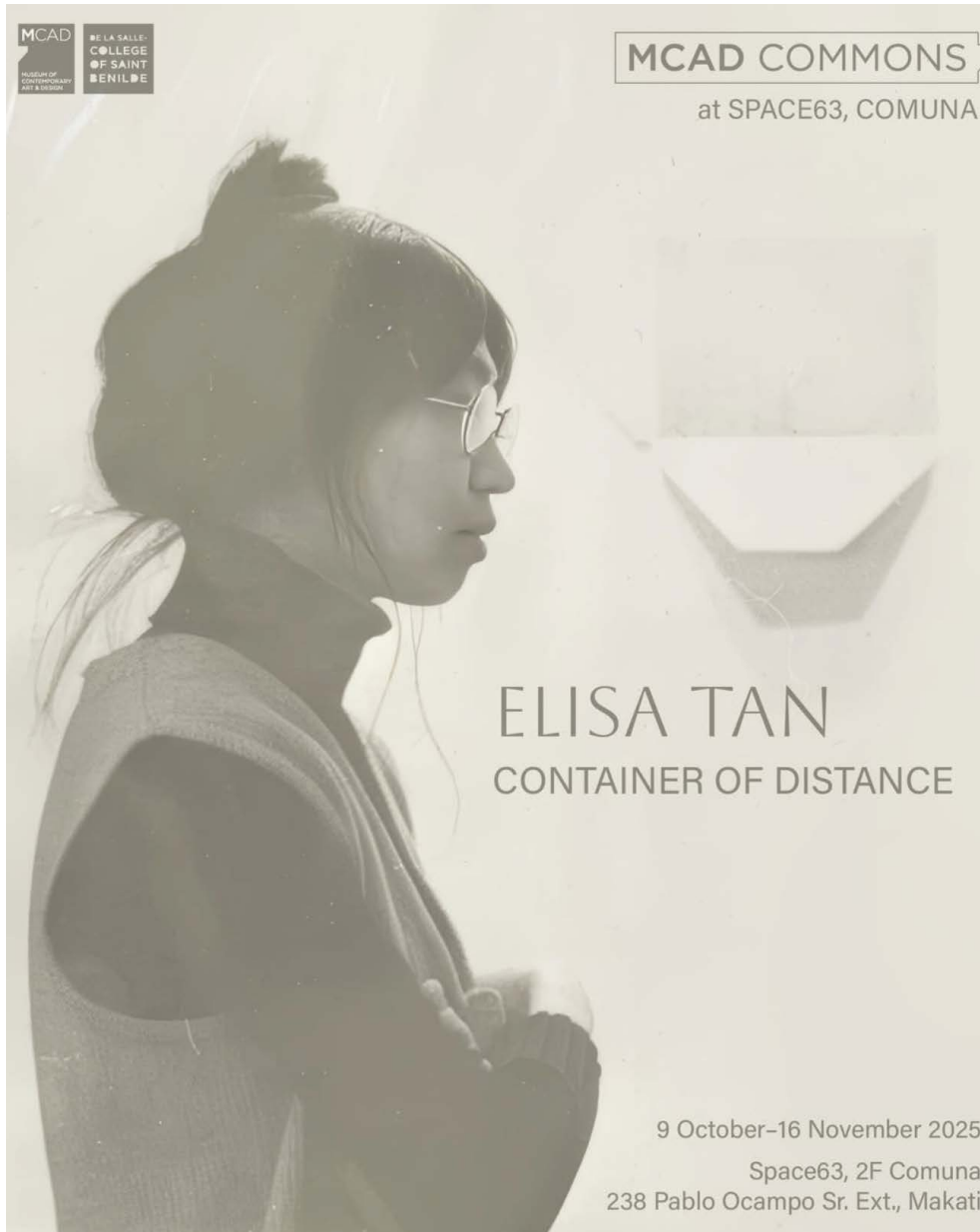
The process

I am grateful for the opportunity to work with the team at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD). During this experience I learned a lot, both professionally and personally. Living for five months on the other side of the world allowed me to experience a different cultural context and reflect on my own position within it. I was able to follow the exhibition from its early stages, starting with the acquisition of the works from the artist’s home, addressing preservation issues due to mould, and continuing through the curatorial process, installation, and opening.

Working outside the traditional museum space was an important part of the experience. It allowed me to meet many creatives in Manila, as well as people who might not otherwise have visited the museum.

Overall, my time in Manila was formative. It taught me a lot about the importance of collaboration and collective work within the museum and work environment, where every employee has a big value for the team.

CURATORIAL PRACTICE



Exhibition Poster

CURATORIAL PRACTICE



[Top and Bottom Left] Exhibition Installation [Bottom right] Myself and my colleague Jeckreegiving a tour on the life and career of Elisa Tan

CONVERSATIONS

Art, for me, is something in continuous transition and transformation. The European museum, on the other hand, is focused on preservation.

[...]

I realized that for me the biggest value of my art is the relationship with my audience. I believe that people go to art when they need something, for their own personal discovery and healing. So it is all about the relationship between the artist and the audience. They are both in a vulnerable position, and they both need to be protected [by the curator or the intermediary institution]. There should be a direct mediation that allows the viewer to fully experience the artwork [the artwork as a relational object].

[...]

A good curator is someone who shields you from having to interact with the museum's authority.

Raziel Perin, artist

Solidarity is often formed by the fact that the world outside can be quite hostile. Being the only women architects, the sense of support among us became crucial. One of the fundamental principles she mentioned was that we always made sure two people attended every meeting, not just one. It wasn't only about supporting each other but also about listening better. If you're running a meeting and taking notes at the same time, it's impossible to catch everything people are saying.

Frances Bradshaw, architect of the Matrix feminist collective

I really like to make art that speaks to people immediately, and even though I have a lot of thoughts behind it, I don't like to present it with a lot of words, because then people think they need to be scientists to be able to look at my art. (Emma Steenma, artist)

Yeah, it would be great to have my own private studio, but also to have a space to store the artwork that maybe is shared with other like-minded people, like a big hall to let your work rest. Because, you know, I think artworks get really sad when they are abandoned and all alone. They would rather be happy to have some company at night or when I am not there.

Emma Steenma, artist

Ideally, I'd want an inclusive, free space—maybe something in a public area or integrated into the community. I wouldn't want it to be locked inside an institution where only certain people feel welcome.

Quiana Cronie, fashion designer and artist

CONVERSATIONS

I'm a big supporter of collectivity, especially in large institutions where multiple people are involved in collaboration and communal practice. Different individuals contribute to the final outcome, and I strongly believe in acknowledging that. I think it's essential to highlight every individual voice, even though it requires additional time and effort. That's something you have to account for, and it requires a supportive team. You can't do this alone; you need people who believe in the idea.

[...]

It's about finding a balance. Some spaces should allow people to just enjoy the artwork without distraction, while others should encourage interaction and discussion. You need spaces that invite people to linger and share their thoughts. It's all about creating a dynamic experience.

Britte Sloothaak, curator at the Stedelijk Museum

I see the archive as a living room for the community. This is also reflected in my architectural practice. I'm interested in challenging the institution from within the archive. It's vital for valuing and making knowledge accessible.

[...]

When approaching decolonial matters from a white positionality, the most important thing is to avoid self-pity. The dilemma of solidarity and allyship is real. Black is also a political term—it refers to exploited people, not just skin color. The worst hurt comes when someone you thought was an ally betrays you because they can't deal with their white tears. Always ask yourself: Who are we practicing for? Who are you an ally to?

Setareh Noorani, architect and curator at Het Nieuwe Instituut

One of my performances involved crocheting a white rope around roughly 250 bottles of red wine, which I then threw into the space. The audience didn't see me create the work – instead, they became the artwork themselves by walking over the broken glass and red wine, which also resembled blood. The red wine would stain their shoes, and they'd carry it outside the exhibition space, becoming the performance themselves. That trace was part of the work.

Ingird Jejina, artist

I see myself more as an artisan and a researcher. That's how I introduce myself — I call myself a dye specialist rather than an artist. I use art as a way to share my knowledge and research, and that's what I love to do.

Rouba Alhabi, textile artisan and researcher

CONVERSATIONS

When we moved to Belgium with my family, our way of living wasn't understood. Our way of dressing, for example, was seen as foreign. I felt like I was living on the margins and had no sense of belonging. Activism became my way of surviving, of resisting the passive mindset around me and creating a new community—one where different ideas could come together, and where people could form real connections.

[...]

For me, activism is about care. It's about daily acts of kindness that show we care for one another.

[...]

Love is always at the center of my practice. I care for others because I need care myself. Activism doesn't always have to be loud—it can be soft activism, in daily life. Checking on people, asking what they need. People need a village. But the real question is: Are you a good villager? It is important to inconvenience yourself for others. If something is wrong, shouldn't we feel it? Too much of our world is about avoiding discomfort, but real activism means stepping into discomfort, being present, and building something real.

Philsan Omar Osman, activist and researcher

I really think museums should have outdoor spaces, or even gardens attached to them. Something like an arboretum. Maybe there should be separate spaces: one for organic art, and one for inorganic art. I don't know, just something more flexible.

[...]

A lot of what I do is about reclaiming history—reclaiming power—not in a dominating way, but in an equal, self-actualized way. We weren't taught any history of women's power in school. We learned about the Ottomans, sure, but not about the ancient goddess cultures. The same goes for ecology—no one taught us how to grow food. We had to learn algebra, but not how to take care of the earth. So now we sit down and teach ourselves. That's what research is—filling in the gaps of what we weren't taught. Self-education is so powerful.

Müge Yilmaz

Almost everything we've done so far has been a struggle because the museum is very risky, because there are other works around here, and it's all air-conditioned, which is also understandable. One of the core businesses of this museum is to preserve, but then to have a project space inside, a project space is to try things out and be experimental. So it's a contradiction in itself, which makes it interesting for me.

Rita Ouedraogo, curator of Buro Stedelijk

CONVERSATIONS

I think for me art is a way of engaging with the world, and artists and makers, thinkers, scholars, are people who are trying to help us find ways to connect with that world.

[...]

We don't have a collection. So that also gives us a kind of freedom because, yeah, we don't have to worry about a collection. Yeah. But what we really care about are the makers and the people. Also the website, no matter how messy it looks, because it was planned to be like this.

[...]

Working with other people and initiatives outside of the museum is one of the most important things for my time or practice. We want to create a space where people can really be and feel comfortable and welcomed.

Rita Ouedraogo, curator at Buro Stedelijk

Reclaiming The Myth of the Muses

I didn't know you were a spiritual person!

Neither did I, until I changed my perspective on what spirituality is all about. What is it about? A god? You can view spirituality from many different perspectives. Generally speaking, it's a sense of connection and understanding that there's something bigger than our physical and sensory realm. This could be a god, or it could be an even deeper sense of aliveness and interconnectedness. This often involves searching for meaning in life, something we all do consciously or unconsciously.

That's so true. I feel like most people in the West shy away from it, disregarding it as purposeless and a waste of time.

Exactly. That was my approach to spirituality as well until a couple of months ago, when I started talking to artists and reading about the topic. Silvia Federici, for example, is a great feminist writer who writes about the oppression of different spiritualities by capitalism and Christian values, and the killing of women considered "witches". I suddenly realised that the Christian environment in which I grew up, within my family and at school, had been forced upon me.

When I moved to the Netherlands, I distanced myself completely from it and became very sceptical about any type of religiosity or spirituality. It's not that I had anything against people with beliefs; I just felt like it was completely external to me.

But what is the relationship between spirituality and your project?

Good question. As I mentioned in the first chapter, I felt very powerless in the face of the state of society and the art world, and I did not know how to deal with this frustration. How could I overcome this sense of powerlessness and feel like I could make a difference?

Then I met Müge Yilmaz, a Turkish artist based in Amsterdam. In her new series of works, she draws inspiration from various matriarchal figures from her homeland, Anatolia, and refers to them as "Goddesses". She said, "These goddesses are not superheroes; they are just women living their lives and taking responsibility for their community."

However, they have become spiritual symbols in her art.

Yes, it made me realise that, although we may just be living our lives with our hu-

REFLECTIONS

man struggles, we are conduits of something much bigger. It is a realisation that whatever we do is greater than ourselves. On the one hand, this gives us a sense of responsibility; on the other, it can help us to distance ourselves from anxiety and the pressure to succeed, allowing us to express ourselves with less fear of making mistakes. Looking at my life and the project from this perspective, I was, for the first time, able to listen to spiritual people and observe symbols without being sceptical. I realised that each of us can find our own symbols with which to create our own mythology.

The same could happen in museums, providing a space for the transmission of spiritual and ancestral knowledge — something that has been completely overlooked in favour of humanist values and white supremacy.

So you created your own mythology?

Yes, it was a way of making sense of all the symbols, conversations, and observations I had made over the months and creating a transhuman narrative that could provide direction and hope for the future of the museum. To do this, I started with the etymology of its name. It comes from the Muses. In the past, the Muses were considered goddesses, but they have since become symbols of passive inspiration for the man genius and men's creations. I wanted to reappropriate this role by creating a new myth and a new home for them: The House of the Muses.

It is essential to me to clarify that the myth of the Muses should not be considered separate from reality; the two are

deeply intertwined and should be used to gain a deeper understanding of the world. You can be your muse, as can the people, objects, and plants around you. We are constantly inspired and inspire the world, and all of this inspiration is stored within us. Spirituality enables us to express our inner world through art and share it with the outside world. This is the spiritual power of the Muses.

I never thought of myself as a Muse before. Can't wait to hear more about it!

Reclaiming The Myth of the Muses

The Loss of Spirituality in the Western Museum

The modern museum, shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, stands as a monument to order, control, and secular reason. Born from a desire to collect, classify, and exhibit the world, it has become a space of discipline and privileged knowledge. Traditional museum institutions, with their pristine white walls, vitrines, and explanatory labels, have systematically stripped objects of the sacred, the emotional, and the transcendental. Their traditional neoclassical façade, resembling a temple, serves as a metaphor for the triumph of knowledge over religion: a symbol of the temple of knowledge.

Algerian scholar Françoise Vergès calls museums “cemeteries” (Vergès, 2024), while German-Cameroonian curator and writer Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung describes them as “freezing chambers” of the soul (Soh Bejeng Ndikung, 2021). Sacred objects, once held in ceremonies, used in healing, or cherished by communities, are immobilized behind glass, deprived of their ability to live or die on their own terms. Musical instruments, toys, tools, or ritual artifacts become deadened, severed from their original

purpose and meaning.

This spiritual void is the result of centuries of ideological violence that extend beyond the colonial project and into Europe itself. Silvia Federici reminds us that the spiritual realm in Europe was systematically eradicated during the rise of capitalism, most violently through the witch hunts. Women’s healing practices, animist beliefs, and communal cosmologies were criminalized and destroyed (Federici, 2021). Christianity, and later, colonialism, extended this logic across the globe, erasing Indigenous spiritualities, burning ancestral knowledges, and replacing relational ways of being with systems of extraction and control.

Thus, the museum reflects a broader Western legacy of spiritual erasure. While many Black, Indigenous, and diasporic communities continue to hold and transmit spiritual knowledge, Western institutions remain secular, sterile, and fearful of the unseen. In their claim to neutrality, they erase the sacred, leaving no space for grief, ritual, or the spirits embedded in the objects they display.

This loss stretches beyond the walls of the museum. In a society disconnected from spiritual frameworks, we become alienated from the earth, from each

RESEARCH

other, and from our ancestors. Fear of failure, obsession with control, and perfectionism take root, leaving us disempowered and powerless in the face of ecological and social collapse.

This disconnection lives in everyone's lineages. Through the course of my research, I began to see it more clearly in my own. Growing up in a Christian-dominated Italy, I was embedded in belief systems that eventually pushed me toward skepticism. Only by uncovering pre-Christian spiritual traditions and the wounds of ancestral persecution did I begin to understand the risks of losing faith in anything transhuman, and the rise of capitalism as a new god, worshipped through extraction, individualism and exploitation.

Yet, as Grace Ndiritu reminds us, "This spiritual element is the only one that gives us hope." It is through reclaiming spiritual knowledge, ritual, and the sacred that we can begin to repair what has been broken (Ndiritu, 2023)

Myth and Fabulation as Tools of Re-enchantment

In order to heal this rupture, I decided to turn to myth not as a fixed narrative, but as a fluid practice. In Western discourse, myth is often dismissed as irrational, fictional or primitive.

The danger of any narration is that it mythologizes, that it builds institutions that hold narratives in place. (Manning, 2020)

It is crucial to take into account that the concept of myth is complex and involves

many contradictions. Erin Manning warns us that myth is dangerous because it can become institutionalised. When museums canonise myths, especially colonial, nationalistic or patriarchal ones, they silence alternative narratives (Bonaventure Soh Ndiukung, 2020). They turn fluid stories into sacred truths.

As an alternative, Manning introduces the concept of "fabulation", the art of creating what is not yet true to make it resonate (Manning, 2020). In this sense, this critical form of storytelling becomes a feminist and decolonial strategy of speculation. Like the science fiction works of Ursula Le Guin, it enables us to envisage alternative worlds and possible futures (Le Guin, 1986).

In the project, however, see myth not as a monument or a canonising story, but as a method and an exercise in divergent thinking and imagination (Benjamin, 2025). Not as a singular story, but as a web of plural narratives created through imagination and creativity. This approach provides a speculative tool for transformation, enabling us to experience, grieve, dream, listen and act within the challenging reality of our world, and reappropriating our future (Benjamin, 2025).

Reclaiming the Muses: From Silent Inspiration to Ancestral Creation

To do so, I reclaim the figure of the Muse, not from a patriarchal point of view, but as a new empowered feminine figure of inspiration and creative genius. "The image of the Muse as loved object who inspires the male artist, whilst she

RESEARCH

herself remains silent, is deeply engrained in contemporary culture, despite the best efforts of feminist critics to expose the implications of such imagery: man creates, woman inspires; man is the maker, woman the vehicle of male fantasy, an object created by the male imagination, incapable of any kind of agency herself. In short, this image of the Muse denies woman's active participation in artistic creation and silences female creativity." (Murray, 2008)



As mentioned, the name museum comes from "museion", the location of the muses. And yet, the muses themselves have been miscast. In classical mythology, they were the goddesses of memory, poetry, and art. But over the centuries, this image was distorted. The muse became a silent woman, existing only to inspire the male genius. As feminist scholar Penny Murray notes, "Man creates, woman inspires." The muse became a passive symbol, a vessel for male imagination, stripped of her own voice, her own authorship (Murray, 2008).



This imagery is deeply embedded in our cultural psyche. Even when women were included in art history, like the poet Sappho, they were called "the tenth Muse": elevated, but also exceptionalized and contained. It implied that women could not create, but they could merely embody inspiration.

But this was never the full story. Across cultures, mythologies abound with female and non-gendered creator deities. In Sámi cosmology, goddesses like Sáráhká and Máttaráhká were honored as creators and protectors of life. These

[Top] Angelica Kauffmann, Self-portrait - The Artist in the Character of Design, [Bottom] Maud Sulter, portrait photography of Bonnie Greer (b.1948), from the series Zabat, 1989

RESEARCH

figures reflect a cosmology in which the feminine is not secondary, but sovereign (Kuokkanek, 2008).

Even in traditional Western art, some women have subverted the passive role of muse. Angelica Kauffmann, for example, painted herself as both artist and allegory, refusing the separation between creator and inspiration (Murray, 2008). Another example is the 1989 series *Zabat* by Ghanaian-British artist Maud Sulter, who reimagined Black women as muses and creators, reclaiming visual space and authorship.

Following these scattered historical examples of feminist power and reclamation of the creative genius, the project results in the *House of the Muses*, in which I pick up these already existing discourses and threads and weave them into a new mythology. A living, feminist and decolonial mythology.

Here, the muses are not silent. They are not an inspiration for someone else's genius. They are agents of change, guardians of memory, protectors of the sacred. They are artists, ancestors, healers, spirits. They are with us, whispering, weaving, remembering.

Spirituality and imagination in House of the Muses

Life-living is a way of thinking life with and beyond the human, thinking life as more-than-human. (Manning, 2016)

In *The House of the Muses*, I reclaim spirituality as an alternative to the traditional art museum. Rather than relying on dogma, I focus on presence, plurality, and care. In doing so, I envision a differ-

ent kind of museum: one that listens to its objects, acknowledges its history, and embraces grief, uncertainty, and vitality. It is a place that does not freeze life, but helps it move, breathe, and speak. It makes space for ritual, dreaming, and more-than-human forms of knowing. This involves giving the muses their agency back and letting them guide us toward presence and transformation. To me, this is the work of healing. The muses remind us that one cannot heal alone. As Erin Manning says, "We are always more than one." (Manning, 2012). Our behaviors and mental health are shaped by our environment. If society and the environment oppress our freedom, no amount of psychotherapy or inner work is enough. This must be balanced with the outside world and the outer muses we encounter along the way. These muses help us resist and collaborate toward a better future for ourselves and the planet.

Imagination and creativity are essential for creating different worlds and making them real. Many people believe that they are not creative. However, creativity is not just the domain of artists. As American professor Ruha Benjamin mentioned in "Imagination: a Manifesto", we all inherently possess the capacity for divergent thinking as children. However, this ability is diminished by schools and education systems, rendering us passive and unable to envision creative alternatives or solutions (Benjamin, 2025).

RESEARCH

How can we reclaim our creativity?

One crucial element is to be intentional about the information we consume and the communities we engage with. Through these inspirations, we can rekindle our creativity and become more authentic. One can inspire simply by being oneself. Inspiration, like respiration, like breathing, is not linear. It is circular. It generates a tangle of sharing and a web of interconnected muses.

House of the Muses is a space of connection, balancing the inner and outer muses. When we seek the right sources of inspiration and are intentional, we can become who we want to be. We can imagine what we might become, freeing ourselves from the constraints of reality. And if we have the possibility, we can, in one way or another, materialize these dreams of freedom.

CONVERSATIONS

I make art to respond to certain people's questions, to assemble a language that is not meant for everyone: the language of my ancestors. I use symbols of conversation and signs whose meaning I do not yet fully understand, linked to Caribbean spirituality and voodoo. Some people recognize them, contact me, and we open a conversation about what these symbols mean to them.

Raziel Perin, artist

My great-grandmother on my dad's side was Indigenous, Surinamese. She was taken away from the jungle where she was living her Indigenous life. The Christians came, took her away, and forced her to learn Christianity. They even gave her a European name: Dina Indian. It's so strange because even the word 'Indian' itself is a colonized term. It originally just meant someone from India, but when European explorers arrived in the Americas, they mistakenly thought they had reached India and started calling Indigenous people 'Indians.' That word alone could be an interesting element to explore in an exhibition.

Quiana Cronie, fashion designer and artist

Colonialism didn't just take land; it took away identities. Many Black people were forced to adopt new names and new realities. Today, people are reclaiming their names and histories. Identity is fluid: it acknowledges colonialism's impact, but it also reclaims pre-colonial histories. Take Black American culture, for example. The hip-hop scene, language, and expressions, all of these are a mix of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial influences. The ability to take something and make it your own is so powerful.

Philsan Omar Osman, researcher and activist

The goddess is a symbol of power: not power in the sense of dominance, but in the sense of equality. It's about having agency, making decisions, being strong. That's the kind of figure we need more of. She represents the female figure taking initiative. It's not about being a superhero. It's about women just living their lives, taking responsibility, and being visible in history, especially in histories where they've been erased or ignored.
[...]

I think all art is a kind of fabulation. All art is speculation. That's why I love the connection between science fiction literature and visual art. It's the same process: you imagine a story and write it, or you imagine a sculpture and make it. It's just different media, but the creative process is so similar.
[...]

I think it's important to remember that all politics are a kind of science fiction. Every politician has a vision of the future, and they try to shape the world toward that vision. Some are fascists: they imagine a future without Black people, for example. That's science fiction. It's horrifying, but it's a speculative fiction they're trying to make real. Then there

CONVERSATIONS

are people who imagine a future where women have equal power—that’s also science fiction, because it’s not reality yet. So all these political visions are just different versions of speculative futures. It’s not always about space or spaceships. It’s just imagining something different from what we have now. Octavia Butler and Ursula Le Guin are great example, they use metaphors like aliens to talk about people who are marginalized. “Alien” just becomes a metaphor for being treated as a foreigner, as someone not accepted. Invasion stories? They’re about colonialism. These stories are deeply rooted in reality, and very political.

Müge Yilmaz, artist

Grounding: House of the Muses

Thank you for sharing the myth of the Muses.

Of course! A myth is made to be shared, a story to be told. It can be very personal, but it allows you to position yourself in the world, to choose who you want and can be. The Myth of the Muses is not just an abstract idea. My definition of spirituality is in service of the people. So the House of the Muses needs to be materialised in the real world, and in this case, in Rotterdam.

In the introduction you mentioned that the project is rooted in a personal need: a need to find grounding, both as a person and as a designer.

Yes, after leaving Italy seven years ago, I found it hard to find a place where I could feel anchored, and connected, at home. This sometimes made me feel disorientated, as my relationship to my place of origin felt fractured, yet I hadn't yet rooted myself completely in my new city, Rotterdam, either. "Grounding" became a vital word, and the question of grounding (what it means to me, how to find it, has become a foundation of the House of the Muses.

Isn't grounding strongly connected to the soil and Mother Earth?

Exactly. In Italian, the word for grounding is 'radicarsi', meaning to put down roots in the ground. Another interesting discovery I made during my research is that in the indigenous Sami language, the words for 'earth' and 'mother' derive from the same root ("eanan" and "eadni", respectively). This close connection emphasises the indeterminate boundaries between the human and natural worlds. "Mother" can be used metaphorically to refer to the feminine caregiver, and is also associated with the concepts of grounding and home. This has also made me realise my personal disconnection from Mother Earth. Having grown up in the city, I had always thought of the world as something dead that I could just use and exploit for my own benefit. Of course, this is not sustainable in the long term, and we all need to change our perspective and honour the Earth, our mother.

How did you find your grounding in practice?

I was so grateful to discover all that the city of Rotterdam has to offer! By taking part in participatory art events,

REFLECTIONS

collective workshops and conversations, I found a sense of belonging that was not just spatial or geographic, but emotional too. These encounters, with people different from me, unfamiliar yet welcoming communities and new ideas, helped me build a foundation not only for myself, but also for the values that this museum stands for.

It's sad to think that these acts of care and community are sometimes undervalued or exploited in a capitalist society.

I agree. We should change the way museums and public spaces are conceived. Museums must be places where people can gather, feel welcome, exchange ideas and grow. They should be homes for different communities, both human and non-human, not just places to observe or consume. In my theory, I will discuss these places as infrastructures of care.

Can you think of something that makes you feel welcome in a place?

Let me think... home-cooked food!
When someone invites you for dinner and cooks for you, that's the ultimate expression of care for me.
Commensality is an absolutely important part of this chapter. It's about sharing food and your home, telling stories around the table and transforming the museum into a kitchen, dining room and living room.

Grounding: House of the Muses

Homemaking

“Home is the place where we can learn to resist,” writes bell hooks in *Homeplace: A Site of Resistance* (hooks, 2008).

The myth (or the story) of the House of the Muses is not merely abstract. It is created to serve us, to imagine possible futures and presents shaped by care. This story is rooted in reality and materiality. It begins by establishing a grounding: a connection with the soil. Soil is where all things begin and end.

For post-humanist thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, Gaia represents the planet itself, the primordial caretaker. Obviously, this concept belongs to a much older tradition. In many Indigenous cosmologies as well, Mother Earth is understood as the mother of several divinities. In the myth I am weaving, she is the mother of the Muses. In this mythology, Earth is not passive. She is Gaia, the origin of care, the mother of the Muses, the one who brings forth art, song, and resistance. She is the ultimate homemaker, not in a domesticated or patriarchal sense, but in a radical, life-giving one. Her care is unpaid, often unrecognized, yet absolutely essential. It is in this grounding that the

seed of my feminist architectural project is planted: to reclaim homemaking as a political, civic, and aesthetic act.

Finding Ground

Making a home means finding a sense of grounding, and this project began with my need to establish roots. After years of moving around, I found a place to anchor myself in Rotterdam, where I could listen and participate. When I started working on the project, I decided that it would be the foundation on which the House of the Muses could be built. Rotterdam is an urban archive of interruption and rebuilding. Severely bombed during the Second World War, the city was almost completely rebuilt and is in a state of constant transformation. By choosing it as a case study, I gave myself the opportunity to immerse myself in the city, observe it, engage with artistic and cultural initiatives, and regain a sense of agency that I had lost through moving around so much. I attended many events and workshops and met lots of people who shared my values. Through its many contradictions, but also its valuable initiatives, Rotterdam taught me that caring for a city means participating in its development as a process of creating a shared home.

Homeplace as a site of Resistance

Rather than a domestic retreat, bell hooks defined the Homeplace as a centre of empowerment and a foundation for future generations. Building on this feminist tradition, I argue that the home must be reclaimed from its connotations of domestic subjugation. It should be viewed as a civic space where knowledge is exchanged, histories are rewritten, and care is practised despite all the challenges.

This project refuses to separate the domestic from the political. The House of the Muses is a literal house as well as a metaphorical one, and will result in the realisation of one or more transformational spatial proposals. It will become a dwelling where multivocal knowledge and different voices can come together. Domestic and Public, Local and Global Drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway's distinction between "topos", a fixed place, and "tropos", a place in constant evolution (Haraway, 1992), the House of the Muses is a paradoxical space, grounded but also constantly shifting. It is at once domestic and public, familiar and strange. It embraces the messiness and complexity of multiplicity.

Dutch-Indonesian researcher and curator Britte Sloothaak uses the metaphor of the museum as a home for a large family: "With the young child, the teenager, and the grumpy uncle" (Sloothaak, 2025). It is a space where different ways of knowing meet and sometimes clash, generating a continuous dialogue. Only

through care and sustained engagement with complexity can the unfamiliar become familiar—through repetition, recognition, and shared presence.

As Marisol de la Cadena reminds us, to "uncommon" is to resist the singular, universalizing logic of heritage (de la Cadena, 2019). The House of the Muses proposes a new kind of heritage that is rooted in soil, stories, and social relations. Here, art is understood as collective creation, always locally grounded and context-specific.

Moreover, House of the Muses is deeply rooted into the local context. In her essay *The Local Museum in the Global Village*, Insa Müller emphasizes the importance of civic, local initiatives in dialogue with the museum, rejecting the false universality that dominates many cultural institutions today (Müller, 2020). Similarly, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung advocates for a locally rooted vision of museums, where every place becomes a microcosm of a broader global reality (Soh Bejeng Ndikung, 2021).

Rotterdam, in particular, exemplifies this intersection of global and local influences. It is a city where many cultures coexist, overlap, and transform one another, making it an ideal context for imagining new models of shared cultural space. The House of the Muses is becoming a place where feminist and decolonial practices intersect with the ecological, the bodily, and the poetic. These perspectives form alliances that help envision a different world, beginning here and now.

Infrastructures of care

After demonstrating the importance of care into today's society and institutions, and after establishing a common ground, it is time to ask: "What is the next step?" and "How do we get there?" To move forward, we must come together, and for that, we need places: infrastructures of care.

In *Matters of Care*, María Puig de la Bellacasa writes that care is not only about matters, but also about "mattering" (de la Bellacasa, 2017).

What matters, and who gets to matter?

The home becomes a place where these questions are posed materially: through architecture, gesture, and daily practice. In this home, care is not just an abstract feeling; it materializes through action and collective civic effort. It is expressed in the shared maintenance of life: repairing, cooking, mending, storytelling. These acts, often dismissed as insignificant, are in fact world-making. One such act is "commensality" (eating together) which can be seen as a political gesture, an acknowledgment of our interdependence with others, human and nonhuman alike. As Grace Ndiritu suggests, at the table, knowledge circulates differently: horizontally, relationally, through oral and sensorial stories (Ndiritu, 2023). Women, historically confined to the kitchen, reclaim it as a place of community-making and power.

House of the Muses resists the museum's traditional mode of distanced specta-

torship. Instead, it proposes a mode of being-with: not looking at knowledge from afar, but cooking it, touching it, tasting it. The museum becomes a kitchen, a common room, a shared hearth where people come together to exchange thoughts, experiences, and traditions.

To conclude, House of the Muses is a place for cultivating and caring for the present, and for building new foundations for the future.

RESEARCH



[Top Left and Bottom] Persian Weaving Workshop by Mohamad Khezri Moghadam at Corpo, Bodies of Movement, Rotterdam [Top right] Homemade gnocchi (recipe from my Italian Grandma) cooked by myself and my colleague Asuka at the Van Eesteren Museum, Amsterdam.

CONVERSATIONS

There's a beautiful Japanese tradition that embraces the passage of time: how cracks and signs of aging can actually enhance an object's beauty. I think that's a much better way of looking at buildings: they gain meaning through the lives of the people who inhabit them.

[...]

No matter how you start—by responding to what people think they need—it will always change. Buildings change. People's needs change. This is true for houses, workplaces, and all kinds of spaces. So, having the mindset that things will evolve over time is really important.

[...]

Sometimes architects can be very scared of these collaborativemeetings and I've seen situations where architects organize large public meetings, and they don't go well: people get frustrated, there's shouting, and it can feel unproductive. But that anger often comes from a real place. People have valid reasons to be upset. The key is to set up discussions in a way that allows for meaningful engagement. The size of the room, whether there's tea or coffee, the level of comfort. These small details can make a huge difference in how people participate and share their experiences.

Frances Bradshaw, architect of the Matrix feminist collective

Cooking, in particular, is a very bodily and intuitive way of understanding culture. When I cook with people, it becomes a shared experience where we reflect on what we eat, where our food comes from, and the methods we use to prepare it. These acts of gathering, eating, and exchanging knowledge are deeply connected to my cultural background, but they also serve as a response to my intellectual and emotional experiences in different places.

[...]

The kitchen is a creative space I love—whether it's making pigments, preparing textiles, or cooking. Being at home feels right for me.

Clara Aramburo, artist

For me, curating is a form of caretaking. It extends from the objects and concepts to the audience, the artist, and even the building itself. It's like taking care of a big family. You have to consider everyone—from the little children to the annoying uncle who always has something to say. You could see it as a challenge, but I actually enjoy it. I like the complexity of it.

[...]

CONVERSATIONS

I've always liked the analogy of a house, where family and friends come together. A museum isn't just a storage space for objects or a display area; it's a place where people gather to spend time, share thoughts, and connect. It's not a shop or a warehouse. It's about creating a space for people, not just for showcasing items.

Britte Sloothaak, curator at the Stedelijk Museum

Family, for me, was always more than just close relatives; it was a collective where love and support were shared, and where different generations played different roles. The older generation was more passive and knowledgeable, while the younger generation had more fire and wanted to act immediately. In our community, knowledge was passed down organically.

[...]

We opened up our own home. We put carpets on the streets and created a communal space outside. We realized that even though we lacked a large extended family, we had the privilege of knowing what a strong, united family feels like. We wanted to create a space where everyone could come and feel welcomed.

[...]

I always reference bell hooks—her book “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” describes how Black women have historically turned home into a radical space of political resistance. Healing from oppression is not just a private act; it has a broader impact. During the Black Lives Matter protests, first aid and food distributions happened in Black women's homes. Care was extended outward. It's about reappropriating what it means to be a woman—politicizing care and making it valuable and acknowledged. Challenging oppression requires love and affirmation.

[...]

I focus on food practices in diasporic communities in Belgium and the Netherlands. Food changes depending on context, and I explore how to create safe spaces for people to heal and share together. Healing happens collectively, in the same physical space.

[...]

Opening up our home required constant negotiation. Sometimes my family felt inconvenienced or annoyed, but that's the price of having a community. We live in a society that avoids discomfort, but facing difficult emotions is necessary for growth.

Philsan Omar Osman, activist and researcher

We've been thinking about how people want to be part of Buro Stedelijk, how we can collaborate, and how this can inform my curatorial practice. One of the most important values is collaboration.

Rita Ouedraogo, curator of Buro Stedelijk

Sewing the Manifestations

How did you approach summarizing and communicating the many conversations you've had over the past few months?

I remember telling one of the studio supervisors during the first week that I wanted to conduct many interviews. She advised me not to conduct more than four and to ask very specific questions, almost as if I already knew the answers. Otherwise, she warned, I would get lost. She was right.

Do you regret not following her advice?

Not at all. Getting lost was the most important part of the learning process. Although I explored many directions, I was amazed by how the connections deepened the farther I went. There were so many inspirational muses, all linked through invisible threads.

How did you eventually find your way back?

A few weeks ago, I felt overwhelmed. My presentation was approaching, the exhibition I curated in The Hague was opening, and I was dealing with personal challenges. This project means so much to me. I promised myself that I would

embody care and healing, not just in the content, but in my life as well. However, the pressure from architecture school and my internal struggles pulled me down. I had to refocus and ask myself, "Who am I, and what can I offer this project?"

That kind of introspection is often missing from academic spaces, especially in architecture.

Absolutely. However, there are exceptions: professors like Heidi and Suzana have supported my personal development tremendously. Taking time for myself helped me shift my perspective. I recalled a workshop at the faculty called "Triple Thinking" about what triggers architectural morphology and design decisions. During the workshop, I began intuitively sketching and modeling with thread and crochet.

Textile seems to have long been your way of expressing yourself.

Yes, it's deeply rooted in my upbringing. My grandmother taught me to crochet and sew at a young age. We spent many afternoons crafting together in our mountain home. As I grew older, however, I drifted away from it in favor

REFLECTIONS

of sports. That changed three years ago when I got sick. It was a difficult, grief-filled yet transformational time. I returned to sewing and crocheting, which became my meditation. It helped me get out of my head and into my hands. Through creating things, I found patience, healing, and a way to express love, particularly through gifts for my loved ones.

That period taught me the value of self-care, which is now inseparable from my textile work. After moving to Rotterdam, I started helping out at a textile workshop for teenagers in Delfshaven. Teaching them how to use sewing machines was an amazing experience. Their enthusiasm and progress made me feel like I belonged in my new city.

Thank you for sharing that. It seems like textile-making channels your inner muse. How does that relate to your project?

When I hit a creative block, I turned to sewing to calm down and reflect. I started stitching my messages - or, more accurately, the messages of my muses - onto cloth. Each letter became a meditation, a slow and attentive practice. Textile became my way of writing. It was a way to engage with grief, memory, and possibility. Inspired by material studies and poetic practice, I've come to see textiles as a soft, repetitive, and mutable alternative way of creating and sharing knowledge. Sewing becomes a form of listening and becoming-with. It creates relational objects that hold memory, meaning, and transformation. These words come

from my muses, but by stitching them, I embody feminist values of care. Sometimes the machine jams. I prick my finger. I break the needle. Through these experiences, these repetitions, I learn. Because "repetition is the mother of learning".

So, the cloth becomes a manifestation of both you and your external inspiration?

Exactly. On the one hand, it represents the outer muse through the words and stories sewn into the fabric, the cotton's journey from the plantation to my home, and the lives that were involved in its creation. On the other hand, it reflects the inner muse through the hands that crafted it, the techniques that were learned, and the symbols and emotions that were embedded in the process.

It sounds like a lot of work. How long did it take you?

Well, you know me. I like to push things a little further. I didn't just sew my reflections. I also made the introduction panel for the exhibition I curated in The Hague. More or less, I spent six full days sewing in my living room in total. I developed a strong connection with my sewing machine: we really worked together! The process was great practice in patience and acceptance. If I ran out of thread in the evening and the shops were closed, I took it as a sign to rest. If I pricked my finger, I knew I was too tired to continue. The process felt natural. It brought me closer to my body and soul.

Sewing the Manifestations

This chapter focuses on the material and embodied aspects of the research, emphasizing materiality as a way to express my positionality. Drawing from material culture studies, I explore how the process of creation can become a way of thinking—an embodied, relational practice that opens new feminist possibilities. This is where the initial sense of powerlessness transforms into power and agency.

Material culture is an important field of study in the contemporary museum which focuses on the relationship between beings and objects, offering a critical lens through which to challenge dominant, disembodied narratives. It reveals how items (such as tools, textiles, and everyday artifacts) carry meaning, memory, and social significance. Importantly, materiality is never neutral; it is deeply embedded in historical, cultural, and political contexts.

As Erin Manning reminds us, “We are always more than one”, a notion that applies to both objects and humans. (Manning, 2012) Objects have multiple identities, stories, and agencies. Studying material culture enables us to trace these complex entanglements and demonstrate that creation is always relational and

embodied.

In this spirit, I draw on the Buddhist concept of “inter-being”, as articulated by Thich Nhat Hanh.

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating on this sheet of paper. Without a cloud there is no rain. Without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees we can't make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here. So we can say that the paper and the cloud “inter-are.” “Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter” with the verb “to be”, we have a new verb, “inter-be.”

(Nhất Hạnh, 2009)

Inspired by this vision of relationality and deep connection, I use sewing and textiles as my method. Sewing enabled me to establish an interbeing relationship with the materials, acknowledging their journey from raw cotton picked in the fields to thread woven in my hands. It becomes a form of meditation, care and patience, while reflecting on the voices that shaped this project.

Following the conversations with my muses and the readings of literature

I sought to embody them through repetition, mistakes, and the process of creation of a cotton cloth.

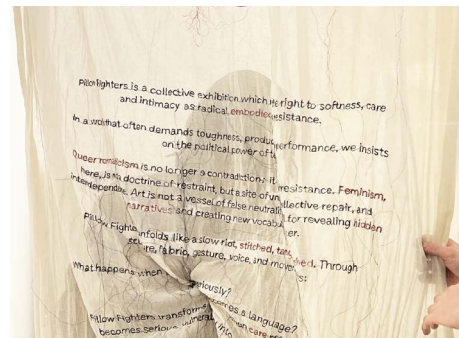
The Manifestations

I reject the patriarchal, colonial, top-down tradition of writing a “manifesto” and instead choose to write “manifestations.” While a “manifesto” implies authority, rigidity, and finality, a “manifestation” is fluid, evolving, and alive. Though both words stem from the Latin “manifestare,” my manifestations resist closure. They offer values for action rather than fixed rules: feminist principles of care, openness, and becoming.

These manifestations are written and sewn through me yet not only by me. They emerge from the words of my muses: the people, things, and ideas that have guided me. I carry their teachings with me and recite them to keep them in mind.

Manifestations are not fixed declarations, but invitations, opening up possibilities for the future. They resonate instead of commanding. They are traces of my inner and outer muses, stitched into cloth and carried forward as reminders that making, like living, is a collective and unfolding practice.

Through writing and reading aloud, feelings of powerlessness give way to hope and motivation for a better future. One can imagine these poems being recited around a fire, with listeners repeating after the speaker. This collective act enables us to embrace everyone’s strengths and contribute to a movement of change.



[Top] Stitched sample of a cotton gauze patchwork, [Middle] Sticthing the manifestations, [Bottom] My friend Xavier helping me out to set up a stitched Introduction Panel for the “Pillow Fighter Exhibition” in den Haag.

CONVERSATIONS

There is a tendency to prioritize new buildings over the maintenance of existing ones. In architecture, there's often no long-term responsibility for a building after it's completed, which leads to neglect. The same applies to textiles—people lack the knowledge or motivation to repair clothing, so they resort to buying new items instead. Both in architecture and fashion, repair should be valued as much as creation. Sharing repair knowledge is crucial for changing this mindset.

[...]

I mainly focus on darning, and I make it clear in my workshops that I'm not the sole expert in the room. There are people who excel at zippers, patching, or other repair techniques, and I want to create an environment where we can all share and learn from one another. The goal is not just to teach a skill but to foster a space for collective learning and exchange of knowledge.

Wietzke Nutma, textile artist and researcher

As a woman, you need to make yourself respected. Be strong. Be difficult. People used to call me a witch because Without violence, I fought for what I wanted. If you want to make it, you have to assert yourself – otherwise, no one will listen to you.

Ingrid Jejina, performance artist

I want to show that a lot of things are possible here. We do reading groups, we write essays, we do manifestations on the windows, we do collaborations with a nightclub. We do collaborations near Wester Park where we have filled all the windows of a building with different works. So it's always thinking, how can we manifest in different places, with different organizations?

Rita Oueraogo, curator at Buro Stedelijk

MANIFESTATIONS



Welcome to the House of the Muses.
You can take off your shoes,
feel the soft ground beneath your feet:
a fertile ground,
where the future is taking root.

Make yourself at home.
Take a seat, and share some food.
Oftentimes, people like you come from the city and ask:
“Where is the collection?”
Be aware - this is not a collection.

Collections are cemeteries,
freezing chambers for the soul.
In our house, we host,
people, stories, objects:
with respect,
and with the possibility of return.

Art, for us, is not a finished object to gaze upon.
It is a process,
a relationship,
a communication between souls.
It was never meant for a vitrine,
but to move among beings and spaces,
to be touched, felt, and changed.
That is how art becomes alive.

So please, take care
of all the other guests, and
their care will find its way back to you.
In this house we do not curate or exhibit.
we connect and we share.

And yes, sharing can be frightening.
You might feel exposed, and vulnerable.
We'll be honest:
this is not a safe space,
because safe spaces do not exist.

But still, you can choose to trust.
If you've come all this way,
perhaps you are looking for something you've lost?

Yes, there may be conflict.
You may stumble.
But the floor will support you,
and we will help you rise.
Stay with the trouble.
That is what it means to be alive.

So listen.
Share.
Exchange gifts.
This is how new alliances begin.
This is how we shape a new language, together.

But to tangle with others,
you must also learn to connect with yourself.
The House of the Muses is also a retreat,
a pause from the city,
a place to reflect,
to come back to your inner self.

Art can be healing.
It can awaken forgotten feelings,
stir buried memories.
It can be painful too:
this world exhausts us.

Sometimes, it can be good to cry.
But we cannot afford to be hopeless.
If we endure the winter together,
one day, spring will come :
with green abundance, and life again.

But don't believe you are alone,
or powerless.
You are togetherness.

And we are all threads
of a force greater than ourselves.

A spiritual truth,
the only promise that gives us hope.

We care for the future,
rejecting immortal archives,
rigid monuments.
Eternity is not our dream:
it is our nightmare.

This house will decay.
And in its decay, it will regenerate.
It will die,
to leave space and fertile ground for what's to come.

MANIFESTATIONS



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LECTURES, EVENTS

The Sacred life of Plants: 29-1-25 to 9-3-2025

Indigo natural dying workshop: 2-2-25

Foraging and Herbarium Workshop: 2-3-25

Cooking workshop: 9-3-25

Life Drawing workshop, Time Window: 16-2-15

Rotterdam Design Biennale: 3-25

Object Rotterdam: 2-25

Exhibition Opening Anarchieff Rotterdam: 28-2-25

Museum Nacht Rotterdam: 2-3-25

Exhibition Garden Futures, HNI: 1-25

Exhibition Dutch: More or less: 4-25

Alternative Collective Financial modes, Extra Practice: 14-3-25

BK Talk, Feminist Pedagogies: 4-3-25

Life on Earth: Art and Ecofeminism: 21-3-25.
Syrian Weaving workshop: 15-3-25

Movement class, Dansatelier: 9-4-25

Renarrative, exhibition opening and talk at Worm: 26-3-25

Collective Joy, Palais de Tokio, paris: 2-25

Travelogue, Mudec, Milan, 3-25 to 8-25

Morphogenetics workshop, BK Faculty: 4-25

Finale Premio Wondy, Books on Resilience: 31-3-25

Critical Walking workshop, Tidal Studies @ Rozenstraat, Amsterdam: 1-3-25
Private Lives: from Bedroom to Social Media - Musée des Arts Décoratifs: 3-25

Il vostro cielo fu mare, il vostro mare fu cielo, Adrian Paci – Mudec, Milan: 3-25

From muralism to street art – Mudec, Milan: 3-25
Katoenhuis visit: <https://www.katoenhuis.nl/history-katoenhuis>

Changing Institutions with Sarah Ahmed, Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam: 19-5-24 (watched online)

Opening Fenix Museum of Migrations, Rotterdam: 16-7-24

Opening “I must still grow in the Dark” at Buro Stedelijk, Amsterdam: 22-5-2025

Opening “Spiritual Disobedience” at Gemaal op Zuid, Rotterdam: 2-5-2025

Opening of Pillow Fighters, an exhibition on the power of softness and vulnerability, Kunstbar, den Haag: 6-6-2025

Collective Food Performance by Mattia Papp, Kunstbar den Haag: 12-6-2025

The Drawing Experience Workshop by razielperin, Kunstbar Den Haag: 14-6-2025.

Lecture on Imagination by Ruha Benjamin at de dependance, Rotterdam: 17-7-24

Morning Rituals Workshop by Zoya Sardashti, Kunstbar Den haag: 14-6-2025.