

# Tools for Collective Learning





## Tools for Collective Learning

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



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*INTUITION*



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## 'Witte de With' museumboulevard



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

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

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

**A  
Name  
is a  
Debt**

UNTITLED

# A Name is a Debt

## *Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy*

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

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

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

Throughout the book, we make explicit that our renaming is part of an intensive period of changing value systems in the Netherlands, where we are situated, as it is in other parts of the world. No less, our work in the superdiverse port-city that is Rotterdam is part of a wider movement promoting cultural inclusivity and anti-racism, locally and globally.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the renaming process itself is not an isolated activity at our institution. On the contrary. Our renaming is a step; one of many components within a larger and multifaceted roadmap, known within our



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

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

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

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

### Tools for Collective Learning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

this art project focuses on the repurposed nineteenth-century building that houses our institution. As his images and text elucidate, our building was originally designed in the 1870s as a school. And while the building is a precursor to modern educational architecture, its style was deemed too international according to the nationalist agenda of the time. In our joint research, we discerned that it was in the late nineteenth century when the country's seventeenth-century accomplishments would be widely revived and commemorated.<sup>2</sup> Today, the expansionist work and symbolic revival made in those bygone eras is what is being questioned and, in certain instances, dismantled. Our institution's renaming is part of this probing. It is a sign of our times.

### Dissonant Heritage

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

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

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

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

characterized most of the nineteenth century in the Netherlands ... It never became a social movement nor a subject that captured the heart of the entire nation".<sup>6</sup>

The academic Laurajane Smith analyzes how dominant heritage discourse developed in the nineteenth century along with nationalist projects and liberal modernity; how ideas of progress took precedence at this time, legitimizing colonial and imperial expansions; how, in this process, ideas of race, ethnicity, and culture developed.<sup>7</sup> It is no secret that for over a century, and more forcefully in recent decades, this understanding has been critically challenged by new historical analysis and cultural promotion, which frame contact, progress, and conflict in different terms. Struggles for representation are at the heart of this social project. Furthermore, in his study of the birth of nationalisms, the author Benedict Anderson coined the concept of "an imagined community" to explain how national identities were forged by using cultural strategies representing the new consolidation of nation-states. Anderson also explains that 'official nationalism', that is, set forms and traditions emanating from the state, were "from the start a conscious, self-protective *policy*, intimately linked to the preservation of imperial-dynastic interests".<sup>8</sup>

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

### Generative Rifts

The online circulation and publication of an *Open Letter to Witte de With* in the summer of 2017 catalyzed a debate at our institution that resulted in our Name Change Initiative.<sup>9</sup> The letter denounced our institution for not having critically regarded the colonial references of its name, then 'Witte de With', even while working, at that time, on an art project about decolonizing. This open letter was authored by Egbert Alejandro Martina, Ramona Sno, Hodan Warsame, Patricia Schor, Amal Alhaag, and Maria Guggenbichler; it was co-signed in support by many more people. The art project they referred to in the letter was *Cinema Olanda: Platform* by the then Rotterdam-based artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh, which was an extension of the artist's concurrent exhibition in the Dutch Pavilion curated by Lucy Cotter for the 57th edition of the Venice Biennale.<sup>10</sup> Organized at our institution by its former Director and curator, Defne Ayas and Natasha Hoare, *Cinema Olanda: Platform* consisted of an event-based, offshoot exhibition presenting work by artists and cultural producers in the Netherlands, most of whom are associated with the country's active decolonizing movement.

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

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

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

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

An early example is the debacle around a statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, governor general of the VOC in the seventeenth century. Erected in 1893 in the city of Hoorn, Coen's birthplace, the statue was at the center of a public debate between 2010 and 2012. This was triggered by a citizen's proposal to remove the statue, considering its personification of VOC genocides. The local Westfries Museum staged an exhibition as trial, literally; there, most voting audiences favored keeping the statue. Regardless of this purportedly participatory exhibition, at best pretentious, at worst a scam, Hoorn's city authorities had already decided to keep the statue anyway. The compromise reached was adding a plaque to describe who Coen was, ending with a brief line referring to the existing criticism that he "does not deserve to be honored." The heritage historian Lisa Johnson analyzes this performative exhibition as a way of cooling off a hot topic.<sup>11</sup> Agreed. But in what way does this explicative text redeem wounds caused by colonialism? In what way does it include unwritten histories or acknowledge cultural disadvantages?

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

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

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

Like us, this American University and British cultural center experienced polemics that mobilized their name changes, and their renaming processes were also years long. Yale's comprehensive report and advice to the University served us to set the basis for the kind of inquiries and work we would set forth in our Name Change Initiative.<sup>12</sup> Determining their advice on namings and renamings were observations of the late Robin Winks, once faculty member at the University, who "identified a critical distinction between liberal and illiberal alterations of historical monuments", and who "wrote about two different concepts of history". The authors of the report summarize it this way:

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

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

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

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

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

#### Site-Specificity: Our Former Name

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### Context-Specificity: Our New Name

A report published by the American Migration Policy Institute indicates that more than forty percent of Rotterdammers are foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent.<sup>14</sup> The 2020 statistics of the *World Population Review* indicate that most of the foreign-born residents of Rotterdam come from Suriname. Residents of Turkish, Moroccan, and Dutch-Caribbean descent also contribute to the city’s superdiverse population, which is made up of more than 600,000 residents in the city center and roughly one million residents overall. Another way to look at this is how the researcher and local politician Peggy Wijntuin describes it: “One in eight Rotterdammers is a descendant of an enslaved African person.”<sup>15</sup>

How can we possibly continue to disavow this?

For good reason, ‘disavow’ is an operative term used by scholar Gloria Wekker.<sup>16</sup> I use it here to advance the relevance of her work. Her book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* is probably one of the most influential books in the discussions on decolonizing in the Netherlands—and has been since its publication in 2016—and was certainly influential in the decision for the name change at our institution. In this book, Wekker makes a call to discontinue disavowing people; that racism is embedded in society. This is also what charged the Name Change Initiative into a task beyond renaming, for systemic change is needed for a resignification of marks and symbols to endure.

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



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

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

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

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

What is imperative to include here are the following points:

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

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

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

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

commissions under a program series we're calling Anchored, and which especially engages with the histories of our building, our neighbors, and our street. Anchored projects are now presented in other spaces within our building. In a similar vein, we also turned one of our offices into a project gallery, where we have most recently begun co-presenting exhibitions with local partners.

## A Culture of Change

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

1.

“Recently the term ‘superdiversity’ was used by anthropologist *Steven Vertovec* as a way of looking at the mix of identities of our cities in a less reductive, less statistical way. Superdiverse cities like Rotterdam bring with them a next stage in the integration process, where ethnicity is no longer the most important let alone the sole factor with which people define themselves. Instead of the old dividing lines of ethnicity or language, superdiversity seems to create new connections. [...] The simple pie chart of ethnicity becomes mixed up into a fluid composition of overlapping and mixing colors.” In “Living in the Superdiverse City,” Independent School for the City, last modified February 25, 2022, <https://www.schoolforthecity.nl/superdiversity22/>.

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3.

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4.

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5.

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6.

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7.

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8.

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 163.

9.

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11.

Lisa Johnson, “Renegotiating dissonant heritage: the statue of J.P. Coen,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20, no. 6 (2014): 583–598.

12.

Yale University, “Letter” and “Report of the Committee to Establish Principles of Renaming,” Office of the President, Yale University, last modified December 2, 2016, [https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR\\_FINAL\\_12-2-16.pdf](https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR_FINAL_12-2-16.pdf).

13.

Yale University, “Report of the Committee to Establish Principles of Renaming,” 2–3.

14.

Han Entzinger and Godfried Engbersen, *Rotterdam: A Long-Time Port of Call and Home to Immigrants* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2014).

15.

Hasna el Maroudi interviews Peggy Wijntuin and Charl Landvreugd, “Melly TV: Vulnerability,” Kunstinstituut Melly, January 27, 2021, <https://www.kunstinstituut-melly.nl/en/connect/219-melly-tv-episode-1-vulnerability>.

16.

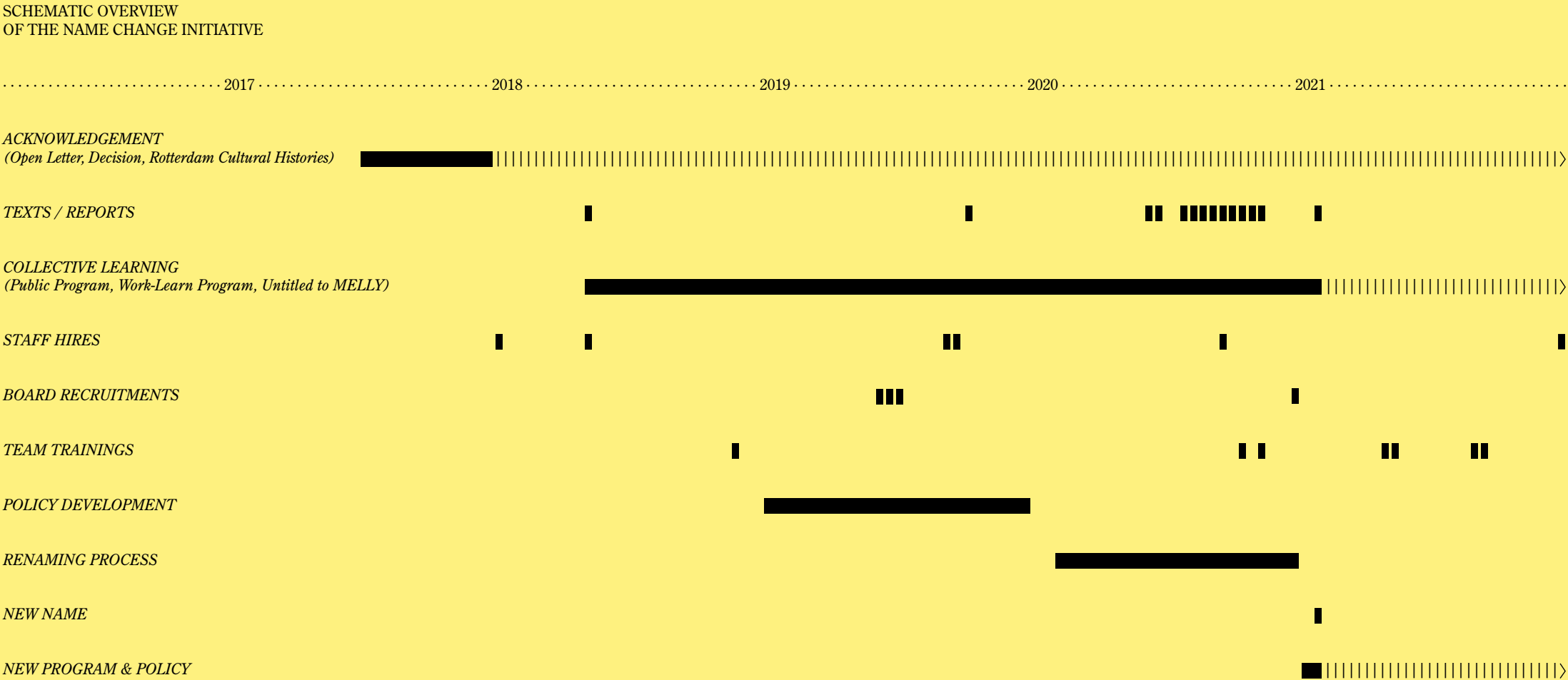
Gloria Wekker, “Suppose She Brings a Negro Home: Case Studies of Everyday Racism,” in *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 30–49.

17.

Ken Lum, faxed artist’s statement, 1989 [Kunstinstituut Melly archive].

18.

The reflection is inspired by a short line, “A name is a debt”, which I actually use for the title of this essay, and which is drawn from an article by the theorist Paul B. Preciado, describing the steps and the significance of the administrative hurdles for changing his name, from Beatriz to Paul, during his transition. Paul B. Preciado, “My Body Doesn’t Exist,” in *The Documenta 14 Reader* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017), 117–134.



The Name Change Initiative enacted a number of transformation pathways over a multi-year period. These include staff hires, board recruitments, and policy development, as well as the renaming process itself. The main pathways of the Name Change Initiative were initiated from January 2018 onwards. This schematic overview connects these activities of the Name Change Initiative to the public triggers of the re-naming announcement in 2017, as well as to a forward-looking commitment towards ongoing transformation and best practice.

## Acknowledgments

*Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy*

We had to change. And we had the courage to change. But from the onset, some five years ago, it was clear that neither cause nor circumstance were enough. The kind of institutional transformation we dreamed of required new tools, which we felt could only be accessed if and when we broadened our community and our frames of reference. Maybe this sounds too abstract. Indeed, these are the first thoughts that spring to mind as I begin to draft the very last pages of this book. And just now, I feel my blood rushing. Many felt emotions and lived experiences surface. Many events and people suddenly come to mind. There are many people to acknowledge. There are myriad things to be grateful for during these years developing the Name Change Initiative at Kunstinstituut Melly. For example, we've had to learn to hold space, or, in the words of writer, activist, and facilitator adrienne maree brown, "to hold change". At times, we have been able to achieve this. Many times we have failed, then we picked ourselves up and tried again. The 'we' here is the team at Kunstinstituut Melly, and the countless dreamers who have been part of our Name Change Initiative. In these pages, I want to name these dreamers as much as those who directly participated in key aspects of this years-long initiative. Needless to say, more people beyond the ones listed have participated, and I wholeheartedly express gratitude to them.

As this book presents, our Name Change Initiative included renaming our institution formerly known as Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art. It has also involved our institution's wider and ongoing transformation over several years. This has been made possible by our team's disposition to change, and no less through the support of our stakeholders. Our stakeholders include our current and former staff and board members, as well as artists, educators, cultural workers, and civil servants who have helped build, undo, and restructure our institution over time. Their personal and collective determination to improve our institution's public engagement over the past five years has been admirable. It has been inspiring, too. The team in particular has worked indefatigably at all times, in one



capacity or another, and with more or less intensity depending on the transformative stage we were in, or, the circumstances we were faced with at a given moment. They are a force. The different members of our team—since 2017, when it was decided that a change to our name would be made; from 2018 onwards, when we started to develop our Name Change Initiative; to 2021, when we officially instituted and formally launched our new name, and to date, in 2022—are listed in the book's back matter. I am deeply grateful to them for their work and collaboration.

I am especially indebted to the team members that participated in the Work Group formed as part of the Name Change Initiative. This NCI Work Group mostly involved staff members, whose participation rotated depending on the stage of work. Rosa de Graaf, Jessy Koeiman, Jeroen Lavèn, Vivian Ziherl, and I were permanently part of the group. Staff members who rotated in and out included Veronika Babayan, Paul van Gennip, Angélique Kool, line kramer, Emmelie Mijs, Sarah van Overeem-van der Tholen, and Wendy van Slagmaat-Bos. At a later stage, the work group also included Collective Learning Fellow Aqueene Wilson and, an external team member, Cyé Wong-Loi-Sing of Brand New Guys in Rotterdam. Creating this group and collaborative working method came along with opening, in 2019, a new position within the team for a Research and Programs Manager. Vivian was appointed to this role, and from the start helped develop key aspects of the Initiative, including our Renaming Process the year following. An earlier hire was Jessy as the institution's first Curator Collective Learning. This role and Jessy, personally, were vital in bringing new forms of knowledge into our institutional imaginaries. Archival research conducted by Wendy and field research by Rosa were key to shaping our activities. Critical in our working process was the untiring work contributed by Jeroen. His agility and openness to test and make things happen, as well as to communicate these in online platforms and social media—at a time when these digital platforms took up an unprecedented role in triggering connectivity and shaping public perception during the pandemic—were simply essential to our work culture.

Importantly, since 2018, team members Angélique Kool and Sarah van Overeem-van der Tholen put special effort into fundraising and stakeholder management processes, helping secure support for our multifaceted and years-long Name Change Initiative and the institution at large. Kunstinstituut Melly is supported by the City of Rotterdam and the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science in the Netherlands. We are grateful for their ongoing and vital support to our basic infrastructure. In the offices of the municipality, respect and appreciation for Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb, Alderman Said Kasmi, and civil servants Alice Vlaanderen and Michelle Mandos, as well as for Diana Chin-A-Fat, Jacob van der Goot, and Rento Zoutman from

the Rotterdam Council for Art and Culture. Sincere thanks also to Jacko Engee, our Account Manager in The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science during the intensive years from 2018 to 2021. Much appreciation is also felt for the several foundations who supported our research and programs intrinsic to our Name Change Initiative, including its public launch activities: BankGiro Loterij Fonds | DOEN Foundation, Fonds voor Cultuurparticipatie, J.E. Jurriaanse Foundation | Volkskracht, Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, Stichting Droom en Daad, and Stichting Elise Mathilde Fonds. We also received grant support by an individual philanthropist and a family foundation in the Netherlands who wish to remain anonymous. If you are one of them and reading this, thank you for your generosity.

Because mutual understanding is at the core of cultural work, the questions of why and how, when and where, as well as by who and for whom presentation platforms renovate over time, have been central to our strategic institutional transformation. This line of inquiry was brought to the fore in the 2017 debacle triggered by *Cinema Olanda: Platform* and *Open Letter to Witte de With*. Together, they paved a road that we must all come to travel, at one point or another, as both people and cultural producers, in order to raise social awareness and mobilize political change, as much as to improve civic institutions and cultural spaces. I would like to thank the participants of this art project, *Cinema Olanda: Platform*: artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh, curator Lucy Cotter, and participants Quinsy Gario; Charl Landvreugd; Egbert Alejandro Martina; Patricia Pisters and Esther Peeren from the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis; Jessica de Abreu and Mitchell Esajas from New Urban Collective/The Black Archives; Katayoun Arian, Louise Autar, and Max de Ploeg from First Things First; Tessa Boerman; Wayne Modest; Andre Reeder; Juanita Lalji; Patricia Kaersenhout; Amandla Awethu!; David Dibosa; Dr. Kehinde Andrews; Ernestine Comvalius; Valika Smeulders; Naomi Veldwijk; and Grada Kilomba. I would also like to thank the authors of the *Open Letter to Witte de With*: Egbert Alejandro Martina, Ramona Sno, Hodan Warsame, Patricia Schor, Amal Alhaag, and Maria Guggenbichler—as much as the letter's many signatories. Thanks to their critique and demand, we became aware of everyday racism. Their missive pressured us to learn about anti-racism, and to foster anti-racism in our work culture and activities.

No less, I thank our institution's former Director Defne Ayas and former curator Natasha Hoare who developed *Cinema Olanda: Platform*. As key representatives of the institution, they personally faced the challenges of this art project and the ensuing open letter. Their endurance during that summer of 2017, which was experienced as a tumultuous time, and their faith in the possibilities of institutional change, gave rise to the planting of the conceptual seed of our Name

Change Initiative. That year, Defne and her team set up a series of lunch meetings at the institution, which were open to the general public and designed to discuss the issues raised by the art project and open letter. Nearly one hundred people participated in these conversations. It was also Defne who proposed to the institution's Supervisory Board to make a change to part of our name—'Witte de With'—in our former name Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art.

At that time, the members of our Supervisory Board supporting this change were Stijn Huijts, Annet Lekkerkerker (Chair starting mid 2019), Gabriel Lester, Jeroen Princen, Nathalie de Vries, Kees Weeda (Chair until mid 2019), and Katarina Zdjelar. Over the years, new members have replaced board seats when tenures expired. To date, the Supervisory Board includes Fariba Derakhshani, Timme Geerlof, Annuska Pronkhorst, and Yolande Zola Zoli van der Heide, in addition to Huijts, Lekkerkerker, and Lester. The support of our board members in general, then and now, is exemplary. Together, they have professionally and emotionally supported me, our team, and our change in general. They have participated enormously in our institution's renaming and transformations over time. Heartfelt appreciation goes to them all, as well as to Chris de Jong (1949–2022).

Chris worked with our institution since its foundation up until his untimely death some months before we took this book to print. Chris headed all business matters in preparation for our institution's opening in 1990, and, upon its inauguration, he led the management team for over a decade. Thereafter, he maintained involvement in our activities as our Business Advisor and honorary member of our Supervisory Board until his passing. We are grateful for his thirty-plus years of service at our institution, as well as for his constant advice and steadfast alliance and participation in moments of creation and reinventions, of crisis and joy. The Name Change Initiative is one he supported tirelessly, and his advice throughout the years was crucial towards our renaming and ongoing transformation.

As part of our Name Change Initiative, and in addition to our Supervisory Board, we formed a special Advisory Committee to consult during the institution's Renaming Process over the course of 2020. The committee members included former board members: artists Liesbeth Bik and Willem de Rooij, as well as Kees Weeda, a longstanding cultural-policy figurehead in Rotterdam and former Chair of the Supervisory Board. Participants of our current exhibitions and education program were also members of this committee: artists Sasha Huber and Iris Kensmil, and emerging arts professionals Stijn Kemper and Yahaira Brito Morfe. Four leading cultural advocates in Rotterdam and the Netherlands formed part of this committee, too: Jannelieke Aalstein, Leal Arazzi van Herwaarden, Clara Balaguer, and Willem Philipsen. Two leading figures in the international arts field, Louise Mitchell and Tumelo Mosaka, also

participated as committee members. (The biographies of each member is available on [change.wdw.nl](http://change.wdw.nl).)

Besides the participation of this Advisory Committee, several other individuals worked as moderators, facilitators, and interlocutors of different kinds during our Renaming Process activities in 2020, including marjolijn kok, Prem Krishnamurthy, Quincy Mahangi, Rolando Vázquez Melken, Cyé Wong-Loi-Sing, Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman, Michelle Lin, and the studio Laumes by Goda Budvytytė and Viktorija Rybakova. The several public consultation and discussion-based programs, plus online survey, that constituted our renaming process have already been mentioned in this book; to all the people who participated, thank you. It is my hope and that of our entire team that these were rewarding and thought-provoking sessions. For us, your participation was instrumental in imagining and decision-making. Here, I also wish to thank consultants whose advice and work at some point helped us to better engage with both our general public and media outlets: Moniek van de Wiel from Blue Note Communicatie and Rhiannon Pickles and her PR team, as well as the teams of the Rotterdam companies Enchilada and Guestwise. Also, special thanks to Marian Markelo for creating a 'better' environment—spiritually. To all of them, we are grateful for their thoughtful feedback and focused work.

Earlier directors of our institution as well as many colleagues who worked here over the past three decades were supportive of our renaming. And, while a number of former staff members were not exactly thrilled with the decision to change our name, our renaming process, or our name choice, they still stood by us. Thanks to all. Likewise supportive and positively vocal has been artist Ken Lum, who created the inspirational artwork *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, as well as his former art student Melly Shum, who is portrayed in this billboard artwork placed on our building's façade since our year of advent in 1990. Who would have known that this artwork, its maker, its model, and even its placement would inspire so much, decade after decade ... Inspire even our new name? To this, to them all, for being here, there, whether by decision or by chance, many thanks for accompanying us in this transformative trajectory.

As it is mentioned in this book, our arts-education program called *Collective Learning in Practice* (CLIP) has been central to our institutional transformation. It is part and parcel of our Name Change Initiative. The program is described and often mentioned in this book, and a conversation with a group of CLIP participants is included here. In these very pages, however, I want to acknowledge and thank the people backstage. First, much gratitude goes to Yoen Meessen, our institution's former Associate Director of Education and Public Affairs, with whom this unique Work-Learn Program was co-created in 2018.

Secondly, and importantly, thanks to Jessy Koeiman for being CLIP's project leader since its foundation and to date, which includes four completed annual editions. (As I write this, plans for the program's fifth edition are underway.) Thirdly, I thank Jeroen Lavèn for co-leading the third edition of CLIP, which assigned its participants to create the visual identity and graphic design for our institution's new name, Kunstinstituut Melly.

On behalf of all our team, much gratitude is felt towards all CLIP participants to date. Participants in 2018–2019 were: Gizem Adanur, Chloé Blansjaar, Tayler Calister, Mohamed Chajid, Sjoerd van Kampen, Stijn Kemper, Eva Langstraat, Joy Ravenswaaij, Sytze van der Wolk. Participants in 2019–2020 were: Merel Drop, Kid Feng, Ayumi Rosa Filippone, April Geoffrey, Eren Kalpoe, Merlijn Mollinga, Yahaira Brito Morfe, Ban Tawfiq, Jemimah Vaughan, Aqueene Wilson. The third edition of CLIP, in 2020–2021, included: Callum Dean, Woosok Jang, Nina Schouten, Alexander Tanazefi, Emily Turner, Yan Zhihan. That edition was realized in partnership with Werkplaats Typografie of ArtEZ University of the Arts in Arnhem, and with the design studio Wkshps in New York and Berlin. At this institution and the studio, special thanks go to Armand Mevis, Aniek Brattinga, and Prem Krishnamurthy. The most recent edition of CLIP, in 2022, included: Bianca Casaburi, Je-Anne Dirks, Lola den Dunnen, Elisa de la Serna Gallego, Simon Mensger, Repelsteeltje, Lara Silva Santos, Seré, Yoshi So, Alma Zijderveldt. Also participating in this edition were: Hyunji Jung, Eduardo Leon from Avoidstreet, Ludmila Rodrigues, and Emilia Tapprest from nvisible. That latest edition was co-developed by Jessy together with Karina Villafan from the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) in Amsterdam, and produced by Pilar Mata Dupont.

While CLIP and several other transformative programs are explained in this book, what is not touched upon at all is the fact that, in parallel to our Name Change Initiative, we have been developing a robust exhibitions program at our institution. These have been developed over the years by team members Rosa de Graaf, Julija Mockutė, Samuel Saelemakers (until 2019), Wendy van Slagmaat-Bos, and myself. Our conversations with participating artists and guest curators have necessarily involved discussions about our Name Change Initiative. In spite of ongoing questioning of what was widely seen as an identity or institutional crisis, and despite numerous public critiques about whether to change our name or not, the artists and curators we engaged over the past five years trusted us and chose to participate in our program. For their beliefs, commitment, and work, I thank them for developing projects with us throughout these years.

Program participants since the fall of 2017, when our institution's name became a public debacle in the Netherlands and internationally, included Rana Hamadeh, Goshka Macuga, Ahmet Ögüt, Dineo

Seshee Bopape, Rayyane Tabet, as well as Ari Benjamin Meyers, whose project was underway in 2017 and presented in our galleries in 2018. All of them were engaged by my predecessor, former Director Defne Ayas, and her team.

My directorship at the institution began at the start of 2018, and only a handful of months later my tenure programming began. That year, participants in the exhibitions program included John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres, Dora García, Jef Geys (1934–2018), Sharon Hayes, Federico Herrero, Emily Jacir, Angie Keefer, Mahmoud Khaled, Irene Kopelman, Quinn Latimer, Mauricio Marcín on Marcos Kurtycz (1934–1996), Teresa Margolles, Susana Mejía, Ana María Millán, Carlos Motta, Rosalind Nashashibi and Raimundas Malašauskas, Manuel Raeder, Pamela Rosenkranz, Wu Tsang, Anicka Yi, and Akram Zaatari.

In 2019, participants included: Firelei Báez, Grace Ellen Barkey, Rossella Biscotti, Maja Bekan, Kévin Bray, Alejandro Cesarco, Mariana Castillo Deball, Chloë Delanghe, Sarah Demeuse, Baldvin Einarsson, Priscila Fernandes, Vera Gulikers, Andrea Éva Győri (1985–2022), Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Stijn Kemper, Melike Kara, An Onghena, Sol Oosel, Kevin Osepa, Josie Perry, Rory Pilgrim, Tramaine de Senna, Johanna Tengan, Edward Clydesdale Thomson, Mario García Torres, Wendy Tronrud, Cecilia Vicuña, and Miguel A. López.

In 2020, which was without a doubt the most challenging year for the Name Change Initiative, and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, the participants were: Adriano Amaral and Julia Mullié, Athos Bulcão (1918–2008), Marcos Castro, Alia Farid, Anna Franceschini, Karlos Gil, Ni Haifeng, Michiel Huijben, Kapwani Kiwanga and iLiana Fokianaki, Nicolás Lamas, Jarmal Martis, Tina Rahimy, Nelly dos Reis, Usha Seejarim and Tumelo Mosaka, Praneet Soi, Bernardo José de Souza, Michael Stevenson, Adriana Varejão, Ana Vaz, Christian Vinck, Bouke de Vries, Enang Wattimena, Raed Yassin, and Belén Zahera.

In 2021, participants were: Kent Chan, Sharmyn Cruz Rivera, Daily Practice (Suzanne Weenink), Afra Eisma, Simon Fujiwara, Moosje M Goosen, Sasha Huber, Iris Kensmil, Raja'a Khalid, Justine Kohleal, Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920–2005), Jo-Lene Ong, Maria Pask, Marieke van Rooy and Domenico Mangano, Joy Mariama Smith, Michael Stevenson, Lisa Tan, The Feminist Health Care Research Group (Inga Zimprich), Jasmine Thomas-Girvan and Sour Grass (Annalee Davis and Iyawo a.k.a. Holly Bynoe Young), RA Walden, Dan Zhu, and Melchior Jaspers. This year, 2022, participants have included to date: Bianca Casaburi, Pablo Castañeda, Je-Anne Dirks, Lola den Dunnen, Elisa de la Serna Gallego, Ane Graff, Ayesha Hameed, Maïke Hemmers, Alma Heikkilä, Nokukhanya Langa and Ellis Kat, Simon Mensger, Repelsteeltje, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz and Sour Grass, Lara Silva Santos, Seré, Yoshi So, Karina Villafan, and Alma Zijderveldt.

Here above I name the participants of our exhibition program. Parallel to the exhibitions there were myriad activities. From performances and lectures to workshops, our public programs included many participants, many with whom we engaged in discussions about our name and renaming, and about our Name Change Initiative in general. There were also so many coffee meetings, lunches and dinners, and long walks with people in town—among them Lara Almarcegui, Bik Van der Pol, Raimundas Malašauskas, Marina Otero, Emily Pethick, Wim Pijbes, and Vivian Sky Rehberg—who were influential in shaping the activities and processes overall. To all of them, thank you.

While our new name was announced in the fall of 2020, its formal implementation happened on January 27, 2021. This was also the day when Kunstinstituut Melly was adjusted in our institution's statutes and in the Chamber of Commerce. Such a date was specifically chosen to match the day our institution first opened its doors to the general public in 1990. Alas, in 2021, our building was unfortunately closed due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Since March 2020, and occurring intermittently for the following two years, the lockdown kept most doors in the city closed. But while this barred us from organizing a live event and gallery program to launch and celebrate our new name, the lockdown didn't slow our desired efforts to connect with the public. We launched our name with a widely broadcast television program, which is freely available on our website, *Melly TV*.

A three-episode television program, *Melly TV* was presented in partnership with the local public broadcaster Open Rotterdam and the online platform e-flux Video & Film. It was developed by Kunstinstituut Melly with consulting partners Lilith Magazine and Brand New Guys. *Melly TV*'s program concept was developed by Vivian Ziherl; she and Jessy Koeiman curated the three episodes, of which production was done by Veronika Babayan. Ideas were developed in episode one of the program, titled "Vulnerability", in conversation with Hasna el Maroudi; for episode two, "Learning", with Munganyende Hélène Christelle, and for episode three, "Joy", with Simon(e) van Saarloos and Odair Pereira. The concept and creation of *Melly TV*'s program segment We Are Melly was developed by Yahaira Brito Morfe and Stijn Kemper. The segment Cijfers (Numbers) was conceptualized and created by Aqueene Wilson. Stijn, Yahaira, and Aqueene participated in all three episodes.

Thanks goes to all of them and to the several participants of the three episodes of *Melly TV*. "Vulnerability" was broadcast on January 27, 2021, and included the participation of Clara Balaguer, Ali Hussain, Yagmur Karahan, Charl Landvreugd, Hasna el Maroudi, Marianna Maruyama, Emmelie Mijs with Veronika Babayan, Peggy Wijntuin, Pim de Winkel, and Cyé Wong-Loi-Sing. (I also participated in this episode.) Broadcast on February 3, 2021, the second episode

was titled "Learning" and included Sharelly Emanuelson, Randy Morais a.k.a. Barber Bob, Lakiescha Tol, Rolando Vázquez Melken, Marike Vierstra, and Vivian Ziherl. "Joy", the third episode of the program, was broadcast on February 10, 2021. It included Mieke Borm-Everaert, Jeanette Chedda, Non van Driel, Paul van Gennip, Rosa de Graaf, Leal Arazzi van Herwaarden, Lisa Hinderks, Sherry Jae Ebere, Jessy Koeiman, Jeroen Lavèn, Odair Pereira, Melly Shum, Mira Thompson, and Vivian Ziherl.

At Open Rotterdam, special thanks to Davidson Rodriguez and Aurora Peters. At e-flux Video & Film, thanks to Amal Issa and Brian Kuan Wood. From the team of Lilith Magazine, thanks to Hasna el Maroudi, Clarice Gargard, and Dounia Jari. From Brand New Guys, thanks to its Director Cyé Wong-Loi-Sing and his team convened for *Melly TV*: Wesley Adams, Mark Bolk, Lisa Brouwer, Mitchell Habermehl, Safiya Morais, Diana Oliveira Cardoso, Saskia Piqué, Olivier Reekers, Christine da Silva, and Lisa Top. From DAIR Design, the fashion brand headed by Odair Pereria, thanks to his choreographer Rubiën Florens Vyent; team of dancers: Juliette Koole, Morena Louisa, Serghinio Giovanni Wooter; guest performers: Bella Dolcé, Khairi Sang-a-Jong, Nathan Sang-a-Jong, Hirondina Santos; and the interns: Saskia de Wilde, Je-ny Freire Monteiro, and Andy Den Hartog. Thanks also goes to Wesley Adams, Tayler Calister, Docus van der Made, and Alexander van Popta, who made music for the television program, and to Vertaalbureau Elycio and Lisa Hinderks for translations and subtitles.

*Melly TV* gathered voices instrumental to our renaming and to the futures it imagined. Its launch in January 2021 also marked the start of our new multi-year policy plan, *The Politics of Care*. Sketched out with an ecosystem-based framework, this policy placed artistic experimentation along with social inclusivity at the center of our agenda. The policy outlined goals and strategies to meaningfully create qualitative public engagements with art made in the present. Characteristic of our plan are activities at the intersection of art and education, as well as brokering partnerships. So, when in the late spring of 2021 the lockdown ceased (if only temporarily) and we were able to open our galleries to the public, we staged a series of exhibitions manifesting both our renaming and our new policy. An exhibition by Simon Fujiwara involved a new project by the artist, which focused on identity and soul searching in an image-based world. In tandem, an exhibition by Sasha Huber gathered her art and activist work on renaming. We also opened the long-term and slowly-evolving group exhibition *84 STEPS*, curated as an artistic environment with art installations and regular trainings open to the general public focused on wellbeing, and especially mental health. The exhibition's name is inspired by the number of steps in our building stairwell connecting the ground floor to the top floor, where this exhibition is staged. It also



pointed to the intent of connecting with—in fact, upscaling—the dynamism of the space and activities sited in the ground-floor gallery, which was turned into a multi-purpose space and named MELLY in 2019.

We have also been able to continue sharing the ideas and research of our Name Change Initiative through our podcast, *Name Takes*, launched later in 2021. It can even be considered an extension of this very book. The podcast, which I developed together with Sarah Demeuse, consists of stories and histories of naming, name changes, and name sayings. The focus is especially on artists' voices. Participants of *Name Takes* to date—since new episodes are in the making as I write this—have included Ayreen Anastas & Rene Gabri, Benvenuto Chavajay, Anais Duplain, Nicoline van Harskamp, Sasha Huber, Sara Rajaei, Wong Kit Yi, Fernanda Laguna, Every Ocean, Jan Pohl, Jurith Schols, Andrea Valencia Aranda, Mary Wang, and Aqueene Wilson. Much gratitude to all of them for participating. *Name Takes* is published on our website and various podcast platforms. On our website are also many other videos we have produced, for example, documentaries of CLIP editions and a design conference organized in conjunction with the creation of the newly designed graphic identity of Kunstinstituut Melly. It is our hope that these materials online will have educational uses and provide creative inspiration to art workers and cultural-policy-makers alike.

Our institution's team and board members, as much as the contributors of this book, are all interested in affectively experiencing, and in effectively making, positive changes in society through artistic, educational, and cultural institutions. On behalf of the team and board, I express gratitude to the several book contributors, apart from myself, for articulating and sharing their ideas in these pages: Veronika Babayan, Teana Boston-Mammah, Yahaira Brito Morfe, Tayler Calister, Callum Dean, Rosa de Graaf, Boutaina Hammana, Michiel Huijben, Wooseok Jang, Stijn Kemper, Alex Klein, Jessy Koeiman, Prem Krishnamurthy, Nina Schouten, Alexander Tanazefi, Emily Turner, Rolando Vázquez Melken, Aqueene Wilson, Yan Zhihan, and Vivian Zihlerl. Thanks also to Jeroen Lavèn who compiled the images and documents here included. To the translators and copy-editors, thanks for their work and attention to make the authors' ideas and words clearer and accessible to its readers: Annemarie van den Berg, Harriet Foyster, Rosa de Graaf, James Hannan, Milou van Lieshout, Marie Louise Schoondergang, and Jet van den Toorn. Much appreciation also to Milou van Lieshout and Wendy van Slagmaat-Bos, who coordinated the realization of this book, as well as to Julie Peeters and her collaborator Laura Martens who created its graphic design.

Needless to say, making institutional change is simply tough. Ours came with much public critique, and even with sharp pain felt in our stomachs, heads, and, really, just all over. It came with doubts

and fears. There were tears. Whenever we failed in the process, whenever we felt low and tired, we found encouragement in the company of colleagues, as well as the friends and family members of our team and my own. The emotional labor they provide cannot be underestimated. Their presence may be somewhat invisible to most, but for the team, for me, it is wholly invaluable. They are. Putting this commotion aside, our institutional renaming and transformations have also come with many pleasures. Thankfully, joy and laughter can heal our muscles. Now, to heal pain resulting from systemic racism and social inequalities—which, while rooted in historical colonialism, keeps being reproduced in much of neoliberal policy—active acknowledgment, research, and hard work are needed. If only the start of what needs to be a larger social project, our institutional renaming promises that transformative justice is underway from this corner of the world. And while for us the undertaking of the Name Change Initiative has been major, we realize this is only a local and minor contribution, considering the monumental scale of decolonizing work ahead, which is necessarily a transnational project.

Writing this today, in my role as a cultural worker and from the position of an arts institution devoted to our present, it has become ever more pertinent that being informed about master narratives, which obstinately yet mistakenly uphold the status quo, is simply compulsory. Listening, writing, and even being considerate or attentive to social injustices and untold histories is vital. Having empathy is central. I also learned that anti-racist activism is a prerequisite for any institutional change, whether by directly participating in demonstrations, being informed about them, or underwriting, celebrating, and supporting them. In general, as a team, we have been learning how these different modes of being constitute civic participation. These experiences nurture our work culture and our personal lives. And we know there is still much to learn and to improve. In the meantime, for now, I thank you—our reader, our partner, our supporter, our detractor—for being with us in flesh, in spirit, or both. It is with and in community that we have worked, and it has been through conviviality that we have been collectively learning. May this sense of togetherness and belonging intensify over time within and beyond Kunstinstituut Melly.

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

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

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challenged graphic design conventions of the  
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and teaching that consisted of philosophy, the-  
ory, and a systematic practical methodology.



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Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en  
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