

A Counterpart to Solid Walls

On Céline Condorelli's Curtain Installation *Host*

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*Paying heed to the entanglement of the roles of host and guest, this article enquires into the large-scale curtain installation *Host* by Céline Condorelli at Kunsthall Aarhus (2019-20). The article argues that as *Host* takes on the role of host by wrapping around a film program and other events, the soft and pliable curtain walls unsettle the role of the white cube and change the conditions of perception in the gallery. With *Host* as host, visitors are no longer reduced to minds and eyes as per Brian O'Doherty's characterization, bodies and ears are welcome too. The article further examines the double ontology of *Host* as both host and guest in the gallery in dialogue with Jacques Derrida's concept of hospitality.*

Already the title of Céline Condorelli's large-scale curtain installation at Kunsthall Aarhus (2019-2020) intimated that something was awry. The title, *Host*, would appear to unsettle the institutionalized distribution of roles in the gallery, which ordinarily assigns the role of host to the art institution and that of guest to visitors, artists, and artworks. As it happened, *Host* not only stated that it was a host, it also performed that role by wrapping around activities and events notwithstanding that it also – as a temporary installation – was a guest in the gallery. This interweaving of the roles of host and guest troubles our common understanding of them as opposites and as a consequence challenges the position of the art institution. As this article will argue, *Host* also took issue with modernity by foregrounding its present-day repercussions. In fact, as I propose later, the materiality of the curtain installation transformed both the conditions of display and the conditions of perception in the white cube – a universal signifier of modernity, as curator and art historian Elena Filipovic labels it (Filipovic, 2010, p. 323).

In this article, I unpack these institutional predicaments with particular attention to the guest/host relation through a close-reading of – and with – the curtain installation. By *with*, I mean at least two things. On the one hand, I lean on Condorelli's own understanding of her practice as described in an interview produced by Kunsthall Aarhus and in numerous conversations I had with her in relation to the exhibition. Her thinking underpins the analysis alongside additional interlocutors like textile artist Anni Albers, writer and scholar Sara Ahmed, and artist and art critic Brian O'Doherty. On the other hand, I take, when possible, my methodological cue from the conceptual instability that the curtain installation introduces by complicating the relationship between host and guest. These terms are not only crucial to philosopher Jacques Derrida's understanding of hospitality, the destabilization of seemingly oppositional terms is also altogether suggestive of the work of deconstruction. In my analysis, this means that I am attentive to binary positions that appear to privilege one over the other – here first and foremost the roles of host and guest – and I endeavor to show how they complicate each other. This *modus operandi* is reflected in art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson's idea of textile politics, or as she verbifies it, "to textile politics", meaning "to *give texture* to politics, to refuse easy binaries, to acknowledge complications" (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p. 7). To follow Bryan-Wilson's lead here means to consider how *Host* gives texture to the assumptions and principles relating to or underlying the white cube, especially when concerned with questions of power and status in a society as per the definition of "politics" in Oxford English Dictionary. Furthermore, to texture something also entails making it "not smooth or plain" as described in the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, that is, making it stand out, which I argue happens to the otherwise inconspicuous white cube upon the arrival of *Host*.

Host is the result of my commission of Condorelli to produce a new work for a ground-floor gallery at Kunsthall Aarhus; a mid-size, non-collecting, contemporary art institution in Aarhus (DK), where I was associated as a curatorial postdoc fellow in 2016-20. To this end, I was also both a host and a guest at Kunsthall Aarhus. As a temporary associate and in practice a part-time member of staff, I was the commissioning host of Condorelli and her project at Kunsthall Aarhus. But I was also a guest on account of my employment at Aarhus University. This means that whenever I refer to

Kunsthal Aarhus throughout this article, I include myself but with some reservations. Although this article focuses on the outcome and not the process, my curatorial involvement in the process is necessarily a factor in my analytical engagement with *Host*. Working on the project with Condorelli has provided me with a deeper and more detailed understanding of the work than otherwise possible and surely installed in me an affinity with Condorelli and her work. These circumstances inevitably shape this article and make the knowledge it produces situated, i.e., specific, partial, and limited (Rose, 1997, p. 307). However, only such a partial perspective promises objective vision according to feminist theorist and philosopher of science and technology Donna Haraway (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). “One only sees at all through eyes that are themselves devices with histories of their own,” as cultural anthropologist Joseph Dumit summarizes Donna Haraway’s position (Dumit, 2014, p. 348). The notion that we can occupy a neutral, non-complicit position in relation to an object of inquiry is simply not possible. Dumit continues, “Non-innocence and complicity are necessary if one is to confront world histories as histories that one is a part of and accountable to. Without these stances, one easily falls into some incarnation of a god-trick, claiming to see the world from nowhere in particular” (Dumit, 2014, p. 348). Being an entangled part of what is being studied is also crucial to theorist Irit Rogoff’s idea of criticality in which we operate “from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness” (Rogoff, 2008, p. 146). It is a modality or even a form of ontology that – although informed by theoretical knowledge – is preoccupied with the possibilities of actualizing the potential of a situation rather than revealing its faults (Rogoff, 2008, p. 147). It is this kind of complicity and embeddedness that frames this article.

In what follows, I first outline the workings of *Host* as both on display and part of the display, and I describe how *Host* operates as a host. Then follows an analysis of the curtain installation’s mesh windows that take issue with the legacy of modernity. Furthermore, I argue that the curtain’s materiality unsettles the role of the white cube and reintroduces the whole body in the gallery. Throughout the article, the double ontology of *Host* produces a both/and conundrum by being both a guest and a host. In the final part of the article, I think through these roles and their relationship in dialogue with philosopher Jacques Derrida’s concept of hospitality.

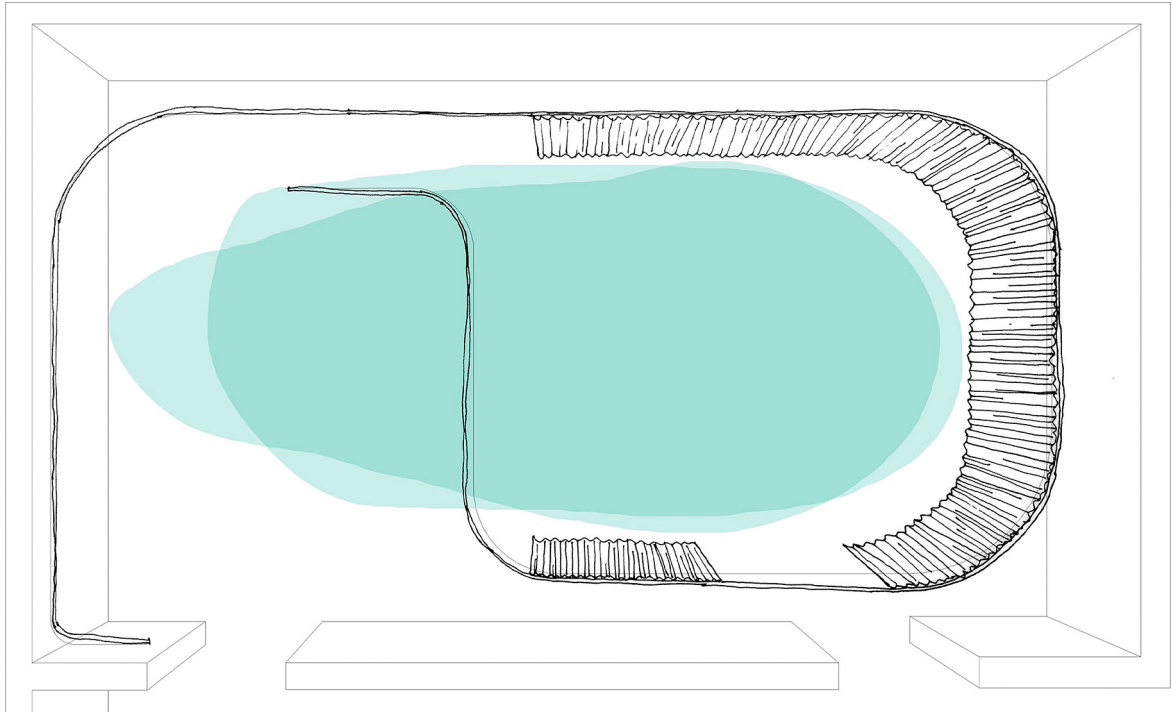




Hosts and Guests

Host was installed in a rectangular 135 m² windowless gallery with white, uniform walls, a wooden floor, a vaulted ceiling, and a skylight in the purpose-made building where Kunsthall Aarhus under various names has resided since its inauguration in 1917. Like many other art institutions housed in old, listed buildings, the ground floor galleries at Kunsthall Aarhus were not initially conceived as white cubes, but over the years they have come to emulate what O'Doherty calls one of modernism's triumphs (O'Doherty, 1986, p. 79). And why wouldn't they? In the "The Global White Cube", Elena Filipovic describes the white cube as "globally replicated" and "a cipher for institutional officiousness" (Filipovic, 2010, p. 328 and 324); a device that conveys an unchanging, seemingly neutral and controlled environment that keeps the outside world at bay. "So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that, once outside it, art can lapse into secular status – and conversely," O'Doherty argues (O'Doherty, 1986, p. 14). This is evident in the case of *Host*, which outside the white cube easily could be construed as just a functional object and not also an artwork.

Made of a light-green polyester fabric fitted with irregularly shaped, semi-transparent mesh windows, *Host* is more than 30 meters long and 3,5 meters tall. The curtain comprised four sections – one of 12 meters, one of 9 meters and two of 6 meters. A curtain rail allowed the curtain sections to envelope most of the gallery and to form various makeshift spaces within it. Single or double layered mesh windows in dark red or charcoal grey enabled partial views across the space into activities happening in the gallery. Condorelli considers curtains as framing devices that establish boundaries between day and night in houses, between inside and outside, between a private room and a public space. In exhibition settings, curtains are normally presentation devices and therefore part of the display, for example in order to shield off light from adjacent rooms or windows or to act as room dividers. *Host* performed these functions, but the curtain was not just part of the display, it was also on display. It was both a piece of exhibition architecture and an artwork.

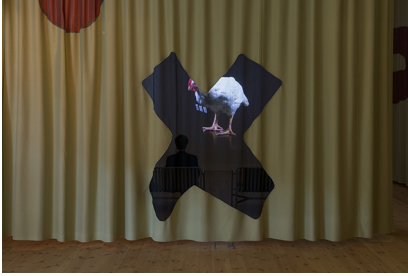


ILL. 2

Céline Condorelli: Sketch for *Host*, 2018. Courtesy of Céline Condorelli.

By literally presenting itself as a host while also being a guest, the curtain challenged the institutionalized distribution of these roles, which ordinarily is a matter of either/or and not both/and. One is either a guest or a host, not both a guest and a host. That is at least how we ordinarily understand this relationship. Over the course of a year, the curtain occupied the gallery for a combined duration of more than seven months, which by far exceeded the normal duration of exhibitions at Kunsthall Aarhus.¹ Altogether, the circumstances outlined above made *Host* a highly complex object and one that challenged the prevailing politics of the gallery.

The fact that the title *Host* was not merely a rhetorical gesture is a case in point. The curtain enacted the role of host by hosting a number of activities in the gallery, first and foremost a film program of documentaries and artist films concerned with climate change and migration organised by Condorelli. Comprising a total of 22 films, the film program was organised



ILL. 3

Céline Condorelli: *Host*, Kunsthall Aarhus, 2019-2020. The installation included the film *Ilha das Flores* by Jorge Furtado, the event *How We Curate* with Tine Colstrup and Marianne Torp, the MA in Curating symposium *The Curator Has Left the Building*, and a conversation between Céline Condorelli and Nils Ole Bubandt. Photos: Mikkel Kaldal and Kunsthall Aarhus.

in seven thematic parts, *Abstractions, Land, Water, Enclosures, Distance, Sea and Seed*.² Wrapping around the impromptu cinema, the curtain installation provided an intimate setting for visitors to engage with “what it means to inhabit a changing planet within a warming climate, which changes the conditions for humans, (...) landscape, and animals alike” (Condorelli, 2019, 4:35-51 min.). The curtain also played host to a lecture by Condorelli, a conversation about climate change between Condorelli and professor of anthropology Nils Ole Bubandt from Aarhus University, as well as various activities organised by Kunsthall Aarhus. These activities included among other things part of the talk series *How We Curate*, the one-day symposium *The Curator Has Left the Building* organized by the MA in Curating program at Aarhus University, and part of the group exhibition *Leviathan* curated by the artist group Piscine. The programming organized by Kunsthall Aarhus would have happened anyway although without the

support of the curtain, but the film program – and with it the topic of climate change and migration – was introduced and actualised on account of *Host*. In fact, the film program was not initially part of the conversation with Condorelli but introduced by her later in the process. Accordingly, the first guest (the curtain installation) became a host as it welcomed in a new guest (the film program). I will return to the significance of this substitution of roles later, but what is already clear is that Condorelli with *Host* destabilized the position of the art institution. As the following section will show, this is not the only institution that the curtain took issue with.

Framing Modernity

The irregular shapes of the mesh windows of *Host* are not arbitrary forms. They hail from architect Le Corbusier's 1956-book, *Les Plans de Paris 1956-1922*, in which they form a punctuated path throughout the book. Condorelli's use of these shapes expands her critical engagement with the art institution to also include a critique of modernity of which Le Corbusier remains the ultimate architectural pioneer. As I will unpack and argue below, Condorelli's transformative adaptation of Le Corbusier's shapes connects the modern paradigm with climate change and migration and intimates how modernity conditions our lives today.

Les Plans de Paris is a facsimile compendium of urban renewal projects that Le Corbusier devised and subsequently presented in a handful of books between 1922 and 1956. Despite its title, *Les Plans de Paris* includes urban projects for various other cities than Paris. Yet, on account of its title and front cover depiction of a map of central Paris, Le Corbusier's infamous 1925-plan for Paris, *Plan Voisin*, is inevitably an emblematic aspect of the book. With *Plan Voisin*, Le Corbusier – an advocate of high-density urban living – imagined a radically transformed Paris. A large-scale demolition of the Right Bank of the Seine would make room for 18 identical skyscrapers accommodating 78.000 residents in a highly structured space of segregated transportation infrastructures and vast parks. Although never realised, *Plan Voisin* became paramount to the spread of modern urbanism around the world. Le Corbusier himself continued to cultivate these ideas in subsequent projects, many of which appear in *Les Plans de Paris*.

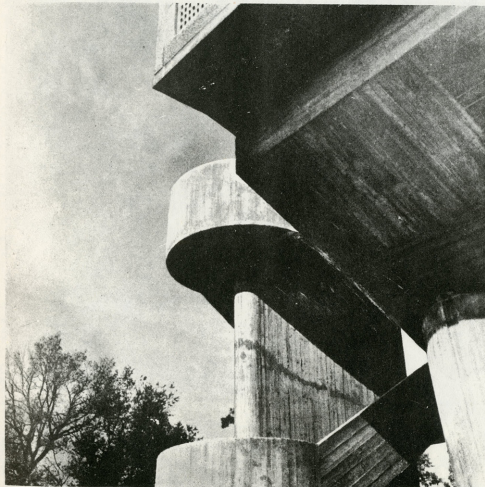
Besides these black/white facsimile prints, a succession of translucent green blobs of different shapes forms a green path through the book. The reader is invited to start with the green path and follow it to the end as it says at the top of the table of content (Le Corbusier, 1956, p. 6). Throughout the book, the green blobs predominantly fill out empty spaces on the pages or the translucent green forms are superimposed on sections of Le Corbusier's handwriting – seemingly as a highlighting device or indeed a framing device, which is how Condorelli refers to them (Condorelli, 2019, 1:00-06 and 2:25-36 min.).

For *Host*, Condorelli has extracted and scaled up a selection of Le Corbusier's blobs to fit the dimensions of the curtain and incorporated them as semi-transparent mesh windows. Condorelli calls the curtain a drawing, because curtains, she argues, are rather insubstantial things that behave much like paper (Condorelli, 2019, 1:52-2:01 min.). Her curtain is a partial unfolding of Le Corbusier's book but with text and images removed. Rather than forming a path through a modern urban environment, Le Corbusier's visual markers frame an entirely different set of issues in Condorelli's curtain, namely climate change and migration as per the film program. Thinking about climate change today necessarily means rejecting a large part of the modern era's definitions of society and man's relationship to culture, Condorelli argues (Condorelli, 2019, 02:43-58 min.). This comment resonates with philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour's call to rethink the definition of modernity that divides the social world and the natural world; that salutes man but neglects to acknowledge nonhuman entities (Latour, 1993, p. 13). This misconstrued bifurcation desensitized man to nature and paved the way for resource depletion and habitat destruction, in short the ecological crisis that has led to climate change. By only employing Le Corbusier's blobs and discarding his machine-inspired urban schemes, Condorelli gives visual form to her critique of modernity.³ The curtain's oversized iterations of Le Corbusier's blobs subtly imply that the world we inhabit today is shaped by the repercussions of modernity.

ILL. 4 AND 5 — OPPOSITE

Le Corbusier: *Les Plans Le Corbusier le Paris. 1956-1922*. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1956, pp. 21 and 29. Courtesy Le Corbusier Foundation and VISDA.

et de l'horizon, = prévision
 qui n'est pas, = s'impose de la conjonction
 la fortune de l'air, c'est-à-dire, l'avenir,
 elle paraît chaque jour, le matin, le soir, la nuit...



Splendeur du béton brut

Marseille

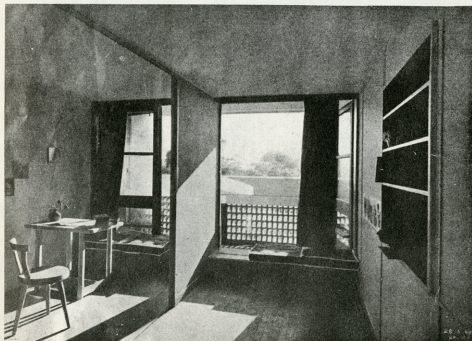
J'ai l'impression
 de dire que l'autorité
 n'est pas informée.
 Informés signifie :
 connaître le fait et
 le vrai.
 Admettons qu'en
 bonne administration,
 je personnalise le
 fait. Encore
 faut-il - il l'avoir
 vu, étudié, et
 reconnu. Et pour
 desirer le marché,
 avoir entendu le
 coupable...
 Ce n'est pas fini,
 jamais...
 Car si le coupable
 s'est égaré, il y a,

n'est pas d'insouciance, puisqu'il y a 150.000
 visiteurs dont désormais 150.000 prosélytes,
 faut-il insouciance ou insouciance d'une future
 action sociale

Différents aspects des chambres d'enfants. Les casiers et rayonnages sont encastrés dans les murs

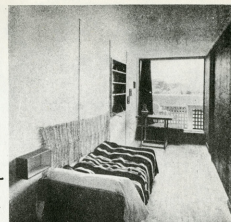
... "L'ingénieur"

Je veux bien être ingénieur. Car le
 groupe m'a fait date d'une fraîcheur d'observation
 et de précision qui ne fait passer au travers
 de l'Académie comme à travers une grille, mais
 me laisse planté devant un bourgeois qui

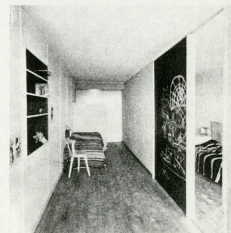


Les chambres des enfants qui permettent de séparer chaque chambre par une cloison mobile. Vue sur la loggia brise-soleil

Marseille



Une chambre d'enfants avec pan de verre ouvert



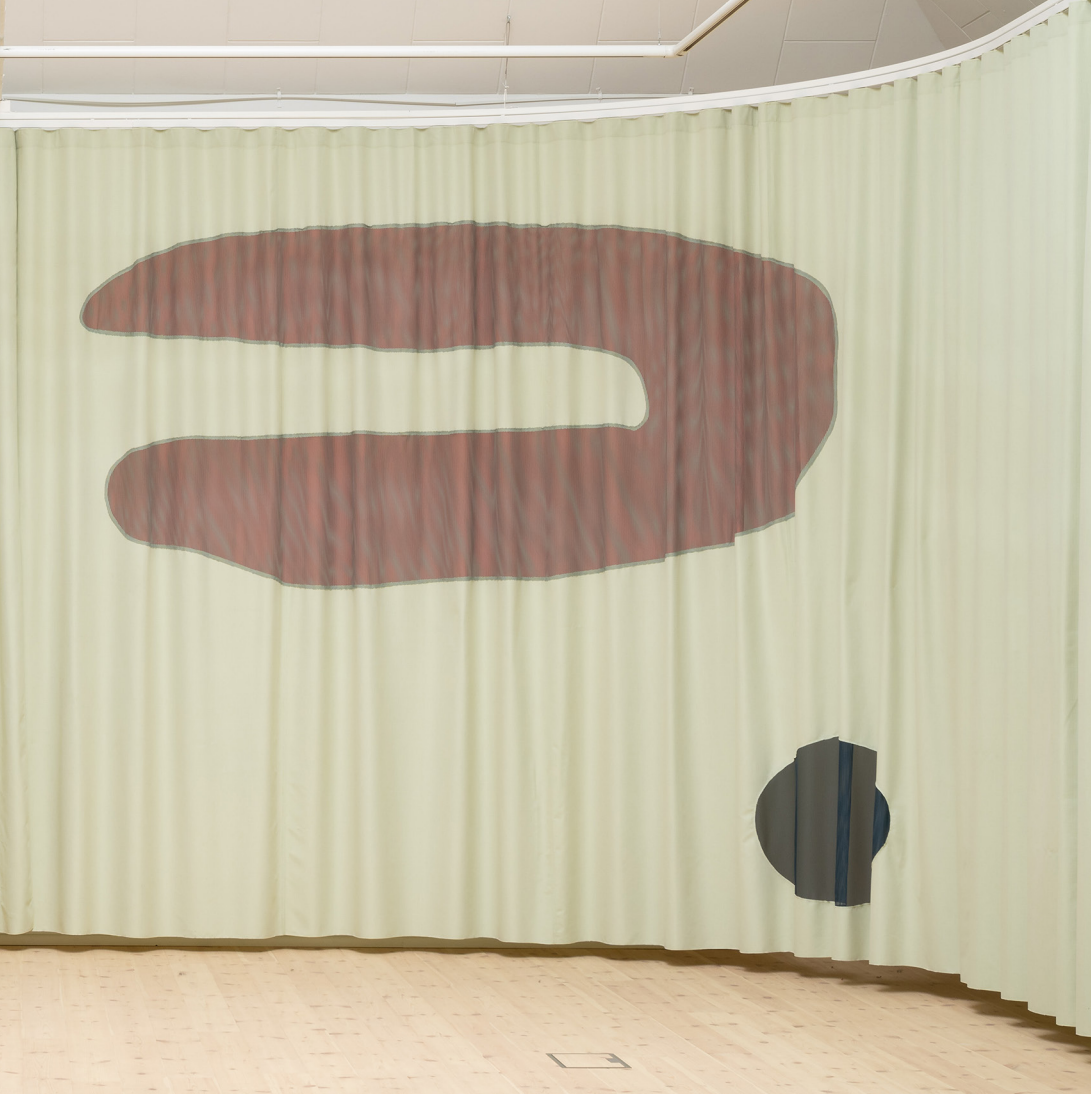
Les chambres des enfants avec la cloison mobile entr'ouverte



ILL. 6.

Céline Condorelli: *Host*, 2019, Kunsthall Aarhus. Photo: Mikkel Kaldal.

This means that in addition to wrapping around and framing events and activities in the space, *Host* also – by way of the windows – connected the issues of climate change and migration to the paradigm that occasioned them. While this perspective may not have been evident in the gallery, it was accessible to visitors who watched the interview with Condorelli online, on a flatscreen next to the gallery entrance, or attended Condorelli's lecture at Kunsthall Aarhus the day before the opening. As the next section unfolds, the predicament with modernity takes an additional turn in the gallery.



A Counterpart to Solid Walls

Brian O'Doherty argues that the white cube transposes any object into an aesthetic conundrum (O'Doherty, 1986, p. 15). In the following, I propose that *Host's* double ontology as both artwork and display device troubles this modernist transposition. *Host* may be an aesthetic conundrum, but the curtain installation also produces an institutional conundrum on account of its materiality and functionality in the gallery. One that unsettles the indiscernible presence of the white cube and changes the conditions of perception in the gallery.

Condorelli often produces objects that operate in support of something else. Previous works have for example supported bodies (by also functioning as museum seating), learning (by providing an adjustable setting for a temporary art school), and discussion (by doubling as a framework for discussing institutions).⁴ *Host* also operates in support. It supports awareness and knowledge sharing on climate change and migration by bringing these issues into the gallery. Furthermore, by providing a pliable, intimate, and sound-absorbing framing of discursive situations, the curtain supports individual concentration and collective knowledge production during events. Condorelli refers to works such as these as support structures, framing devices or apparatuses of visibility. In short, objects but also practices and structures that support or enable something else to become perceivable. We know of such devices from the exhibition space; the frame of a painting, the plinth on which a sculpture sits, lighting etc. are all crucial apparatuses of visibility in the exhibition setting. As designer George Nelson notes in his introduction to the book *Display*, the Latin root of the word display means to unfold or to spread out, which in the case of *Host* is to the point. But, Nelson continues, “as used by us, in a variety of situations, it always conveys the idea of calling someone’s attention to something by showing it in a conspicuous way” (Nelson, 1953, p. 7). So, by making what is on display stand out, display devices operate in support of attention and consequently in support of the construction of meaning in the gallery. In other words, we pay attention to a sculpture because it sits on a plinth and a painting on account of its frame, and this attentiveness in turn enables us to form an understanding of the exhibition.

In order to call attention to something other than themselves, display devices are necessarily inconspicuous things. “They allow us to encounter the world without thinking about it,” Condorelli argues (Condorelli, 2019, 3:15-25 min.), and they are therefore taken for granted and rarely noticed. Looking to writer and scholar Sarah Ahmed, who looks to phenomenology to think about institutions, the lack of attention to display suggests that such measures have become institutionalized. Ahmed writes, “when things become institutional, they recede. To institutionalize *x* is for *x* to become routine or ordinary such that *x* becomes part of the background for those who are part of an institution” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 21). Condorelli’s

preoccupation with what she summarizes as “the political unconscious of the exhibition context” (Conadorelli, 2019, 3:32-50 min.)⁵ could be characterized as an effort to attend to what has become institutionalized in the exhibition setting and make it conspicuous once again. Why? Perhaps because institutions, as anthropologist Mary Douglas argues, shape our thought processes; they “systematically direct individual memory and channel our perceptions into forms compatible with the relations they authorize” (Douglas, 1986, p. 92). In the gallery, we encounter the institution in the form of display devices and exhibition architecture (among other things) and even though they are given and inconspicuous, they still direct our attention in the gallery. They condition how things appear before our senses, which means that they not only support the construction of meaning, they co-determine it.

Among the various apparatuses of visibility in the exhibition context, the white cube is surely the most institutionalized of them all; a completely ordinary, given, natural, common and invisible condition that has become background and remained so for at least half a century. The white cube has attracted quite a bit of attention over the years and generated a critical discourse (O’Doherty, 1986; Sheikh, 2009; Klonk, 2009; Filipovic, 2010), and already in 1997, Catherine David, Artistic Director of *documenta X* in Kassel, commented specifically on the shortcomings of the white cube with regard to hosting contemporary aesthetic practices (David, 1997, p. 11). But the discourse has not brought about any substantial changes in the gallery. Here, the white cube remains naturalized and inconspicuous, which according to architect and author Mark Wigley characterizes the white walls of modern architecture at large (Wigley, 1995, p. xiv). Needless to say, the white cube is what makes *Host* conspicuous and perceivable as an artwork. In fact, considering that the curtain installation predominantly covers up the white cube, its invisibility would appear to be even further emphasized. Or perhaps it is the other way around? Does *Host* in fact accentuate what it obscures? Does the white cube become conspicuous to us by being covered up? No longer hidden in plain view, the white cube is shrouded by a large-scale curtain. Its pliable fabric and soft play of folds, the color and luster of the fibers and the fuzz of the mesh windows – all these qualities stand in contrast to the flat, hard and cool surfaces of the

built architecture (Albers, 2000, p. 49), and certainly to the white cube. As a counterpart to solid walls – to use textile artist Anni Albers’ characterization of curtains (Albers, 2000, p. 50) – Condorelli’s curtain installation transforms the experience of the gallery, not only visually but also tactually and acoustically.

In the essay “The Pliable Plane: Textiles in Architecture”, Albers elaborates on the qualities and uses of textiles and their relationship with architecture. In advance of built architecture, she recounts, textiles and hides sustained human life both as clothing and transportable shelter. Although architecture proceeded to become immobile and textiles took on new aesthetic and practical functions in our homes, our relationship with textiles remains an intimate one. We have an inherent understanding of fabrics from wearing them, “from their use next to our skin,” Albers argues (Albers, 2000, p. 49). By way of this tactile familiarity, *Host* activates the body in the gallery; the body that O’Doherty describes as a superfluous piece of furniture in the white cube. “Indeed, the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not – or are tolerated only as kinesthetic mannekins [sic] for further study.” (O’Doherty, 1986, p. 15). The white cube, O’Doherty argues, would seem to make our bodies redundant; only minds and eyes are needed in order to appreciate the modernist artworks for which the white cube was initially introduced. However, since our understanding of fabrics, as per Albers, is a bodily one, the presence of Condorelli’s large-scale curtain installation changes the existing conditions of the gallery. This also includes the white cube’s “abysmal sound isolation” (Steyerl, 2009, p. 3) – a problem that art historian Claire Bishop calls perennial (Bishop, 2014, p. 64) – which is mitigated by the presence of more than 100 square meters of fabric. Consequently, the space that *Host* produces offers the thought that bodies and ears as well as minds and eyes are welcome.

Ahmed notes, “Perhaps the habits of the institutions are not revealed unless you come up against them,” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 26). I propose that *Host* accommodates such an encounter with the white cube. Surrounded by the curtain installation, we come up against the habits of the white cube with our whole body by experiencing tactually and acoustically as well as

visually and intellectually what the white cube is *not*. Visitor testimonies substantiate this argument. For example, symposium participants emphasize the notably improved acoustics of the space, a bodily connection to the curtain, a sense of being embraced, of feeling included in an inviting and intimate space as opposed to feeling excluded by the sterility of the white cube. These qualities enabled more informal and less self-conscious behavior in the space.⁶ So, on the one hand, the white cube makes *Host* perceivable as an artwork and conditions our perception of it. On the other hand, *Host* also makes the white cube discernible to us by introducing itself as a soft and moveable counterpart to the gallery's solid, white walls – a manoeuvre that welcomes back the whole body in the gallery. I will look further into this both/and conundrum below, where I return to the roles of host and guest in dialogue with Derrida's concept of hospitality.

Hosts and Guests – and a Parasite

The dictionary establishes the words host and guest as antonyms – as opposites but correlative and interdependent terms; there is no host without a guest and no guest without a host. Moreover, as literary scholar J. Willis Miller notes, the words host and guest hail from the same Proto-Indo-European root, *ghost-ti*, which means “stranger, guest, host; properly, ‘someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality’” (Miller, 1977, p. 442). This means that the notion of a guest is contained within that of a host and vice-versa. Or, as Miller puts it, “A host is a guest, and a guest is a host.” (Miller, 1977, p. 442). As should be clear by now, Condorelli's curtain performs exactly this ambiguity in the gallery by being both a guest and a host. However, one thing is etymological correlations, another is how common practice negotiates this relationship. As it happens, the reciprocal duties of hospitality are difficult if not impossible to uphold in practice if the roles of host and guest are interchangeable.

How are we to understand the reciprocity of hospitality? The host welcomes the guest and offers hospitality but also asks for hospitality in return. That is, the host imposes certain conditions upon the guest, who must agree to these restrictions (Westmoreland, 2008, p. 2). In an exhibition context, there are numerous conditions and regulations involved in this

reciprocal – if not transactional – hospitality. In short, the institutional host provides an exhibitionary framework and various forms of support – practical, intellectual, organizational, monetary, sometimes even emotional – in exchange for the services of the invited artist, significantly in the form of an artwork. Condorelli delivered on this obligation, but *Host* was not an ordinary and obliging guest. Instead, the curtain established a temporary space, a fabric house of non-rigid walls within the fixed architecture of the gallery. In doing so it reinvigorated a now obsolete meaning of fabric, namely “a building” (Harper, n.d.). By erecting new walls, the curtain set up home, and as the host of this home, it provided shelter for a new guest in the form of the film program. The duties of hospitality between the original host and guest – the art institution and the artwork – were in other words not reciprocated here. In fact, as I showed earlier, it would appear that the host – here the art institution – has welcomed into its home the very thing that can overturn its sovereignty (Westmoreland, 2008, p. 7). There is, however, no way around this destabilization. The host needs the guest in order to gain the authority of host, but welcoming in a guest necessarily involves relinquishing some of that authority.

This confounding relationship between host and guest is particular to Derrida’s understanding of hospitality. He distinguishes between the concept of pure or unconditional hospitality and conditional hospitality which involves an invitation. He argues, “If you are the guest and I invite you, if I am expecting you and am prepared to meet you, then this implies that there is no surprise, everything is in order. For pure hospitality or a pure gift to occur, however, there must be an absolute surprise.” (Derrida, 2002, p. 70). In the case of *Host*, the curtain arrived at Kunsthall Aarhus on account of a commission and an understanding that the hospitality was reciprocated and hence conditional. However, as I have shown in my analysis, *Host* stretched the invitation by enacting the role of host and welcoming in a new guest.⁷ *Host* acted *as if* the hospitality offered by Kunsthall Aarhus was unconditional, which entails that the host offers all they have – including their home – to the guest without asking any questions (Westmoreland, 2008, p. 3). That is not and cannot be the situation when an art institution invites an artist and an artwork. Instead, the hospitality that plays out between Kunsthall Aarhus and *Host* is necessarily conditional and

by acting as a host, *Host* is on the verge of being an uncivil and undesirable guest – or even a parasite as suggested in parenthesis in the exhibition text.⁸

Just like the word guest, parasite is also a word that gains its meaning through an antonymous relationship with the word host, but the relation is one-sided. There is no parasite without a host, but the host is likely to be better off without the parasite. However, in the case of *Host*, neither the common meaning of parasite nor Derrida's use of the term are accurate as they both imply that the parasite, unlike *Host*, is uninvited. Derrida specifically describes the parasite as a guest, who does not have the benefit of the right to hospitality (Derrida, 2000, p. 61), and the common meaning of parasite is an organism that lives on, in, or with a host organism from which it obtains nutrients and as a consequence jeopardizes the wellbeing of its host. This is not how things stand with *Host*. Instead, *Host* is a guest that has been invited and welcomed but goes on to challenge the role of the institutional host and knowingly stays, if not too long, then certainly much longer than normal. Although calling something a parasite undeniably has negative connotations, *Host* calling itself a host and enacting that role has even graver repercussions for the original host, the art institution. Because with *Host* as parasite, the art institution maintains its role as host – no parasite without a host – but with *Host* as host, what becomes of the art institution? Does it become a hostage or indeed a guest in its own home? No hospitality in the classic, conditional sense, Derrida writes, “without sovereignty of oneself over one's home” (Derrida, 2000, p. 55). To this end, calling *Host* a host means that the art institution no longer is one.

Redressing the White Cube

Earlier, I described *Host* as a soft and moveable counterpart to the solid walls of the white cube, one that changed both the conditions of display and the conditions of perception in the gallery. To this end, *Host* not only produced a critique of the hegemony of the white cube, it also redressed the gallery. Visitor experiences indicate that *Host* came across as a more considerate and accommodating host than the white cube, but as host, the curtain also commanded the room and dictated certain conditions that guests had to abide by. Such is the logic of conditional hospitality. However,

unlike the white cube, *Host* did not bring about a sense of unchangeability; the curtain was not a new regime of display. Even in an immobile state, the curtain conveyed the idea that a transformation of the room was possible as a symposium participant comments,⁹ and the sentiment aligns with observations by Albers about the general mobility of fabrics (Albers, 2000, p. 22). As described in the beginning of this article, a curtain rail allowed the curtain sections to be organized in a number of different ways; the curtain could even be gathered together and retire temporarily in a corner. *Host* was in other words neither unyielding nor a permanent fixture in the gallery. A similar mobility is reflected by the interchangeability of the roles of host and guest, both in their shared etymological root and as enacted by *Host* in the gallery. At times, *Host* was the host of the film program, discursive events and exhibitions, and at other times the curtain was a discrete installation in the gallery, i.e., an artwork and a guest with parasitic tendencies.

When it comes to the institutional host that we encounter in the form of the white cube, the relations are more rigid. The white cube would seem to always be the host and to suggest otherwise – as I did above by insinuating that it is a guest – is perplexing if not ridiculous. Or is it? As Catherine David argued more than 25 years ago, contemporary art already then and certainly now “oversteps the spatial and temporal but also ideological limits of the ‘white cube’” (David, 1997, p. 11). In other words, the white cube no longer provides an accommodating home for its guests, i.e. artworks but also visitors as this article has argued. What *Host* invites us to consider is that the white cube can also be a guest; that its command of the art gallery does not need to be a given. Instead, the white cube is also a guest; a guest from an era long past that continues to hold the present captive.

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NOTES

- 1 Host was on display at Kunsthall Aarhus from 26 April to 22 September 2019 and again from 24 January to 1 March 2020.
- 2 The film program at Kunsthall Aarhus was based on *Ecodrome*, a film program that Condorelli co-organised with film curator Filipa Ramos for the outdoor *Cinema Zagara* at the Agricultural University Garden of Athens in 2018.
- 3 Le Corbusier's architecture reflected his famous dictum, "a house is a machine to live in" (Downs, 1932, p. 115). Even the street is "a machine for circulating" (Von Moos, 1974, p. 135).
- 4 The works include *Spatial Compositions 1 2* (2019), *Revision -part II* (2010) and *All Our Tomorrows* (2016), see <https://celinecondorelli.eu/>.
- 5 The political unconscious is a term coined by Marxist cultural critic Frederic Jameson to articulate that artistic works can be seen as symbolic solutions to real but unconsciously felt social and cultural problems. Condorelli expands this idea to concern the entire exhibition context.
- 6 Email interviews conducted 8–11 June 2024 with participants in the symposium, *The Curator has Left the Building*, Kunsthall Aarhus, 25 January 2020.
- 7 Condorelli used the turn of phrase "stretching the invitation" to characterize her *modus operandi* in a public lecture at Kunsthall Aarhus 25 April 2019.
- 8 On Condorelli's suggestion, the exhibition text, available both online and in the printed exhibition folder, includes a reference to a parasite, <https://www.kunsthallaarhus.dk/en/Exhibitions/Celine-Condorelli-Vaert-Host> (accessed 13 June 2024)
- 9 Reflection by symposium participant, email interview conducted 8–11 June 2024.

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