

Floating in the White Sea

Part 1. Orientation Begins

A new academic year has come, and Vita Havet, its waves now calm from restful summer months, is once again ready for students and faculty to inhabit its halls. It has been a year since we first stepped into Konstfack's main exhibition space ourselves, an arrival which marked the beginning of our master studies. The two of us entered as strangers: to each other, to Stockholm, and to the expanse of white walls and concrete called Vita Havet, the White Sea. Our orientation began in this sea of white, and are continually oriented by it as we navigate its halls day after day.

On the surface, Vita Havet appears obvious: the vast, empty space with towering white walls and the sky through the vaulted windows above renders its name transparent, rational, maybe even

natural. As an art space, the name invokes idealized visions of untouched landscapes as represented in a blank canvas or a blank piece of paper, an "infinitely young 'blank' which emphasizes the Beginning, as yet unborn"^[1], a naked presence full of possibility. Within the art institution, however, the silence and austerity of Vita Havet imbues its white, smooth surfaces with an assumed neutral, aesthetic purity that may not be as innocent as we might believe.

What enunciations are privileged or undermined by a sea of white that demands order and smoothness? What expectations are implicitly imposed upon those who inhabit such a space, one that makes some bodies feel "uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different"?^[2]

"A sea of white that I do not intend to drown in."
Emma Dominguez

A Foray into the Contemporary Art Institution

[1] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1977)

[2] Sara Ahmed, *A Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007)

[3] Quote by fine arts student Emma Dominguez in an article she wrote at the beginning of her studies at Konstfack. *Jag tänker inte drunkna i Konstfacks vita hav.* ETC (2015)

Part 2. Searching for a Source

Vita Havet at Konstfack emerged in the 1950s while the school was located at Mäster Samuelsgatan near Hötorget. Having moved there in 1867 after sharing a building with The Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts and inhabiting various temporary locations, the top floor of the new building housed “Predikosalen”, a preaching hall with dark blue drapes that stretched from floor to ceiling. Falling out of use, the hall later functioned as a gathering room for weekend classes, a museum, as well as an auditorium. As student numbers increased through the early 1900s, it was eventually used as classrooms and was subdivided with brown masonite walls. It wasn't until renovations in 1950–1951, when the masonite was torn down and the roofs and walls were painted white, that “the magnificent assembly hall appeared in all its glory”.^[4]

From Mäster Samuelsgatan to Valhallavägen and finally to Telefonplan in 2004, Vita Havet followed, outliving its previous homes. Diverging from its royal, high culture beginnings, Konstfack moved into the refurbished Ericsson factory building, claiming the emptied out factory floor. Opaque white walls were raised, forming a labyrinth of corridors that sequestered workshops and departments from one another behind code-access doors. Vita Havet found its place at the entrance neighboring the cafe, making

it an unavoidable formal public space, as if it were a central town square. Its smooth, glowing emptiness basking in natural light is continuously revived, creating a timeless, eternal sea of white.

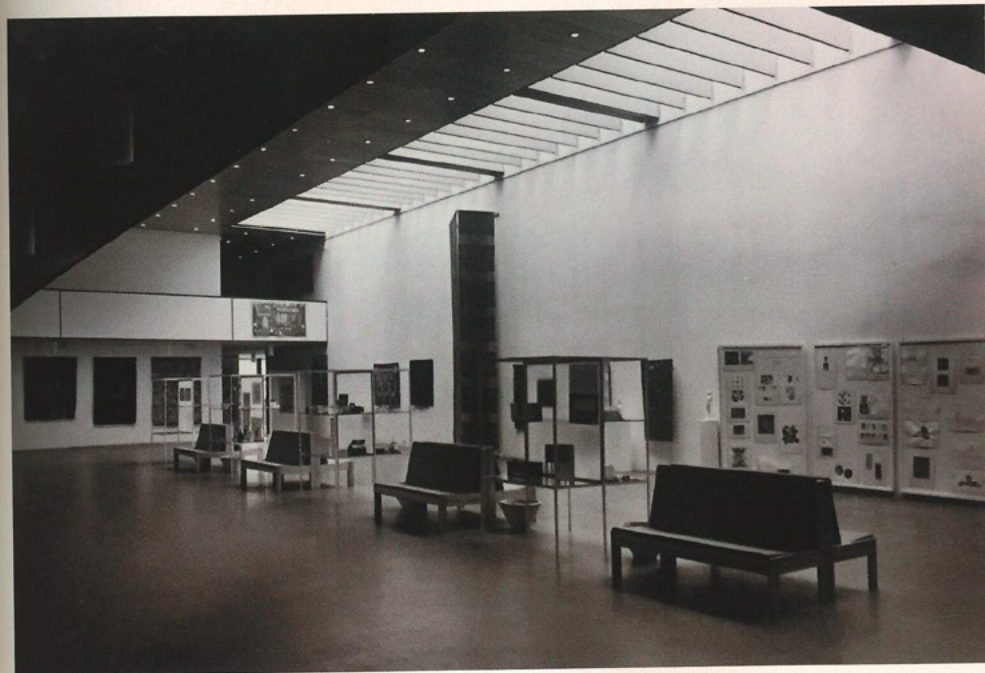
Nearby in Sweden's Royal Palace sits another room named Vita Havet. This Vita Havet, a ballroom which previously had been two rooms, the Royal dining hall and a guard room, is incredibly ornamented in a revival of Baroque styles immersed in gold, fine wood, and laborious ornamentation. Far from a non-white space, however, the room speaks of a different whiteness, a display of white bodies and western power. The room hosts royal wedding banquets and gatherings for Nobel laureates which externally represents and makes visible its wealth and privilege. In contrast, Vita Havet at Konstfack with its white, empty walls embodies modernism and encourages minimalism — today's fashionable expression for high culture and good taste — keeping its privileges less clear, seemingly invisible, though certainly present. While their aesthetics diverge, they may not be so different from each other; both Vita Havets serve the same role for each respective institution as a space for the presentation and representation of power.

Part.3 Purifying the Social Body

In the early 20th century, as industrialization and mass production proliferated through Europe and the United States,



(1952) Vita Havet, Mäster Samuelsgatan



(1961) Vita Havet, Valhallavägen



(1995) Vita Havet, Valhallavägen



(2018) Vita Havet, Telefonplan

ideas began to spread which proclaimed ornament to be not only in bad taste but a disease, a retrograde step, a crime that "inflicts serious injury on people's health, on the national budget and hence on cultural evolution."^[5] Artists and architects applied models from the language of philosophers, medical doctors, and psychologists, adopting the logic of affliction and disease to validate their claims. This rhetoric helped shape fundamental modernist thinking still intact today, which describes and villainizes everything and everyone that stand out as stains, as 'dirt'^[6] in need of cleaning and purification. Modernism's ambitions to reshape and make new our environment, and thus the world, was simultaneously a project that quarantined and removed that which was seen to hold back progress. The elimination of what was considered out of place was seen as "a positive effort to organize the environment," which encouraged support for eugenic and race biology practices and furthered the othering of non-normative bodies.^[7]

In Sweden, between 1935–1975, the government enforced 'sterilization laws' which attempted to 'purify' the social body of those that were considered out of place or offending against

[8] In *In Praise of Shadows* (1933), Jun'ichiro Tanizaki writes about the beauty of traditional Japanese aesthetics, but there are moments where he seems to admit inferiority of his own skin and race when comparing to Westerners and white skin. He seems to claim the shadows because he believes Westerners to be of a purer white, thus more beautiful in the light. This quote serves as an example of how the white gaze can be internalized within those it oppresses.

evolutionary order. People seen as promiscuous, disabled, of mixed blood, poor, of another race perceived to be inferior, mentally ill, and others were targeted, resulting in almost 63,000 sterilisations, 93% of them performed on women, and at least one third of the cases under compulsory conditions.^[9] Furthermore, transgender people have, up until just a few years ago, been forced to undergo sterilization in order to change their legal gender.^[10] Sweden's sterilization laws have systematically been carried out on people deemed as inferior based on a social, medical, and eugenic rhetoric constructed to allow the privileged to retain power and legitimize the removal of those that have been othered, an attempt to create a homogeneous social body.

This is part of the modernist tradition Vita Havet emerges out of; traumas of contemporary western history linger within its smooth surfaces. If "aesthetics in the modern sense is itself [...] already an anesthetic" that removes feeling and "calms the nerves," as Beatriz Colomina writes, then this anesthetic doesn't simply suppress bodily sensation but facilitates the control and even the silencing of what has been felt. Any perceived friction is smoothed out, depriving the inhabitants of leaving any traces, thus memory.^[11] After every exhibition where students claim space

[5] Adolf Loos. *Ornament and Crime* (1913)
[6, 7] Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger* (1966)

[9] Mattias Tydén, *Från politik till praktik: de svenska steriliseringslagarna 1935-1975* (2002)

[10] In 1972, Sweden introduced a law that made it possible to change a person's legal gender. In order to change legal gender, individuals were required to be sterilised and were not allowed to save any sperm or eggs. On 1 July 2013 the requirement was removed from the law. (RFSL 2016)

[11] Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, *Are We Human?* (2016)

and voice, Vita Havet is returned to its white, resting, sterilized state. Of course, as a constantly rotating exhibition space, Vita Havet needs to be maintained and easily adaptable. This, however, does not negate that the act of constant whitewashing performs as the ultimate anesthetic, a perpetual process of sterilization that communicates the incessant need for silence and order.

Part 4. Fade to White

Smooth, white surfaces provided the ideal art space museums and institutions had been looking for. The overcrowding of both people and paintings in their early Paris Salon style rooms was seen to diminish the quality for visitors and was abandoned for an empty tier gallery wall, where a curated selection of works hung isolated and at eye level. "For the first time, the colour of the walls was explicitly up for discussion."^[12] Museums began to experiment with different wall colors, shifting away from the once gray-green hue to colors such as red, light gray-brown, dull yellow-gray, and white. As the dust settled, we found ourselves under the tyranny of the White Cube.

The White Cube is a gallery space with white walls, smooth

[12] Charlotte Klonk, from *The White Cube and Beyond*, Tate.org (2011)

[13] Love Arbén was responsible for the interior when Konstfack was moving to Telefonplan

floors, little to no furniture, the ceiling as the source of light; it attempts to deprive the senses of everything, except for the work itself, leaving the art free "to take on its own life."^[14] Vita Havet is an embodiment of this practice; it is a White Cube, a "bourgeois ivory tower of high culture"^[15] that produces a space where both objects and subjects are "sanitized, sequestered, cut off from 'reality'."^[16] With each new coat of paint, in the exact shade prescribed by the institution, Vita Havet reproduces an isolated chamber that divorces the everyday experience of walking its halls from the voices beneath every painted-over layer.

By co-opting the Fordist factory, Vita Havet furthers its processes of separation and isolation. Having been emptied out, shipped away, retrained, and reoccupied, the factory is reborn as an empty shell framing the art space. As actual factories are relocated to the global south to dominate the lives of the global poor, distancing and further rendering their brutal labor invisible, the art institution has transformed into a symbolic factory which reproduces, maintains, and panoptically surveils the constant labor toward the production of cultural capital for dominant cultural and economic power. The factory, which at one time was considered an "ugly and ordinary"^[17] everyday building, has now become a symbol in the global north, a symbol which bears un deniable ideological weight, a monument which romanticises the perpetual production of capital and

[14] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (1986)
 [15, 16] Hito Steyerl, *Is the Museum a Factory? e-flux* (2009)
 [17] Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972)

the persistent reproduction of the "modern".

At Konstfack, departments are kept separate and locked away from one another without much common social space or opportunity to build dialogue across disciplinary lines. Professors and lecturers are given second floor offices with windows overlooking student studio spaces and workshops. In the unmarked walls of Vita Havet, a background which attempts to claim its presence as neutral context, exists both the White Cube and the symbolic factory. It is in this way that the white walls and empty space dotted with white Neoclassical sculptures and reliefs perform as dogmatic content, transforming what intends to be a free art space into a ritual space, preserving a certain order and logic of "modernity".

Part 5. Seeing the Invisible

The notion of being unmarked denotes alignment with the norm, and thus not seen, receding into the background. People who inhabit whiteness take an unmarked and invisible racial position against which other non-dominant groups are examined, thus reproducing a sense of differentness and deviation from the norm.^[18] The world, made 'white' through colonialism^[19] and repetitive acts of oppression makes its surfaces a mould where

[18] Richard Dyer, *White* (1997)
[19] Sara Ahmed, *A Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007)

Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is

some bodies fit better than others. Konstfack along with other art institutions have, as Sara Ahmed would explain, become 'orientated around whiteness', as they have acquired the 'skin' of the bodies that have inhabited them through history. In the book^[20] where we found fragments of Vita Havet's history, we encountered images of a performance held during a big autumn party, in which teachers and students wore blackface and referred to their characters as "n***** chief" and "n***** child ren". This is part of the history of Konstfack and Vita Havet have been oriented around, an orientation which forces bodies that might not be considered white having to still inhabit whiteness if they are to be accepted insofar as they are not used as tokens. Whiteness appears invisible for those who inhabit it and even to those who get so used to it that they learn not to see it. It becomes 'a straightening device' where bodies learn necessary codes in order to 'line up' making them indistinguishable in the vast sea of whiteness.^[22] These unwritten codes of conduct follow institutional, class, and cultural taste in dress, speech and performance, privileging some behaviour more than others — one must not be too loud, stick out, be in the way, or learn to do so just the right amount.

Vita Havet has been constructed and continuously reconstructed

- [20] Ruth Hallberg, *Gamla Konstfacks-kolan. En liten rundvandring* (1959)
- [21] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986)
- [22] Sara Ahmed, *A Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007)

surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. [...] self as a

body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world. - Frantz Fanon [21]

[23] Sara Ahmed, *A Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007)

[24] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986)

ucted in ways that allow certain kind of bodies to be at ease with their environment, becoming 'bodies-at-home' by moving without losing their way.^[23]

While some thrive in comfort, alternating easily between floating and swimming, the rest get caught up in the exhausting and tedious act of dragging their body/ies in various directions, encountering "difficulties in the development of [their] bodily schema."^[24] This fidgeting sometimes stops movement, marking a clear separation between the body made self-conscious and its surroundings, turning what is assumed to be an innocent neutral background into a frozen sea.

Part 6. Reorientation Begins

This year, reorientation begins in Vita Havet. Bright light still descends into the "holy land"^[25], valorizing the "ritual space"^[26] which keeps the outside world at a distance. But we now know the silence of the white sea, we recognize the effects of the sterile, panoptic, institutional public space, and we refuse to be estranged from the places we inhabit.

At the beginning of our investigation, we set out to write a piece that would make a case for changing the name of Vita Havet. We felt that its linguistic symbolism

[25] Ruth Hallberg, *Gamla Konstfackskolan. En liten rundvandring* (1959)

[26] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (1986)

[27] Maya Angelou, *The Power of Words, Oprah's Master Class* (Jan 2011)

should not be taken lightly, as the name frames meaning for what happens within. Currently, the name presents opportunities and a platform for critique, important as a method that articulates inadequacies, shortcomings, and gaps, and an entry point to negotiate practices that seeks other ways. Changing the name could be one such practice as it would directly engage a process that questions institutional procedures and values, revealing who has a voice, which positions have power, and the possibilities and politics of representation. However, this alone will not resolve the issues we have been discussing. We must also call attention to what sits beyond the name, the invisible structures that maintain the institutional status quo, and the histories and voices that have been left out.

Our writing process has been an effort to further discussions of our experiences and research and articulate our own discomfort and alienation felt within the institution. Verbalizing, sharing, and making unmarked structures visible is important, so that we can recognize them together. Our dialogue also allows us to recognize each other, forming islands where we can rest for a brief moment: on the grass in the summer, on the steps opposite the entrance, in the kitchen cooking together, or in self-organized collectivity. Sometimes, being neither invisible nor too visible, but just being is what keeps us from drowning.

Words are things. They get on the walls. They get in your wallpaper. They get in your rugs, in your upholstery, and your clothes, and finally in to you. - Maya Angelou [27]

We need manifold strategies and diverse practices to address the complex issues we experience within the contemporary art institution, as well as to acknowledge and respond to the institution as a condition of broader society. Despite the walls and structures that impede dialogue and community, we must develop tactics to transgress institutional boundaries, while collectively demanding and creating spaces where we can dwell. What kinds of spaces do we need while in residence? What might an art institution look like if it were collectively imagined and created out of dialogue to allow for diverse bodies to feel at home? Vita Havet is fast approaching the age of 70; is it not time for us to seek beyond the waters of the sea to realize spaces where a plurality of voices can reside side by side?

Text: written by two members of Brown Island
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BROWN ISLAND

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