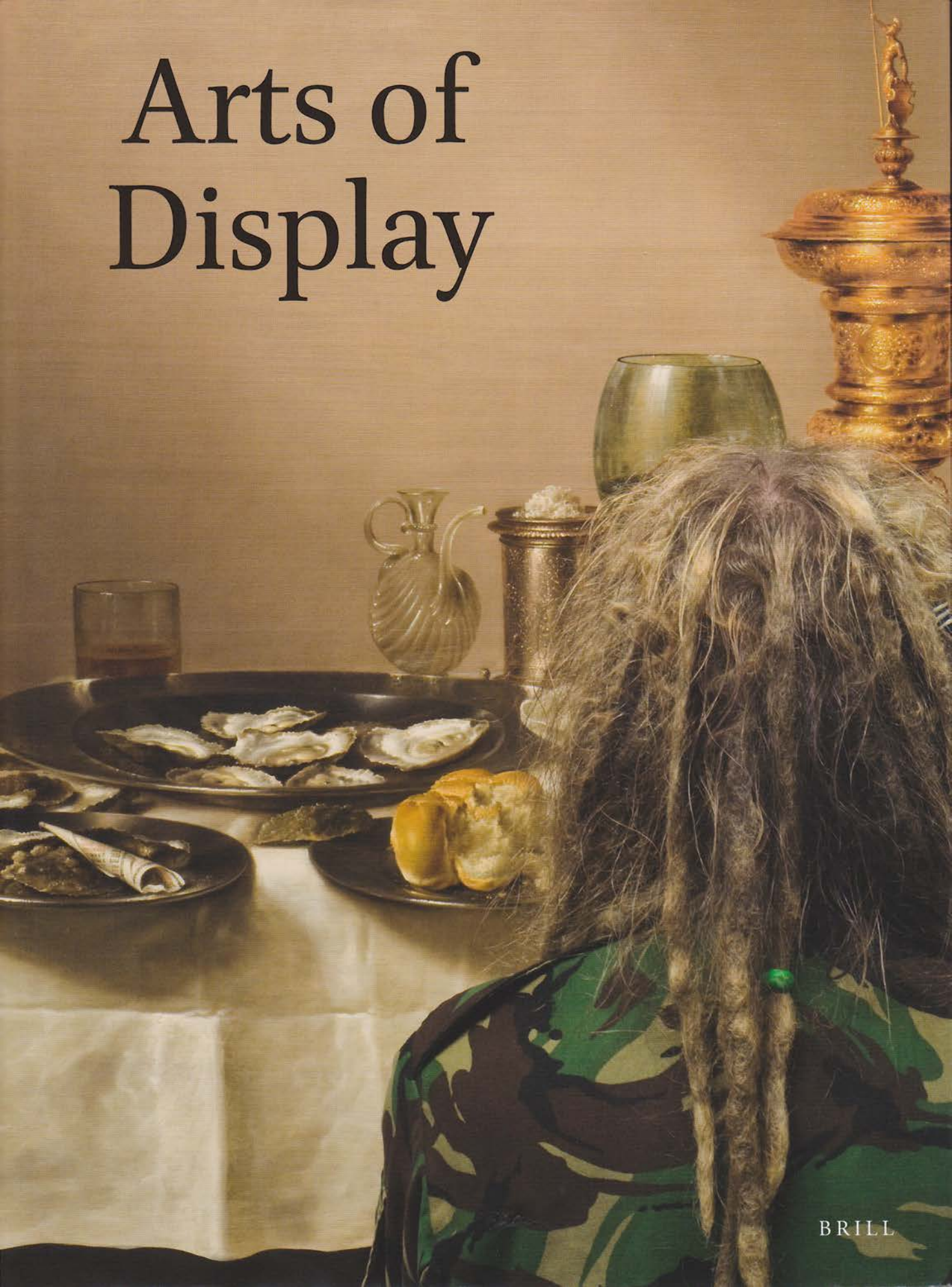


Arts of Display



BRILL

Arts of Display

Het vertoon van de kunst

Editors / *Redactie*:

H. Perry Chapman

Frits Scholten

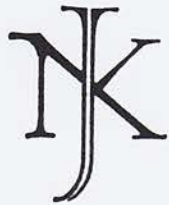
Joanna Woodall



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2

One of the cabinets of the Rijksmuseum's Gallery of Honour with dark grey walls
(photo: Erik Smits, 2015)

for instance, that the museum would become a 3-D book on Dutch history, with the works of art reduced to illustrations – that prevailed among art historians in 2003, including herself, have largely proven unfounded.

To dissenting voices, however, the Rijksmuseum's forced march through a chronological history that privileges political and economic progress displaces other ways of displaying Dutch art that are perhaps more accessible and have broader appeal.⁹ For example, the social dimensions of artworks could be emphasized, through such contexts as the urban townscape, rank and status, the lives of women, and the role of religion. A more flexible organizational scheme might open up ways to bring back some of the much-loved paintings and sculptures that are now relegated to storage. Too, for some viewers, the mix of mundane objects of material culture with works of art of great beauty has the potential to detract from the pleasure of 'unencumbered' viewing.

Some of these conflicting notions of display are encapsulated in Laurence Aëgerter's 2008 photograph of a contemporary viewer in front of a seventeenth-century Dutch still life (fig. 4). Chosen for the front cover of this volume, it was drawn from a series of Aëgerter's photographs that merge



3

BiermanHenket Architecten, *Museum de Fundatie in Zwolle, with cloud-shaped top, 2010-2013* (photo: F. Scholten)

spectators and paintings in the Rijksmuseum, called *Het apparaat*, appropriating the name of the museum's object files; the photographer envisions the series as adding to the museum's comprehensive cataloging system. Here, the juxtaposition of the dreadlocked viewer and Willem Claesz Heda's *Still life with a gilt cup* of 1635 reminds us that, at its most basic and idealized, display brings the isolated work of art before the eyes of the contemplative spectator. Yet, in Aëgerter's photograph, superimposed, quite disparate modes of showing off – emphatic personal adornment and sumptuous spread – also reveal display as a never disinterested visual and physical process that unfolds in space and over time. The defamiliarizing contrast of matted hair and camouflage jacket with crisply creased linen and the Old Master sheen of finely painted oysters, glass, pewter, and gold opens our eyes to the beholder's role in the display of art. It prompts us to consider the politics of display and to ask, whose art is this? What does today's somewhat androgynous young citizen of the world make of yesterday's painting in the Rijksmuseum? Is the still life understood as part of the museum's guiding chronological and nativistic historical scheme, appreciated as an object of beauty and desire, or pondered as strange and remote? By recon-



4

Laurence Aëgerter, SK-A-4830-0802031526
 (Heda) from the series *Het Apparaat*, 2008.
 (© Laurence Aëgerter, c/o Pictoright
 Amsterdam 2015. Represented by Johan
 Deumens Gallery, Amsterdam)

textualizing the work of art, and (dis)organizing attention, Aëgerter's photograph captures display's limitless potential to make the old new and the familiar different.

Artfulness and display have always been closely connected, and the condition of being on display was a determining factor in the rise of the notion of 'art' in early modern Europe. Crucial to this process were the assertion of sovereign magnificence through the collection and presentation of precious, skillfully made objects and the transfer of artifacts from sacred spaces to elite personal collections as a result of the Protestant reformation.¹⁰ From this era onwards, most art in Western culture (to which we limit ourselves here) was and is created for show and exhibition in one form or another. The desire to collect and present such artworks, at first alongside manifestations of divine creativity in nature and instruments of human knowledge, initiated the birth of the art museum as we know it today.

While the English word 'display' is derived from the Latin *displacare* (to unfold) and suggests something being unveiled or opened to reveal its contents,¹¹ its Dutch equivalent *vertonen* (to show) is etymologically linked to the Gothic *ataugjan*, meaning 'to bring before the eyes'.¹² It thus directly connotes the sense of sight, whereas display in its original Latin meaning

VOLUME 47
Pieter Bruegel

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Beeld en zelfbeeld in de Nederlandse kunst 1550-1750

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Beelden in de late Middeleeuwen en Renaissance

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*Nederland-Italië. Relaties in de beeldende kunst
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(1558-1617)*

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Pieter Aertsen

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Het Rijksmuseum

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Klassieke traditie in beeldende kunst en architectuur

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in the three centuries from 1650 to post-World War II
Verzamelen in Nederland

COVER ILLUSTRATIONS

Laurence Aëgerter, SK-A-4830-0802031526 (Heda) from the
series *Het Apparaat*, 2008 (detail). © Laurence Aëgerter,
c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2015. Represented by Johan
Deumens Gallery, Amsterdam)

Kunstkamer, the Rembrandthuis Museum (detail).
(photo: Rembrandthuis Museum)

The recent wave of renovations of Netherlandish museums inspired this volume of the *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, which focuses on display as a key approach to the visual culture of the Netherlands from the early modern period to the present. The volume opens with a critical discussion of the newly installed Rijksmuseum. It includes analyses of the depiction of aggressive interactions with artworks, the ways in which meaning is mobilised by changing displays of paintings by Rubens, and the politics of display in a seventeenth-century palace and in Fascist and De Stijl exhibitions. Display in domestic spaces, including Rembrandt's house and a museum of Asiatic art, is considered, as are the implications of plinths and curtains. Display emerges as a complex praxis that determines interpretation and implicates the beholder.

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