



The Grey Space. Where body and world meet.

An essay on perception, art as transformation, and the encounter between the creator, the audience, and the artwork outside traditional frameworks.

by Annemijn Rijk / Body of Art



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“My eyes which see, my hands which touch, can also be seen and touched, because... the world and I are within one another.”

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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When I introduce myself as a creator, it usually goes like this: "My name is Annemijn Rijk, I'm an artist and philosopher, and I create my work in the Grey Space; the space between the black box of theater and the white cube of museums." I then continue my explanation with more information about my latest production and the fact that I was once—in the distant past—a dancer. Although it only serves as an introduction to my introductions, the space in which I create and share my work is a fundamental part of my practice. In this essay, I delve deeper into the relatively unknown space that is essential to me in communicating my vision and mission: The Grey Space.

The road to Grey Space begins with a detour and a bit of theory. So, buckle up.

To discover what Grey Space is, we must first consider what it isn't. This brings us to two well-known art spaces: the aforementioned black box of theater and the white cube of museums, between which Grey Space (as the name suggests) seems to exist. (Spoiler: I consider Grey Space a separate space, a "third space," with its own *raison d'être*. Grey Space doesn't exist because there happened to be any space between the white and the black, but more on that later.)

The black box and the white cube have a long history of development and, in their development, each has developed a suitable set of cultural conventions and (behavioral) codes¹; in a museum, we don't talk too loudly, and we maintain an appropriate distance from a sculpture. And when the lights dim in a theater, we become silent, and at the end of a performance, there's applause. These rules and agreements ensure, among other things, that we know how to behave in these spaces and what is expected of us as spectators.

But these codes and conventions do more than simply prescribe a pattern of behavior. They also frame how we perceive a work of art in both artistic spaces. An aesthetic experience is a layered experience, and a brief explanation does not do justice to the complexity and value of an (aesthetic) perception or experience in these more traditional spaces. However, in the context of the purpose of this essay – to explain the Grey Space – I will now briefly summarize how the codes of the black box and the white cube partly determine how we perceive art in those spaces.

In the theater, we, as audience members, experience a performance together, at a directed pace, from a distance (the stands), and watching a "neutral" theatrical frame, where there is a direct (live) relationship between the audience and what is happening on stage.² In the museum, during opening hours, we walk individually, autonomously, and at our own pace around an "objective" or "timeless," often white space to view art.³ While it is typical for artists to challenge and break rules and conventions, and parallel to the history of the black box and the white cube, there are also movements that have developed outside or in relation to these traditional frameworks, we can

¹ Wiles, D. 2003. *A short History of Western performance Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 244-260 & Bishop, C. 2018. *Black Box, White Cube, Grey Zone*, TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 62, Number 2, pp. 22-42 (Article), New York: Mid Press. P. 29,30.

² Wiles, D. 2003. *A short History of Western performance Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 244-260

³ Bishop, C. 2018. *Black Box, White Cube, Grey Zone*, TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 62, Number 2, pp. 22-42 (Article), New York: Mid Press. P. 29.

generally say that traditional work in the black box and the white cube has a clear design and clear conventions.⁴

As a dancer and choreographer, I was primarily trained in the black box of the theater. For years, the dressing rooms, the wings, and especially the stage felt like home. But in recent years, I, and a growing number of artists with me, have developed an interest in a space beyond these two traditional spaces. A space where work is created that cannot be captured by pre-existing logic, traditions, laws, or conventions. In recent decades, a new, hybrid (in-between) space has opened up, which is becoming increasingly common and has been given a name: Grey Space.

Although the term "Grey Space" has not yet been claimed, it is used by the artists who create work in this space.⁵ Partly because it is the artists themselves who use the term, there is no clear definition. Each artist has their own artistic signature, which is accompanied by their own interpretation of Grey Space. But this is not the only reason why Grey Space as a phenomenon is difficult to "capture."

A space in motion

In 2023, I wrote my Master's thesis in philosophy on Grey Space, using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to investigate the mechanisms and methodologies that exist within this space. This wasn't an easy undertaking, as a key component of philosophy involves defining phenomena. (The question "What is consciousness?" is a well-known example.) However, my research into Grey Space revealed that a characteristic aspect of artworks within this space is their innovative or dynamic nature, making them impossible to define. The work often explores new developments, is in motion or development, and isn't "finished" by the time an audience comes to see it. Therefore, I couldn't offer a hard, fixed definition of Grey Space, and perhaps that's a good thing: Fixing what something is and how it works or should work can hinder creativity and innovation.

The dynamic aspect of the Grey Space is one of the reasons I find it so appealing as a creator: when you work in a space that isn't defined by codes, conventions, or agreements, you're less bound by expectations or rules. "How it should be" or "the laws of theatre" don't apply in this artistic space. This also means that through or from within this space, we can view "what we've come to consider normal" or "how we've always done it" in the "normal" or "traditional" world from a distance, critically question it, and explore alternatives, both in theatrical and social contexts. I think that's fantastic. Questioning the norm is something that drives my vision as a creator and philosopher. I seem to have found a new home.

The removal of borders

So, how can we explain Grey Space? One way to interpret Grey Space is to assume that it's not a fixed "space," but rather a methodology, a way of working that artists incorporate into both their creative process and their sharing. Of course, every artist has their own methodology, but a common thread I discovered through artworks in this space, and which I've used as a guide in my research for describing Grey Space, is the embodied approach to the audience necessary for the creation of the work. In other words, interaction with the audience is what makes work in Grey Space come to life.

With work in Grey Space, the audience is no longer at a distance; their body itself becomes part of the creation and, thus, simultaneously the existence of the artwork. This can happen, for example,

⁴ Bishop, C. 2018. *Black Box, White Cube, Grey Zone*, TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 62, Number 2, pp. 22-42 (Article), New York: Mid Press. P. 29.

⁵ Art historian, critic, and professor of art history Claire Bishop has written extensively about the "Grey Zone," also a space between the black box and the white cube. However, Bishop's definition of the Grey Zone doesn't align with my research and discussion of Grey Space. We're both talking about different spaces, though there are similarities. Ref: Bishop, C. 2018. *Black Box, White Cube, Grey Zone*, TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 62, Number 2, pp. 22-42 (Article), New York: Mid Press.

because an artist uses a work to respond to the audience's perception, and it is this alternative perception that brings the artwork to life (e.g., Ann Veronica Janssens' "Green, Yellow and Pink" and my earlier work 'Yellow Horizon'). But also, for example, by placing the audience's body in the space, thereby creating a play or tension that can be felt by the audience through that same body and that is essential to the flow or meaning of the work (see, for example, Marte Boneschansker's 'Opstand' and Olafur Eliasson's 'The Weather Project'). Or by using, for example, the audience's breathing, heartbeat, or walking pace as a dramaturgical tool to define and/or give meaning to the work (see, for example, Theun Mosk, Boukje Schweigman, and Robert Wilson's 'Walking').

Based on my research, I would also like to define Grey Space as a space where the boundaries between disciplines, material, creator, audience, process, end result, autonomy, and reciprocity blur. Performing arts disciplines such as dance, mime, or theater step outside their familiar surroundings and, in a new context, acquire new functions and meaning (see, for example, BoogaertvanderSchoot's 'Travelling Without Moving'). Experiences are being developed instead of fixed objects, dialogues, or choreographies (see, for example, Gregor Schneider's 'Tote Räume'), or the aesthetic experience is created through the interaction you have as a visitor with the environment you wade through (see, for example, Dries Verhoeven's 'Phobiorama' and my latest production, 'The Lab').

The Grey Space can thus far be described as a space where boundaries blur and where the visitor is no longer merely a spectator, but a participant, sometimes even a co-creator. The Grey Space is an invitation to approach art not just with the eye or the mind, but with the entire body.

Observation as the driving force behind the work

In Grey Space, it's not just about looking or listening; it's about art becoming embedded in the body. For me as a creator, that's essential: art that plays out within you, that activates your senses and temporarily takes you out of your usual routines or what you're used to.

With my latest production, The Lab, I explore precisely that. It's not a performance you can watch from a distance. It's a work, inspired by the form and workings of a labyrinth, that you experience. As soon as you enter the darkened, winding corridors of The Lab, you're transported into an experience that only truly unfolds because you're part of it. The Lab isn't a linear story, but a journey in which your own perceptions help shape its meaning.

The philosophy of the body

To understand the mechanism of these kinds of experiences, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty draws on the concept of "embodied being." According to him, our body isn't an object we possess, but the foundation of how we experience the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that we're not only "in the world" through our bodies; we're made of the same material as the world around us. He speaks of the body as "flesh"—flesh that is one with the world around us.⁶

That sounds abstract, but in art it becomes tangible. Take Olafur Eliasson's famous Weather Project (2003): a gigantic artificial sun in a misty hall of the Tate Modern. Visitors gathered beneath it, lying on the floor as if sunbathing, and saw their reflections in a huge mirror hanging from the ceiling. It wasn't just an object to look at; it became a shared experience that you physically experienced and thus created with your body. According to Merleau-Ponty, something special happens: our perception and the world meet in what he calls a "chiasmus": an intersection where, in this case, the artwork, the artist, and the audience temporarily coincide.⁷ In my thesis, I concluded that it is this intersection, this temporary coincidence, that allows work to be co-created,

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M. 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. By Alphonso Lingus, ed. By Claude Lefort. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, M. 1964. *Signs*, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. P.123 & 142

through an encounter between the artist, the audience, and (the structures or performers of) the artwork itself.⁸

Art as transformation

The unique thing about Grey Space art is its potential to make a lasting impact. (I don't mean to say other art spaces can't.) Because work in Grey Space approaches you physically, nestles within your body, and comes to life there, you co-create the work, as it were, while simultaneously, through this physical approach, the work can change your perspective on the world. For example, through the work, you experience the vulnerability of your own senses, gain a different experience of time, or rediscover your connection to others and your surroundings.

Art in Grey Space isn't something outside of you, but something that works through you. The winding corridors of The Lab, the ever-changing light, the hypnotic sounds... In The Lab, your senses are slowly disrupted. The path you walk in The Lab constantly bends, preventing you from seeing around the corner. You don't know where you're going, but you do know you're moving. Sometimes the space seems endless, sometimes oppressively small. Sounds shift, lights dim or brighten, and your body becomes hypervigilant. You can't check your phone, you have no directions or clear instructions. Your senses become your only compass. This is exciting, but also vulnerable.

Because Grey Space work engages the body and demands something of you. As a visitor, you must make your body available; otherwise, the work can't come to life. In the case of The Lab, it demands that you slow down, sharpen your senses, pay attention, and accept the unknown. The optional, alternative forms of Grey Space (in the case of The Lab, a labyrinth) and the embodied approach of Grey Space allow the sensory element of The Lab to do its work: The Lab isn't there for me, the creator, to convey my message to you, but rather allows you, the visitor, to experience through your own body what it means to wander and lose direction in this day and age. It makes the visitor active, embodied, and alive. The embodied approach of Grey Space enables me, both as a creator and the visitor, to do this. I therefore consider my own work in Grey Space, in addition to artistic experiences, as experiments: I try things out, present them to an audience, and in doing so, I take a big risk. It could fail! And whether it succeeds or not isn't for me to decide; the visitor determines that through their own experience.

The ethical side

But with that power and risk also comes responsibility. Because the audience becomes an active participant, a reciprocal relationship develops between creator and visitor. I don't design a closed artwork that remains mine once it's finished; I hand over an experience, which only unfolds in and through the other. When an artwork can so deeply impact a body and the memories and emotions stored there, ethical questions arise. How far can you go as an artist? What if a work evokes old traumas in a visitor? And how do you ensure that people are sufficiently free to choose how far they want to go? Because the Grey Space is still young and developing, there are (as yet) no fixed rules or codes. This makes it exciting and fruitful, but also vulnerable.

For me, this ethical dimension is inextricably linked to working in the Grey Space. Making art in this area means that I design not only an aesthetic experience, but also a relational and vulnerable one. The audience places something of themselves in my hands. I feel I must bear this responsibility with the same intensity and care with which I embark on the artistic adventure. Together with my fellow artists and The Lab's guides, we ensure thorough preparation for the audience, clear instructions that still allow room for wonder and personal interpretation, and there's always the option to leave the work if desired. However, from previous work and the test sessions we had with The Lab, I've noticed that seeking a disorienting, embodied experience combined with

⁸ This statement is valid if one acknowledges the mechanisms I explore in my research and should not be used as a criterion for distinguishing "good" Grey Space work from other work. Every artist in Grey Space will employ their own methodology, with or without awareness of the phenomenological mechanisms that may lie behind it. Rijk, A. 2023. The Grey Space – A phenomenological and ethical investigation into contemporary embodied art practices. P. 29

providing a safe context and clear instructions is a challenge, and I'm still searching for the right balance.

Because, however fruitful, I quickly discovered that the lack of clear codes and conventions in the Grey Space can also hinder a work's expressiveness. For the audience, the space is often new, or they haven't previously experienced how best to approach the work. If, as the artist, I then suggest that they best "open up their bodies," things usually don't get any clearer. A suitable introduction, a preparatory step towards experiencing the work, or shaping the work as a ritual can be helpful, but giving too much away beforehand breaks the tension. For now, I'm seeking a solution by conveying to the audience that the meaning of the work isn't found outside of themselves, in interpretation, analysis, or judgment, but within themselves, in their core, perception, and body. An ongoing investigation.

Possibilities for our humanity

While providing a clear-cut definition of Grey Space seems impossible, research into this emerging phenomenon nevertheless yields valuable information. Developments in the arts reveal something about the zeitgeist, about the way artists and audiences reflect on the changing world around them. If artists feel the need to engage with audiences differently, this may reflect the urgency they feel to reach their audiences and address specific themes. Moreover, understanding the mechanics of Grey Space also yields more concrete steps to be taken. Different types of work require an alternative marketing strategy, perhaps even new words appropriate for the new space. If we gain a clearer understanding of the mechanics and effects of Grey Space, we can apply more appropriate criteria to it; the conditions and regulations (performances, audience reach) imposed by funding agencies are currently based on more traditional spaces and do not necessarily align with this new space currently under development.

Grey Space is not a new kind of stage or museum gallery. It is an artistic approach that seeks intimacy, physicality, and co-creation. For me, the Grey Space is a necessary space. In a world that increasingly seems to think in black-and-white dichotomies, the grey offers the opportunity to embrace complexity and question established paths. That's partly why I keep seeking this territory. Because I believe that precisely there, in the indeterminacy, valuable discoveries can be made, both by me, as a creator in, among other things, my relationship to the artistry, and by the visitor, in relation to themselves and the world around them.

Perhaps that, for me, is the greatest value of the Grey Space: it reminds us that art is not a luxury product to be admired from afar, but a means to re-experience and question our relationship to the world and to each other. Between the black and white, a grey area opens up that is anything but colorless – a space brimming with new possibilities for exploring our humanity.