



Press Announcement: 15.07.2025

SHIVANI GOWDA

THE DEPARTMENT OF DESTRUCTION

Exhibition: 06.09.2025 — 07.12.2025

Opening: 06.09.2025, 19:00 hrs.

Location: West Den Haag in the former American Embassy, Lange Voorhout 102, The Hague

With The Department of Destruction, West Den Haag detonates the very idea of a passive exhibition. This part-theatre, part-bureaucratic séance performance is a hybrid, site-responsive intervention that stages a feverish investigation into a cultural institution on the edge of dissolution. Set within the charged architecture of the former American Embassy, it questions the fate of art spaces under administrative pressure and 'economic progress'.

Two officials arrive to determine West's future: Saulė Petreikytė plays a conflicted Middle Manager, while Isma Bloom takes on the role of an opportunistic Harbinger. Should West remain autonomous, be absorbed into the state's cultural machinery, or be shut down entirely? What begins as a Socratic dialogue quickly spirals out of control. The elusive Memorialist, portrayed by Yorrick van der Ouw, has disappeared, leaving behind a ransacked office and unresolved findings that haunt the building like a bureaucratic ghost.

On the ground floor, the audience is pulled into the thick of this bureaucratic showdown. Policy manuals become shields, missing documents become weapons, and the dialogue devolves into a battle of stalled procedure and unresolved logic. As contradictions pile up, deeper questions emerge: when do mechanisms meant to protect culture begin to dismantle it? Who decides what art is worth saving? And who profits when it is declared obsolete? Downstairs, the tone shifts. In dilapidated surveillance rooms once rumoured to house CIA offices, the Memorialist reappears as a spectral presence. No longer just missing, he becomes a figure of quiet reckoning, offering reflection on failure, complicity, and the unfinished business of institutions. On days without performance, a video installation takes over, pushing the satire further and offering insight into the department's origins, purpose, and internal contradictions.

Born from frustration with systems that both nurture and devour artistic labour, this performance remixes research, satire and lived experience into an indictment of institutional death and bureaucratic absurdity. Its characters are composites of makers, administrators, educators and bystanders who have shaped the artist's own uneasy passage through such spaces.

Rather than resolve West's fate, The Department of Destruction invites audiences to dwell in ambiguity, where procedure becomes performance and audits reveal the private cost of sustaining art in a world eager to discard it. The work refuses to offer its audience easy answers. Instead it asks them to sit with the discomfort, to witness the quiet violence of decisions made behind closed doors, and to consider how readily art, and those who make it, can be pushed off the ledger when the bottom line demands it.

Shivani Gowda (b. 2000) is a writer, first and foremost. She is in an absurd situation where she does not understand art nor its value, yet she stands amidst it and holds on to it fiercely. Born in the South of India and raised in the bureaucratic sprawl of the UAE, Gowda grew up navigating class difference, linguistic fragmentation, and the quiet violence of censorship. She studied Fine Art at the University of the Arts London and graduated from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. This is her first public exhibition.

The Department of Destruction is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to institutions or events is purely coincidental.

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For more information, please contact us: info@westdenhaag.nl or +31(0)70.3925359

The program of West is made possible by the Municipality of The Hague and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

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