



## **Heritage Practices Dissected**

Programme for the Cultural Heritage professorship 2012-2015  
Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam School of the Arts  
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We conceived this programme after a 100-day period of orientation, directly following our appointments in August 2011, during which we participated in many conversations and discussions, inside and outside the walls of the Reinwardt Academy. A draft version was discussed in the Academy's Advisory Committee at the end of the year and subsequently with all the tutors and an international visitation committee of the AHK professorships and research groups.

### 1. Task

The Cultural Heritage professorship is one of the eight such bodies of the Amsterdam School of the Arts (AHK). In 2006, the AHK created this professorship in order to react to current developments within the broad field of heritage with improvements to the Reinwardt Academy curriculum. The programme for the period 2012-2015 is still based on this assignment, which was implemented during the first five years with research into a unifying heritage theory and into local orientations of heritage institutions. On the one hand, we now diverge from it by no longer focusing on an integral or integrated heritage theory; on the other, we follow it by explicitly focusing on the social aspects of heritage.

The professorship is also intended to contribute to strengthening the position of the Reinwardt Academy as an international knowledge centre.

The third task of the professorship is its contribution to improving the research skills of students and tutors. Raising research to a higher level is a spearhead of the general AHK policy and in particular of the policy of the Reinwardt Academy.

### Coherence

We see those three tasks as interrelated. The programme is based on the conviction that heritage professionals must be able to reflect on current developments in the field critically, in other words on the basis of a fundamentally inquiring attitude.

That reflection is necessary in order to be able to practically operate in a distinctive and responsible way in the arena of selecting, managing and presenting heritage. After all, that arena is continually being influenced, if not shaped, by political, economic, social, ideological, emancipatory and identity issues.

The professorship wants to play a key role in providing theoretical reflection on processes of 'heritagisation' and other such developments in the field of heritage. We attach equal importance to the awareness that heritage professionals can not only (help to) reproduce existing meanings and significances, and fixate any desirable ones and vice versa, but can also help to create new meanings. In many respects, heritage institutions are generators of culture, with heritage professionals acting as heritage brokers and creators.

### Concept of heritage

We conceive of heritage not as a given, but as a particular property that is created within specific social contexts, and that can be assigned to every possible kind of object, ensemble and practice. Objects, buildings, texts, performances and traditions that are cherished as heritage by a group of people are charged with meanings and evoke all kinds of memories of a particular place or time. At the same time they also inform both places and periods.

Heritage can be deployed politically, socially and economically. That is in fact what happens in practice, precisely from the moment when it is labelled as heritage. Whether we like it or not, processes of heritagisation are always accompanied by both inclusion and exclusion. These refer to the traces themselves – selection, formation of a canon – and also to the actors. After all, heritage is a label that groups of people apply to bearers of meaning, and whenever a group is concerned we find both inclusion and exclusion.

### Current social issues

It is these social and processual dimensions of heritage and heritage practices that call for critical reflection. This involves current issues to which both the Academy curriculum's content and



organisation must respond. The field of heritage today is faced with drastic technological developments; with flows of people, commodities and knowledge that are felt to be unprecedentedly fast and intensive; and with the related precarious longing for anchor points and limits. This craving sometimes assumes extreme forms of preoccupation with questions of identity. Another issue has come up recently which may be historically unique: the question of whether and how heritage institutions can survive the substantial cuts in public spending that have been announced in the country, a sharply declining public confidence in the arts and culture, and probably also an unprecedented economic crisis. Third, the relations between government, citizens and private enterprise in the field of heritage are changing fundamentally. The classic notion that it is the state's duty to act in a delegated and expert capacity as steward of important public goods is being replaced by different allocations of responsibilities. That calls for both new positionings and new competencies of heritage institutions and professionals.

In this context the professorship wants its research to target not so much heritage itself as heritage practices and the way in which today's and tomorrow's heritage professionals and creators must, can and are willing to respond in a meaningful way to changes in society in general and to those in the field of heritage in particular.

The fields of attention enumerated above combine to form a social aspect of heritage that we want to explore in our research programme.

## 2. Objective and questions

The research agenda of the group is intended to contribute to the development of a meta-level toolbox for the analysis of the practices of heritage institutions. We expect a toolbox of this kind to enable us to better reflect on coherent choices to be made both in the selection, conservation, management and making accessible of collections, and in presentation, education and contacts with stakeholders and outreach.

The ever expanding range of heritage sectors that the Reinwardt Academy covers (collections, built monuments, archaeology, archives, intangible heritage, landscape and science communication) is characterised by a diversity of paradigms. Each of these sectors has a constellation of its own with regard to provenance, legislation, academic roots, systems of evaluation and selection, training requirements, quality and ethics. Insight into and debate on those aspects can contribute to a more focused positioning of the Reinwardt Academy.

If students from the Reinwardt Academy are later to be able to maintain a position in the insecure field of heritage, they must be able to reflect systematically on their own activities as heritage professionals. We therefore only regard our mission as successful if the toolbox to be developed also finds its way into the courses given at the Academy and if our programme can be shown to have contributed to the training of students at the Reinwardt Academy who as professionals not only act but also see themselves acting.

The research questions that we raise touch on two fields: relevance and perception.

### 2.1 Relevance

To analyse the ways in which heritage institutions seek relevance, we start from three interrelated questions. How do heritage institutions react to developments in society? What were the intentions, unconscious or not, of the actors involved in selecting, safeguarding and presenting? And how did this change not only the stories that these institutions or the acquired collections tell, but eventually also the very institutions themselves?

#### **a. How do heritage institutions cope with identity politics?**

Some heritage institutions are trying to find radically new ways of responding to questions of identity and changes in society, among other things as a result of large-scale processes of migration (of people, commodities and knowledge). We want to investigate exactly how they do that, why they sometimes fail to do it, and what the implications of that search – or of its absence – are. How do heritage institutions deal with traditional oppositions such as popular/élite, high/low culture, Western/non-Western, self/other, local/global? Sometimes a deliberate attempt is made to escape from the traditional categories, for instance by reverting to notions like superdiversity (Imagine IC, Kosmopolis Rotterdam, Rotterdam Museum), transnational relations (Tropenmuseum Amsterdam), or lifestyle groups (Maritime Museum, Open Air Museum Arnhem).

Another trend is for historical, ethnographic and folk museums to opt for strictly thematic presentations. They centre on universal practices or traditional anthropological themes such as



celebration and commemoration, death and burial, connected with practices or rituals. Sometimes they fall back on structuralist theories, but more commonly they are seen to operate within a more postmodern perspective.

A trend seen in practically all heritage institutions is the attempt to stimulate all the senses and emotions of the visitors. This trend, that is reflected in a shift from object-related presentations to experience, is accompanied by a new interest in intangible heritage. Festivals, rituals, crafts, stories and songs: they all count. Folk museums but also associations sometimes have long traditions of collecting and performing folk culture through fieldwork, living history, re-enactments and first-person interpretations.

Now that the Netherlands too has acceded to international treaties on intangible heritage and is expected to evaluate, select and safeguard in that field, new questions arise. How does one handle living practices in the museum? How does one deal with nostalgia for an imagined past (the invention of tradition)? Where is one to tackle oversimplified world views, with all too clear-cut images of group cultures? Should museums and Reinwardt Academy students raise these issues for discussion, or should they try to satisfy these demands with, for example, an experience that appeals to all five senses?

The Reinwardt professorship will scrutinise, analyse and discuss the different approaches of heritage institutions to these issues. We want to do so with tutors, students and others by means of systematic research on written and digital resources and by working visits, but particularly also by entering into conversation with people from the field. We want to explicitly invite them to participate in our research by jointly reflecting on the above questions in different platforms and meetings (see 3 below).

#### **b. What are the heritage creators' own contributions?**

Trying to grasp the everyday choices in the field of heritage and the factors that play a role in them, one immediately faces the question of intentions, especially those of the creators of heritage themselves. What are the criteria by which objects and collections were and are being selected (immovable) or collected (movable)? What intentional or unintentional purposes lay or lie behind the decisions that safeguarders of monuments, conservators, archivists and presenters have taken or are taking? In order to gain insight into the primary process of heritage practice, we want to focus on charting the most important factors that play a role in the formation and presentation of a collection, both now and in the past. Studies like those of Ad de Jong on the discovery and representation of folk traditions in the Netherlands between 1815 and 1940 (*De dirigenten van de herinnering*), and Susan Legêne's study of the cultural traces of the colonial experience (*Spiegelreflex*), illustrate the importance of research on the context of acquisition, as well as on the passions and fascinations of conservators and others involved in bringing objects into the depot. Without an understanding of the Zeitgeist, much of the heritage status quo remains unclear, collections become orphaned, and our discussions with 'the predecessors' come to a halt.

This line of research is in tune with a long-term research project of the Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency aimed at the development of a toolbox for the evaluation of heritage. Both professors have been directly or indirectly involved in it, and will also make a specific contribution to it.

**c. How do heritage institutions change by all this?** The selection of what is deemed worthy for transmission has its own temporal dimensions. What one generation appreciates may be rejected by a later one, and vice versa. Previous heritage values are not automatically appreciated. We want to help our students become aware of shifts of this kind. This is where that feeling for the Zeitgeist, for past intentions, new reception frameworks and social repositioning becomes indispensable. However, it is not only the heritage choices that are to be understood in the context of their times; the role of the very institutions themselves is permanently in flux, just like those of governments, for instance in the extent to which they accept heritage responsibility. A fine example is the current re-assessment of governance in museums. Audiences increasingly evolve from viewers to participants (see Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, and Arnoud Odding, *Het disruptieve museum*). The same can be said even of entire branches, as in the field of archives (records continuum) and monuments (community archaeology).

Giving society, or groups in it, a position in the process of assigning meaning and thus also in the more technical aspects such as evaluation and selection at an early stage may reveal new horizons. In that connection doctoral research is being supervised on the governance of science centres and museums. Here, the increased attention to intangible heritage takes on a special significance. Also



cherishing a tradition could well be a fundamentally different, grassroots practice from cherishing a collection of objects, which is much more often heavily institutionalised.

## **2.2 Perception of heritage performance**

A particular form of dealing with exhibitions is exhibition direction. This integral form of spatial communications design has been developed over two decades at the Reinwardt Academy and can count on international appreciation. A necessary complement that is still lacking is the analysis of its results in terms of professional exhibition criticism, by analogy with art, theatre and film criticism. The question of how to interpret spatial communication without borrowing terms from other disciplines is certainly underdeveloped. We are thinking of keying in with fields of attention that are important in other parts of the Amsterdam School of the Arts: art and architecture criticism and film reviewing. We would like to investigate this theme in discussion with Reinwardt Academy lecturers who have put this item equally high on the agenda and have already experimented with it, with the other professorships and research groups of the Amsterdam School of the Arts, and with branch organisations of professional intermediaries such as the Netherlands Association of Journalists (NVJ). We are also orientating ourselves towards international experiences with actor-network theory (Latour) and more practically those in the field of exhibition analysis and critique, as well as earlier exploration by the Reinwardt Academy of the system of Generic Learning Outcomes that has been developed in England, in which the effect of visits to museums and exhibitions is interpreted in terms of several parameters. For the Netherlands there are many new borders to be explored and charted. Our ambition is to develop a handbook *On Exhibiting* along the lines of Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977), to substantially raise the level of reflection in this area at our own academy, and thereby to offer more coherence between and focus on different subdisciplines within it.

## **3. Forms of cooperation**

We see the development of a toolbox for the analysis of heritage practices outlined above as a process of cooperation in which (former) students, (guest) members of staff, and primary relations of the Academy take part. We intend to make use of initiatives across the full breadth of the institution to strengthen the network of relations of the Reinwardt Academy. The recently started digital Reinwardt Community and the Heritage Arena are already examples of that. The research group intends to launch initiatives that can contribute to a strengthening and deepening of contacts both at the level of academic and higher professional education in the Netherlands and at the international level. The international networks in which the Reinwardt Academy has grown and prospered since its foundation 35 years ago are of great importance for the profile and quality of the processes that go on inside the Academy. Just as the city and the field of heritage form the virtual learning environment of the students, so too the contacts with researchers and practitioners, fellow institutions, congresses, workshops, professional organisations (ICOM) and the distant biotopes of many of our tutors form the intellectual matrix within which our Academy is nourished and positioned in a strong reciprocity of give and take. The International Master Programme in Museology is the consequence of and the condition for this.

Below we offer a survey of the various platforms for the elaboration of our programme. Some of them fall under the shared responsibility of the Academy's director and the professors, others fall entirely under the responsibility of the professors.

### **3.1. Research group**

A Research group generally consists of the professor(s) and a number of other researchers, which also holds for our situation. A research group was formed in February 2012 including not only a number of lecturers from the Reinwardt Academy but also several PhD researchers from elsewhere. The research group will meet at least five times a year to share experiences on issues that emerge from the Reinwardt research programme. Once a year the group is extended to an international public in the form of a conference, if possible in cooperation with other (university or higher professional education) heritage training or research institutes.

### **3.2. Heritage Arenas**

The responsibility for the monthly open debate podium Heritage Arena rests with the director of the Reinwardt Academy and the professors. Students will be involved in the Arenas more than in the past. An international, English-language Arena will be organised at least twice a year in which the Master students will also play a prominent role. The Arenas are the perfect opportunity for students to acquire skills in conversing and debating current issues in heritage practice, as well as generating and



rebutting contrasting views. After the demise of the Netherlands Institute for Heritage, Erfgoed Nederland, the debating evenings will be organised with a variety of partners from 2012 on. The director and professors will be assisted by a programme advisory council.

### 3.3. Reinwardt Memorial Lecture

Another activity that falls under the joint responsibility of the professors and the Academy director is the organisation and publication of the annual Reinwardt Memorial Lecture close to the birthday of Caspar Reinwardt (3 June 1773). The aim is to visibly ally prominent international players with the Academy. The research fellows are keen to widen the effect in the sense of organising master classes and making use of the *artist in residence* facility made available by the Amsterdam School of the Arts.

### 3.4. The Bachelor curriculum

The Reinwardt Academy has undergone a turbulent development in recent years. Far-reaching changes were the drastic extension of the field targeted by the Bachelor curriculum, from mainly museums to the whole bandwidth of heritage; the explosive growth of the number of students, from 60 to 180 first-year students; and the introduction of competence-orientated teaching. We would like to assess the effects of these changes and join in thinking about ways of responding to them. We shall continue to do so as much as possible in the light of current developments in the field.

One specific result towards which we want to work jointly with the lecturers is the compilation and publication of a corpus of recognised knowledge in the main fields covered by the Reinwardt Academy. We want to do so in a sustainable form for the benefit of our own and other students, tutors, and a market of potentially interested parties. We have in mind five compilations whose contents will be decided in consultation with colleagues and will be able to count on a consensus that transcends disciplinary boundaries. They must cover at least the following areas:

- heritage theories
- digital heritage
- material, preservation and management
- project management
- exhibition direction
- legislation and regulations
- public

We also intend to work with the programme council to find ways of introducing themes from the programme presented here in the bachelor curriculum. After all, the Reinwardt Academy wants to achieve more coherence, focus and depth in the curriculum. A first step in this direction has already been taken by connecting research training in the B.A. programme with the research of the professorship. Students are encouraged to focus their fourth-year research on:

- a. ways in which heritage institutions respond to identity issues
- b. factors that play a role in the formation of collections, both now and in the past
- c. public participation in heritage institutions (and a rethinking of public governance)
- d. perception of heritage performance (Generic Learning Outcomes, etc.).

The professors will be deployed for this purpose in the B.A. teaching programme with a view to the improvement of research skills.

### 3.5. Master of Museology Programme

Since 1996 the Reinwardt Academy has had an International Master's Degree Programme in Museology. The final responsibility for this programme rests with Hester Dibbits.

Parts of the programme will be renewed with the explicit attention of fitting in with the research programme. A number of experimental clinics have already been started. Museums and other heritage institutions put questions to the master students and discuss possible solutions with them. The clinics are directly related to the questions raised above. Examples are workshops with Imagine IC regarding making their collection accessible, and with the Rotterdam Museum on a project targeting informal health care. Themes for subsequent clinics might include migration in the National Open Air Museum, the new permanent exhibition in the Finnish Alvar Aalto Museum, or the selection of the legacy of the photographer of ordinary people Dolf Toussaint.

## 4. Dimensions



The ambition expressed here has to fit within the limits of what is possible. On paper they are limited. Riemer Knoop has an agreement with the Reinwardt Academy for 0.3 full time equivalents (FTE) for the professorship. Hester Dibbits has an appointment for 0.75 FTE, of which 0.3 for the professorship and the rest for running the International Master of Museology Programme and membership of the Reinwardt's Management Team. Lecturers of the academy participate in the research group on temporary and parttime basis."

Although the professorship programme is set up as a cooperative project, the final responsibility rests with us. Asked what we want to look back on in four years' time, we would like to repeat our ambition to make a substantial contribution to the improvement of teaching at the Reinwardt Academy. What is at stake? Focus, inspiration, clarification, coherence, and moving in sync with the field. We may be held accountable for that. Since we also know how important it is to report on the proposed joint projects in both spoken and written form, we may also be judged in the light of a number of publications and lectures for the broad heritage field and other interested parties. The five publications mentioned above have already been planned: the first two will be issued in 2013, the next two in 2014, and the last in 2015.

## 5. Conclusion

The theme of the professorship, cultural heritage, is volatile. It can be anything, but whatever it may be is always exposed to every possible imaginable and unimaginable, practical and ideal claim and expectation. In a certain sense, the same can be said of the institutional environment with which we interact, a recently renewed and rapidly expanding faculty of the Amsterdam School of the Arts. But at the same time high demands are made on transparency, effectiveness and the added value of the teaching. Moreover, society demands of higher education a permanent top quality and employability, while the field demands professionalism and energy. The wider framework for all these moving targets, a sustainable welfare state with permanent institutions and reassuring prospects, no longer seems to be very securely anchored either.

In this report we have outlined a research project for the benefit of a society that feels insecure. We consider it appropriate, instead of coming up with certainties, to take part in a committed way in multifarious explorations, and to inspire students, tutors and partners to do the same.

Hester Dibbits and Riemer Knoop - *15 February 2012*