Nick Shepherd and Christian Ernsten were joined by dance animateur Nicola Visser in leading the first winter school of the Master of Museology degree at the Reinwardt Academy. The winter school took place in collaboration with Artis Amsterdam Royal Zoo. Artis was one of the earliest museums of Amsterdam. In the past, it also held about 12,000 objects from Africa, Oceania, and Asia. Currently, it consists of a designed park, a collection of living animals, plants, and trees, a “dead” natural history collection (stuffed animals, geology, shells, skeletons), collections of art, history, and ethnography, and 28 national monuments. The issue at stake during the winter school concerned the idea of a zoo in the Anthropocene. How do we understand zoos in general, and Artis Zoo in particular, in an epoch in which human impact on the earth and its eco-systems is the main force to be reckoned with? How do zoos respond to the challenges of biodiversity and climate change? What should a zoo of and for the Anthropocene look like? Students worked through the ideas at the heart of the “zoo walk” via embodied research methods, as a way of imagining the zoo’s alternative futures in the Anthropocene.
The Anthropocene. Have you heard of it? If not, you will very soon. This term marks the beginning of our way as humans, or more specifically the moment when mankind began to reign supreme over environmental forces and to shape the natural world. It is easy to take for granted the idea of natural climate-shaping forces: meteors, volcanic eruptions, or hurricanes. But what was once seen as nature’s raw and unrelenting power will soon be easily traced to our own actions, in relation to climate change, natural conservation, or resource depletion.

While the flux of global change are usually computer-generated statistics of sea-level rise, or metropolitan cities shrinking into desert wastelands, we must ask what will become of the animals in the Anthropocene. Or better yet, what of the zoo? Once cultural centers of entertainment or places to encounter “the other”, zoos face a new challenge of remaining relevant, while reconnecting not only the ethical conditions involved, but the socio-historical and post-colonial aspects as well.

The graduate students at the Reinwardt Academy chose to tackle this topic in winter 2018 at Artis Zoo in the center of Amsterdam. This was done through a week of workshops involving self-guided tours through Artis, anthropographic and movement-based workshops, and literature reviews from the Union of Concerned Scientists and John Berger, as well as introductions into the concept of the Anthropocene.

One presentation that stood out was by a group of students whose aim was to demonstrate how “the gaze” within the zoo. In their proposal they also placed an emphasis on “blind spots”. To achieve this, they would make use of architectural elements to encourage the visitor to re-navigate the zoo, as well as disrupt their own stance and aesthetic of power. The observer becomes the observed and has to deal with the uncomfortable position they are placed in when they find an area in the zoo, via pre-designated mapping, where they are watched, or cannot view any life at all. The group claimed this was a way to connect with the animals in a different manner. In their role as animals, their docility prevents them from living a life as they would in a natural environment.

This is a very pervasive field, from science to literature. It boils back to even the subatomic “observer theory”, according to which particles behave differently when they are observed. Rogers reminds us that in his dissertation of the “public” and “private” self. Do animals have such a thing? Should they be excluded? After all, there are even pre-school children that do not understand people as “wrong” and non-Englished, almost animal-like. We, as well, learn every day of new developements in science that touch on the ability of advanced cognition and empathy response among animals. As our social consciousness rises, we can no longer neglect these unseen elements waiting at the edges of our reality. The universal impact of climate change, the dying of species and livelihood, and the global migrations crisis will not only affect our lives but also change forever the fundamental fiber of our societies and our global advancement.

In a changing world of rapid developments and global neo-liberal policies, empathy needs to be at the forefront of our minds and our global advancement. So desperately needing connection, one must not neglect those unseen elements waiting at the edges of our reality.
My family is from the west of Germany. I never experienced this as clearly as during one day in Berlin. Germany was for me most of the time was GDR. The GDR was something that emanated from its history books, “Ampelmännchen”, and German movies such as “Die Ratten” or “The Lives of Others”. When I asked my grandma if she had ever been to the GDR, her answer was a clear no: “You didn't just go there. No one went there.” One of my best friends is from Dresden; she was born two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and her birth certificate still reads “German Democratic Republic”. I was born in a country another world— in time and space.

Heike fig. 3: View of the Kennedy-Haus, the headquarters of the GDR’s secret police (Stasi), Berlin, 1990. Photograph: Heike Ströbele.

The same night, I asked my grandma if she had ever been to the GDR and she had seen the outer structure, our constructed reality, but never anything more. “I never heard her” she said, “I never heard her.”

In one of my favorite German books, the author reflect: “Never will I forget that moment. I had invented something that was more like an aura than a tool. My hand had formed an unexpected knot and dragged it back through the depths of my memory. It was an incredible, thrilling revelation: inventing is remembering.”

I am wondering why the building makes you feel like you have never been there before. It feels like falling back into the past, like moving in time and space. We talked about their guitar and concrete. It felt like falling back into the past, like moving in time and space.

Concrete under construction – noise, a grey sky, and nothing to tell. The whole space we are walking on looks like a desert after the last snow has been blown away. Someone once put a quiet music box hidden in the storage room and never took it back out, forgot it here right behind the pompous outer structure, Neptun fountain in its awkwardly exposed elegance.

The GDR building is a “sozialräumliche Objekt” – a social object. It is a social environment – of course, it is huge building. I saw myself now standing at the picture. But when you see me as the subject, you can see someone at the mirror, at the moment, at the moment, in the mirror.

One day, my grandma was sitting under the bridge next to the Alexanderplatz. They started talking to one after the huge GDR construction, “the Rathauspassage” – a guarded object. I was talking to (sitting on the drum) and a little cross – magician – behind the guy I was talking to (sitting on the drum) and right next to us, in the left, a little cross that indicated “28 Bäume” – steps. This little concert in the main square under the bridge is my Utopia. It was a Russian song.

The Stasi system, the GDR’s secret police, the “Sozialräume” – the social environment, is a huge building. I saw myself now standing at the picture. But when you see me as the subject, you can see someone at the mirror, at the moment, in the mirror.

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I am wondering why the building makes you feel like you have never been there before. It feels like falling back into the past, like moving in time and space.
Accessibility – “A lowering price of the object [is not] necessarily a negative thing, as it can also mean greater accessibility, and not just devaluation” (Buma Antink Hove Dean). When the visitor-object is in the antique shop, it is halfway between everyday object (accessible) and a sacred museum object (inaccessible). Being in the antique shop gives it a certain status, but at the same time it remains accessible, for trade and purchases. Its future is still undefined, as it may be reinserted in the dynamics of use or end up in a museum collection.

A personal and preliminary glossary – Marina Piquet Fernandes

Curator – The curator's work seems to approach at some points collage-making: as it also the action of transforming pre-existent fragments into a new and original context, producing new meaning with this displacement. College (like the first cut collage) can be potent and revolutionary, but other collage actions (like curation in architecture college, where buildings and objects were reenacted from parts from different faculties) often make the fragments lose their original meaning. Collage as a displacement-operation (in the same way a decompression-operation can make the original fragments gain more strength or lose strength in their new ensemble).

Duality – Apparently, the “wearing seminar” was supposed to engage simultaneously body and mind, in the same activity. At the end of the day, the impression was that it had highlight- ed the duality of these two different spheres, which we had experienced successively: body and mind, interior and exterior, domestic and wild, culture and nature. What would an intermediate experience be like? What kind of intermediate spaces and activities effectively engage body and mind? Many people nowadays live in a series of interiors [...] (disconnected from each other). On foot everything stays connected. The same activity.

Food – I was supportive when I heard that the land reform movement has caused more hunger. People who have cultural knowledge are aware of the heritage meanings or inscriptions holding monologues and pursuing miserable rituals, with experts and local authorities. Nature is also a political thing. People who own the land try to take over their kitchen knife to politics. People who have cultural knowledge are aware of the heritage meanings or inscriptions holding monologues and pursuing miserable rituals, with experts and local authorities.

Hybrid – The painter's house was a domestic space but also a cultural space and, hence, that a commercial space (as it is where he sells his work). The idea of “hybrid” is often negatively associated with the law of “parity”. Just this “contamination” into generates more complex and interesting spaces. These old distinctions and programmatic distinctions can be set aside sometimes in favor of the enrichment of certain experiences.

Interaction – The Groninger Museum is concerned with being an opinion-forming and persuasive place, a place for exchange and conversation: for interaction. Many times we think about interaction in museums as bottom, light, and opening doors, but the interaction can be mental or social. Most people come to museums in groups, but the act of relating meanings is not frequently seen as a collective and social activity.

Intention – How to plan a museum and identify strategy, that is to say a spontaneous process, without falling into “image-making” and other marketing strategies?

Materialization – The Open Air Museum: the city (as a) museum. When the urban space itself becomes a museum, then urban cultural heritage becomes a spectacle for tourism and nature which is excluded from the dynamics of cultural life.

Ruins – “This is a country without ruins.” Could we also understand the state of ruins as a construction as being more related to the absence of use and of people than merely to the state of material conservation. What are those other kinds of ruins?

Taste – Being surprised by the popular atmospheres of the Groninger Museum, in contrast to white-cube museums, was an exercise in getting off my personal tastes and preferences, of aesthetic judgments. Postmodern architecture as a form of communication, giving new meaning for old clichés. “You don’t need to like something to learn from it”, as Wiel Arets once said.

Usability – “The Mapping Slavery” project aims to “make traces visible” and to relate visibility and slavery in the region. A highlight was that it evidenced wealth on an important kind of heritage, generally not analyzed in these terms. Telling a story is important, but who is going to tell the story, why, and how? In the way the story was told, the above remained as abstract (and unlinked) as they were when presented in the old pictures we saw. They did not seem to have a name, a story, a past, a future. Where did they live? Where did they come from? Are these descendants in the city? Was the urban space shaped or transformed by their presence in its more direct way?

Master's students in museology at the Reinwardt Academy did a walking seminar in the province of Groningen, in the north of the Netherlands, as part of their introductory week. They captured their experiences, thoughts, ideas, traces, emotions, and memories as a first methodological exercise. Based on their notes, images, and sketches, they were asked to produce a personal autobiographic/subjective research document. In addition, they were asked for an initial reflection on what it means to work in the heritage field.

No title – Bonnie Chen

Day 1: Farmers and their land

I was surprised when I heard that the families of farmers own the land and take care of it, whether they are aware of the heritage meanings or not. In the article by Werner Krauss, “Scientists are still in favour of de-politicizing and administratively managing the countryside in the name of truth or reality. Public consultations and debates are too often nothing more than rentable rituals, with experts and local authorities holding monologues and pursuing their special interests.” Nature is also a political thing.

The land reform movement was carried out in the regions in China. The land of landowners was confiscated and allocated to landless peasants. In 1952, most of China’s land reform was basically completed: more than 90 million peasants got about 3.70 billion square meters of farm land for free. But in the same year, the party began to implement the collective land ownership system, purchasing and marketing policies and the agricultural cooper- ative movement made the results of the land reform cease to exist.

Land reform has completely eliminated the countryside, the local people in China since the Qin dynasty. Since the 1950s and 1960s, scholars estimate that the land reform movement has caused more than one million people to die, and many of the victims are well-educated people who have cultural knowledge and understand economic laws.
When we pointed at the wide fields and said, "That is the land that belonged to those farmer families," I could recall childhood memories back home when my father pointed at the split fields and said, "These are the lands that USED TO belong to us." So I cannot argue reasonably about whether it's the right thing to do, to keep the land in a natural or agriculural way, because I'm not even a Pocahontas on my own land anymore.

Day 2: Different views of history

One thing I have already been saying for years is that to enjoy something simply is a precious opportunity; once you lose it, it will never come back again. When I was watching Menkemaborg and the Open Air Museum in Warffum, I felt it in both places. Through the filter of four years of art history study experience, Menkemaborg looks like Peter de Hooch's paintings, and the houses from Warffum are like Van Gogh's. In a way, one of the most obvious differences between these two museums is the class. Especially when they are both intended to be kept in a still scene of past lives. And in the middle of the tour is Boerma's antique store, which surprisingly reminds people that not every part of history is being kept and waiting to be seen.

History is not only the past. History can be present. And maybe that's why the name "everyday life museum" seems to have a conflict but still keeps the balance.

Day 3: Museum Helmantel and the modern church

In Museum Helmantel, I wanted to buy a souvenir card, but no one was at the front desk. I saw the information on the card's back and found the webpage of Art Revisited, where they introduce Henk Helmantel as an artist who tried to analyze the medieval art style in northern Europe, and then the paper artworks by Miriam Geerts made my suspicion clearer. Unlike many modern art forms, artworks in church have their religious mission to send a message to people who come in; therefore they are more open to watching and understanding. On the other hand, believers' interpretations of the stories in the Bible keep changing; they're more or less influenced by post-modernism, abstract art theory, and the retro complex that became stronger after World War II. That is why art by Reynolds and Geerts is hanging on the wall of the church. People's version of religion sits on the same level with the arts, in a timeline that couldn't be far from the last century.

Churches, because of their role in society and community, just like small daily objects, will lose every meaning in everyday life then turn into so-called heritage when they are listed on the museum system.

Day 4: Slavery history in Holland

"I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life in an academic manner, so I'm forced to be an optimist. I'm forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive. But the Negro in this country, the future of negro in this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country. It is entirely up to the American people, and not representatives. It is entirely up to the American people, whether or not they are going to face and deal with slavery; and embrace the stranger they have maligned so long. What white people have to do is try to find out in their own hearts, why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place, because I'm not a nigger. I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it. [...] If I'm not the nigger here and you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you've got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that; whether or not it's able to ask that question."

I was tired and sleepy while in Groningen city. I caught clips of words like "not as heavy as in the US", "they contributed in the community, but on the other side they took money from slavery trade". And inside my head I heard the voice of James Baldwin on Boston public television: "The Negro and the American Promise"

Just because the situation here is not as obviously serious as in the Americas, it doesn't mean that it is reasonable not to fully face up to this topic, but only that it lies in varying degrees of ignorance. If we really want to face this history we have always been carrying, we should know that these accumulating problems will eventually break out, and we should not expect a gentle way to get through it; we should not dream that a final solution can completely fix it.

And I feel related to Baldwin more than to anything I heard or saw in the city walking, only because I take it as a case on how to learn from life a brutal problem to face.

"Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a flaw. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty." – Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray

To embrace history is to understand that the pasts are corrupt without being charming. When a writer like Oscar Wilde said the word "cultivated", the loathing moved along the air. And these cultivated people put their hope in it, desperately, but they see in things only beauty and nothing else. It is not only unrealistic: it means doing work with castrated facts.