

MIND THE GAP!



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INTRODUCTION

In this second volume of the Future Review by the University of Amsterdam's Heritage and Memory Studies programme, the 2026 cohort reflects on the new age of institutional heritage and memory practices. Through a collection of short essays, the students explore what makes heritage meaningful and how to make heritage feel alive and human.

While completing five-month internships in the field, many authors felt a disconnect between academia, lived experience, and the heritage industry. That is to say, we identified a gap between critical theory and practice—hence the title of this series, *Mind the Gap*.

Additionally, how we shape collective memory and the heritage that contains it becomes easily commodified and simplified to an extent where we lose the complexity of our cultural history and are left with only abstract glimpses of who we are searching for. In letters and reviews spanning four categories—Contested Heritage, Heritage Technologies, Art and the Archive, and Field Commentary—our authors share their outlook on these questions and dilemmas.

The resulting reflections can be destabilizing—but also, we hope, enlightening and even inspiring.

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM
HERITAGE & MEMORY STUDIES

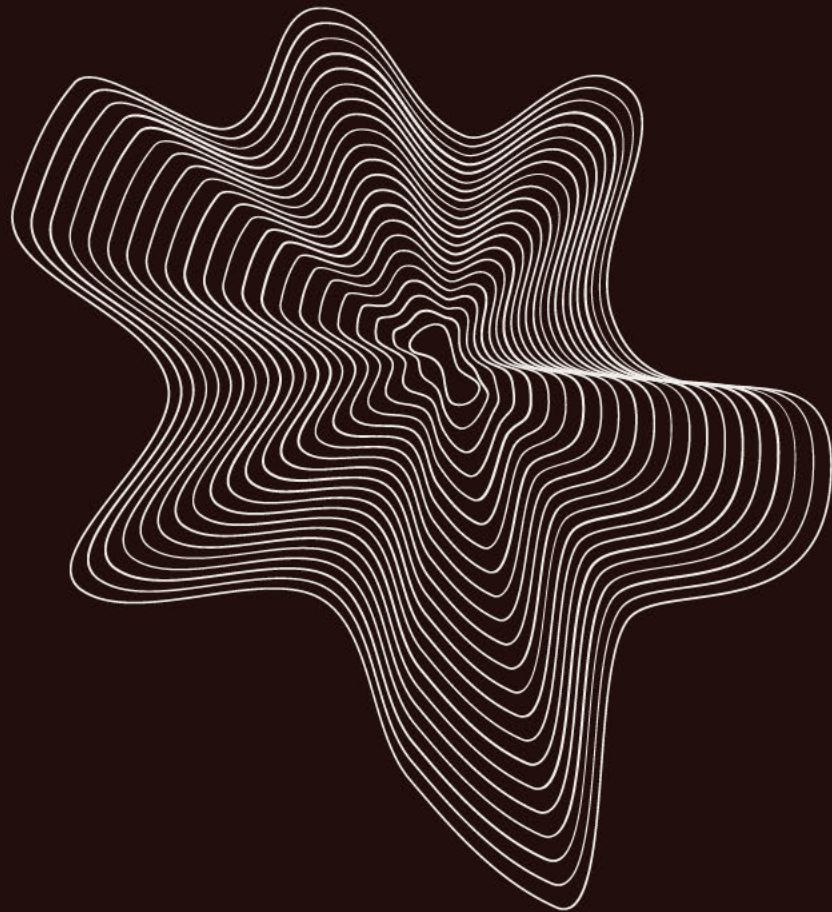


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01

CONTESTED HERITAGE

THE GAP IN THE FIELD: HOW TO BUILD A BRIDGE

Ashanti G.

“Disconnect,” “dissonance,” “tension,” “gap.” These were the words students in our cohort used to describe the field of heritage and memory after a few months of internship experience. They pointed to a distance between academia and practice, with academia in the lead. After months of placement at a wide range of institutions, there seems to be a consensus that a considerable gap exists between what we learn in the classroom and what we see at work.

This came as little surprise, since we had already read about the phenomenon. Laurajane Smith’s “Uses of Heritage” and her concept of “Authorised Heritage Discourse” (AHD) served as a starting point for many of our analyses. The institutionalised definition of heritage still very much exists and is rarely contested by colleagues within our placements. Some of us could point to colleagues who did hold a critical view of their own work, but several of us were struck

by how firmly the institutional level of the field remained aligned with interpretations of heritage we had already discredited in the classroom.

This raises a critical question: what does it mean to carry critical frameworks into spaces that were not built to hold them? Many of us found ourselves in a kind of double position: participating in the daily rhythms of institutional heritage work while simultaneously observing that work through a theoretical lens that rendered its assumptions visible. This is an uncomfortable space to occupy, requiring a kind of code-switching: engaging professionally and in good faith with colleagues and tasks, while privately maintaining a critical distance. Smith’s AHD is useful precisely because it explains why the gap feels so stubborn. It cannot be corrected by introducing better ideas alone,

since it is embedded in legal frameworks, institutional hierarchies, professional norms, and built infrastructure. It shapes what counts as expertise, who gets to speak with authority about heritage, and which sites are deemed worthy of protection. When we enter our placements, we do not enter a neutral space where theory and practice meet as equals; we enter a space already organised by a particular set of power relations. Theory does not simply illuminate practice here, it also makes visible how practice resists that illumination.



Even so, we have all found small sources of hope. Several of us identified colleagues who held more critical perspectives, people who found ways to introduce different questions, advocate for different approaches, or at least hold space for discomfort.

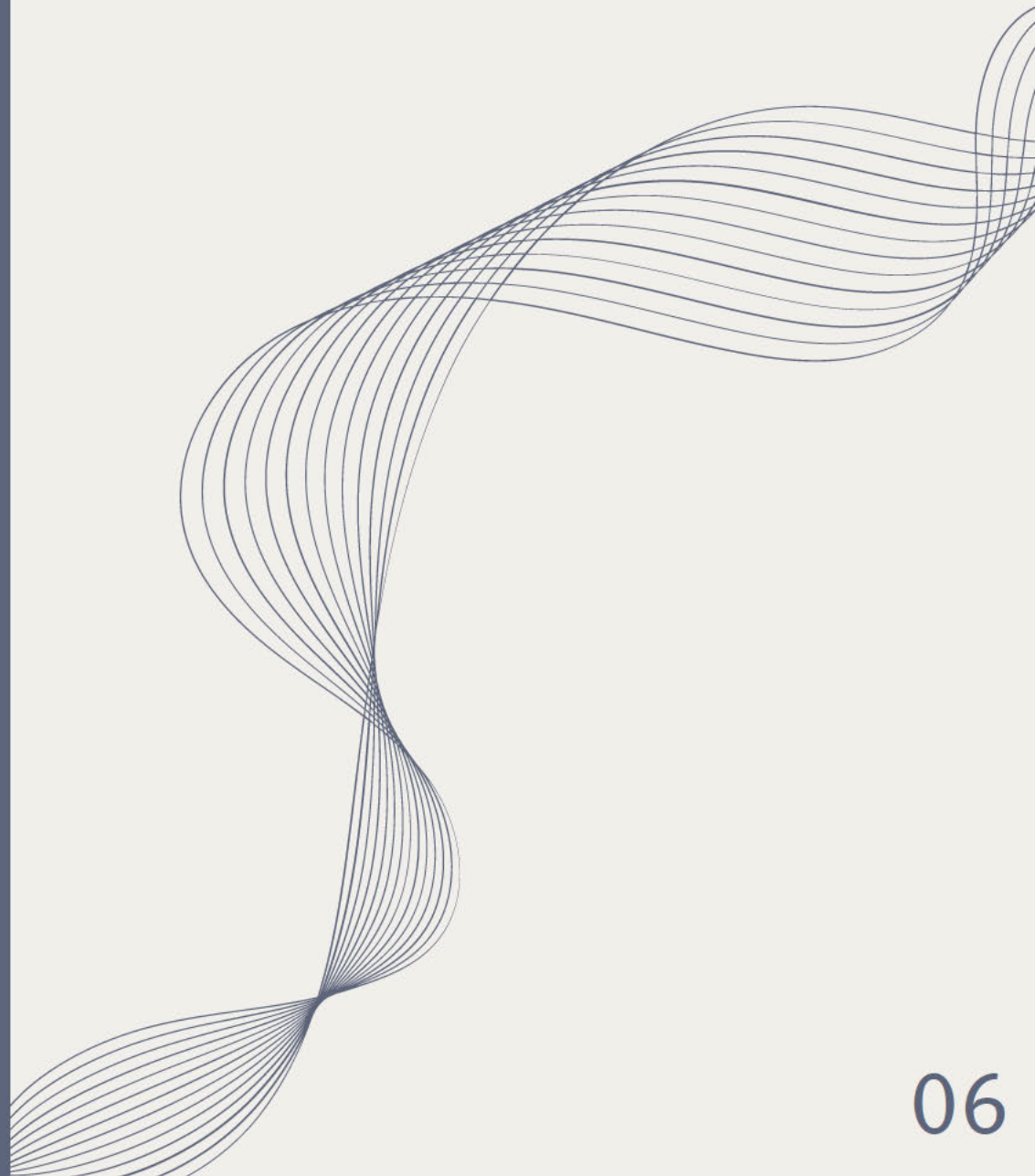
Their existence, and ours, suggests that the institutional and the critical are not entirely incompatible, and that change tends to happen through people rather than policy. Perhaps, through our internships and reflections like this one, we are developing the capacity to be those kinds of people: practitioners who can work within institutions without losing the critical vocabulary that lets us see clearly. In this sense, the dissonance we have described is not a problem to be resolved so much as a condition to be navigated. The gap between theory and practice may never fully close, and perhaps it should not: a field in which academic critique translated seamlessly into institutional transformation would have lost the productive tension that drives it forward. What our internships have begun to teach us is to become skilled at holding that tension.

Perhaps the more useful question is not how we fit into these institutions, but what exists alongside and beyond them. Not all of our placements were marked by the same institutional inertia. Some of us interned at

organisations oriented not toward the archive and the object, but toward building lasting relationships with communities on those communities' own terms. These examples stood out because they point toward a different model of heritage work: one that does not wait for institutional frameworks to catch up, but builds the practice it wants to see from the ground up, in collaboration with the people affected. This is where my cautious optimism lives: not in the hope that we will gradually reform the institutions we pass through, but in the recognition that other ways of doing this work already exist and already work. The gap feels smaller in these spaces, because the practice has been built with the commitments of the theory in mind.

I think we've proven that the change is also within ourselves: we leave our internships having seen both sides clearly. We have seen the weight of AHD and the cracks in it. We know what we might walk into, and what we are looking for. Personally, this is the most valuable thing I take with me moving forward.

What does it mean to carry critical frameworks into spaces that were not built to hold them?



AWARENESS OF DIFFICULT HERITAGE IN THE LOCAL NETHERLANDS

Claire v. D.

Heritage experts in the Netherlands need to broaden their knowledge on colonial heritage; a more culturally, politically and historically diverse and sensitive perspective on local heritage in the Netherlands is necessary to paint the full historical picture of spaces and objects that are open to the public. Recent developments in historical research on estates demonstrate some progress.

Heritage is and has been a much discussed topic in academics, with well-known researcher Laurajane Smith describing heritage as a “cultural and social process” and paving the way for more discussion.¹ Researchers have been tackling issues worldwide, zooming in on the history of colonialism, war and repression, and the consequent ill treatment of minority heritage. However, when it comes to practising and presenting Dutch local heritage, these topics are yet

to be discussed far more extensively. It is useful to closely watch recent developments on addressing difficult heritage in the Netherlands to understand the pace and manner in which this is advancing. The first thought within Dutch heritage organisations often goes to professionals such as art historians or archaeologists. However increasingly, the general ‘heritage expert’ is present within local and national governments, and advisory bodies. These experts no longer just deal with issues of monetary or aesthetic value of material objects. Thinking of heritage as diverse and as bottom-up practices also does no longer allow this quite superficial perspective on history to linger.² The strong presence of the FARO agreement within the Dutch heritage field is causing increased awareness on the diversity of heritage, heritage ownership and historical narrative.³



Photo via Wereldmuseum Amsterdam.

Within the Dutch academic world of humanities and social sciences, researchers have been working increasingly on changing the narrative of existing heritage practices. Dr. Jaswina Elahi, teaching at the University of Utrecht, has published the ‘Revision of Heritage,’ using knowledge from postcolonial communities to counter the dominant perspectives on heritage in the Netherlands.⁴

Elahi focuses on living heritage and the experiences of six heritage communities from three postcolonial groups; namely Hindustani-Surinamese, Javanese-Surinamese, and Chinese-Indonesian.⁵ An important result is how heritage within these communities is often practiced outside of formal institutions and inside of intimate daily life and together with family.

Notions of authenticity are not fixed, but are constantly renegotiated, and the communities feel there is a great lack of institutional recognition.⁶

Professor on colonial heritage at the VU Jos van Beurden has written a book on 'uncomfortable' heritage in the Netherlands, making this topic known to the field and the public as a relevant issue.⁷ This book gives an insight into issues of restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium, and is being sold in museums throughout the country.

However, these discussions are not only being highlighted within academics. Some organisations in the local heritage field have initiated research into difficult heritage themselves. A number of estates have begun researching the controversial parts of their history; figures who are linked to colonial activities and the resources used to build the estates and houses are investigated. A good example is a publication that Huis Doorn and Kasteel Amerongen have published together; this is named *The Kaiser's Colonial Worldview* and revolves around provenance research done on objects in the estates and the colonial mindset of Wilhelm II who was connected to the castles.⁸

Furthermore, Geldersch Landschap has also published writings on the colonial 'shadow' side of the castles in the province, to be found on their website.⁹ Like this, more estates are following in their footsteps.

Although there is still much work to do, the above-mentioned developments are positive and demonstrate willingness to change perspectives and historical narratives in different parts of the Netherlands. It is now important to continue pursuing this progress, and look much further into historical issues of oppression, money-extraction and looting in the context of Dutch material heritage on local levels to make way for a more inclusive perspective on heritage practices.



1. Laurajane Smith, "Introduction," in *Uses of Heritage*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 2.
2. John Schofield, *Who Needs Experts? Counter-mapping Cultural Heritage* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 1-3.
3. Wim Burggraaff, "Voor ons kan erfgoed alles zijn," in *het Faro-onderzoek Definities* (Amersfoort: Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, 2022): 1-4.
4. Jaswina Elahi, *Erfgoed herzien: Perspectieven op 'erfgoed' vanuit kennis en ervaringen van postkoloniale groepen* (Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2025).

5. Elahi, *Erfgoed Herzien*, 3.

6. Ibid, 4-6.

7. Jos van Beurden, *Ongemakkelijk erfgoed: Koloniale collecties en teruggave in de Lage Landen* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2021).

8. Britta Schilling, *The Kaiser's Colonial Worldview* (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2024).

9. Geldersch Landschap & Kasteelen, *Koloniaal Erfgoed*, <https://www.glk.nl/koloniaal-erfgoed>.



WHITE CUBE / LIMINAL SPACE

H. M. Lowe

When you imagine an art museum, what comes to mind? A specific place? One of the world's famous museums, perhaps the Louvre, the Met, the British Museum? Maybe you imagine not a specific location, but an archetype: a nonspecific yet universal image of a gallery with paintings hung on walls painted a mild, inoffensive color, usually white, with unobtrusive lighting and small blocks of explanatory text beside the artworks.

This archetype is commonly known in the field as the "white cube," a term coined by Irish-American art critic Brian O'Doherty in the 1970s. For O'Doherty, the White Cube was designed to remove any and all distractions from the art objects

that are the focus of the exhibition—even the visitor herself. In "Notes on the Gallery Space," O'Doherty wrote:

This eternity gives the gallery a limbolike status; one has to have died already to be there. Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion ... Here at last the spectator, oneself, is eliminated.¹

In the White Cube, only the art matters. When you enter the White Cube, you become a student to the museum's master. The White Cube supports this dynamic as a symbol of the museum's authority, objectivity, and unassailability. It is simultaneously eternal and timeless—a modern manifestation of the Ivory Tower.



Dannie Jing, 2018 (Unsplash).

Earlier this summer, seeking a reprieve from the heat wave then suffocating northwest Europe, I visited Amsterdam's H'ART Museum. Housed in the historic Amstelhof building, H'ART opened as a museum in 2009 as a satellite of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Inside its brick walls is the quintessential White Cube: white walls and gallery lighting, a state-of-the-art facility designed to house masterpieces from a collection

once founded by Catherine the Great. However, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the museum broke ties with the Hermitage, changed its name to H'ART, and entered into partnerships with international museums to present traveling exhibitions from Western Europe and North America. In a *New York Times* profile about its rebrand, general director Annabelle Birnie described the new H'ART as "a museum for museums."²

At the time of my visit, three shows were on view. In the north wing was a pair of exhibitions from the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), presented under the title *American Identities*: David Levinthal's photographs, which deconstruct American myths through dioramas made with children's toys, and activist posters from the Chicano Movement (*El Movimiento*) of the 1960s and '70s. The shows were exactly the kind of projects planned by the Smithsonian to commemorate the United States' 250th birthday—that is, before the current administration took a hatchet to arts funding and attacked the Smithsonian for what it termed "divisive, race-centered ideology" (i.e. having the audacity to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism in America).³ As I wandered through the galleries, it was striking to consider that the Smithsonian was only able to offer these critical views on American art and history without retribution outside of the nation's borders.

Exiting *American Identities* and crossing to the north wing of H'ART, the visitor then enters *Het Land van Hagelslag*: *Building a new world together*, an exhibition organized by the Congolese art collective CATPC.

CATPC, headquartered on a former Unilever plantation in D. R. Congo, specializes in subverting the White Cube archetype. On the "Post-Plantation" in Lusanga, they have erected their own White Cube: a multi-purpose exhibition, meeting, and education space by and for their community.⁴ At H'ART, *Het Land van Hagelslag* exhibited sculptures created by CATPC from the same edible materials that make up *hagelslag*, challenging the visitor to think about the supply chains and exploitative labor practices that enable us to enjoy a treat as simple as chocolate sprinkles.



This is in keeping with CATPC's goals, among them a challenge to museums, particularly in the Netherlands, to "move beyond symbolic gestures toward genuine repair with communities" who live and work on plantation land from which these museums and their founders once profited.⁵

The quintessential White Cube, as O'Doherty described it, is a vacuum: it eliminates all distractions from the artwork and conveys a sheen of authority and unassailability to the museums that utilize it. At H'ART, this archetype does the opposite. Here, the White Cube becomes a liminal space—a zone where the museum's identity and even the definition and purpose of a museum are actively being negotiated. Is a museum still a museum if it has no collection? What obligations, if any, do museums have to the governments that fund them? What do they owe to the people whose exploitation funded their endowments, collections, wealth? These questions, open-ended as they are, remain worthy of consideration. After all, nothing in our field is settled—not even the White Cube.

Sculptures by CATPC in *Het Land van Hagelslag*.
Photo by H. M. Lowe.

1. Brian O'Doherty, "Notes on the Gallery Space," in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica/San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1976/86): 15.

2. Nina Siegal, "After Cutting Ties With Russia, a Hermitage Museum Outpost Rebrands," *New York Times*, 26 June 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/26/arts/design/h-art-museum-hermitage-amsterdam.html>.

3. Executive Order 14253 of March 27, 2025, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," *Federal Register* 90:63 (2025).

4. CATPC (Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise), "White Cube" and "Post-Plantation," <https://catpc.org/>.

5. CATPC, "CATPC launches Toolkit," <https://catpc.org/>. See also CATPC, *Toolkit: Seven Easy Steps for Museums to Liberate the Plantations that Funded Them* (<https://whitecube.online/home/learn/toolkit/>).

CONTESTED DETESTED HERITAGE: THE BRIT ABROAD CASE STUDY

Anonymous

The Brit Abroad is both national and international, a person-concept created as much on the island as on the European mainland; belonging as much to Forster's Windy Corner as to Malaga's Calle Larios.¹ For this reason, the Brit Abroad is a peculiarly contested, and for some a detested heritage: difficult to define, slippery with subjectivity.

Across Britain, the Brit Abroad is a character assumed both proactively and reactively, cheerfully and defensively. He (he is most often a "he") is sweaty, sunburnt, monolingual, drunk. He is a national embarrassment (for Britons) or a public nuisance (for locals, councils, police services). He is targeted by Gemeente Amsterdam's digital campaigns "highlighting the risks associated with the excessive use of drugs and booze ... triggered when people in Britain [use search terms such as] stag party, cheap hotel or pub crawl."² He embodies and enacts a culture of British exceptionalism rooted in colonial inheritances of arrogance,

inflexibility, disinterestedness, superiority.

He is also simply who you are on holiday: relaxed, enjoying time away from normal routines. He is happy to be in Amsterdam, Alicante, Palma; but also, "Brits can find return flights to Amsterdam for £50."³ The UK's cost-of-living crisis rules out an expensive and dispiriting weekend in London or Newquay. He is a victim of class snobbery.

He has long been a figure of ridicule, but his identity — his gender, social background, monthly income — has not been consistent. Forster published *A Room with a View* in 1908, a novel that is preoccupied with love, truth, and ridiculing "[t]he narrowness and superficiality of the Anglo-Saxon tourist."⁴ Visiting Italy from Edwardian Britain was costly, but Reverend Eager, Miss Lavish, Charlotte Bartlett, and Cecil Vyse were able to fund it (or had family who would). They didn't have an allocated 25 days of annual leave per calendar year.

As represented by Forster, the insularity of an Edwardian Briton's travel abroad is consistent with the indifferent archetype today: at her hotel, Lucy Honeychurch looks

...at the two rows of English people who were sitting at the table; at the row of white bottles of water and red bottles of wine that ran between the English people; at the portraits of the late Queen and the late Poet Laureate that hung behind the English people, heavily framed; at the notice of the English church (Rev. Cuthbert Eager, M.A. Oxon.), that was the only other decoration of the wall.⁵



Martin Parr, *Benidorm, Spain*, 1997/2023.

The Brit Abroad is not defined by Britain alone, but constructed in testy partnership with neighbours. But that this symbol of moneyed Edwardian Britishness, obnoxious, foolish, and vain, has been manipulated into a snobbish caricature of inebriated, youthful messiness that omits the insidious Cecil Vyses that also plague Torremolinos, Crete, Faro? This belies a classist opportunism that is quintessentially British.

1. E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (Penguin Books, 1978). Lucy Honeychurch returns to her mother's home in Surrey from her tour of Italy. Calle Larios is one of Malaga's most well-known shopping streets.

2. Anna Holligan, "Amsterdam launches stay away ad campaign targeting young British men," *BBC News*, 29 March 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65107405>.

3. "Amsterdam launches stay away ad campaign."

4. *A Room with a View*, 81.

5. *A Room with a View*, 23.



02

HERITAGE TECHNOLOGIES

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN HERITAGE BECOMES SEARCHABLE?

Michalina S.

Digital archives are often seen as a neutral method of preservation, allowing for greater accessibility and democratic governance of archives. But what happens when heritage becomes searchable?

Through digital archives, the heritage sector was transformed, allowing people all over the world to access local collections and creating global collections. Making archives more democratic than ever before, they allow the user to access them without specific training, travel and collectors' restrictions.

However, the practice remains complex, intertwined with politics and digital limitations. Every archive, including the digital ones, is marked by its creators, institutions and users. They determine what should be included in the archive, as well as what should be excluded. Moreover, the algorithms reflect the learned patterns of visibility and establish what becomes searchable. This is where accessibility can become a double-edged sword.

Heritage, like data, is never neutral. The assumption of objectivity dismisses the decisions about collections, digitisation, and classification. This reflects the dominant voices and can easily fall into the perpetuation of oppressive systems. Digital archives and their searchability not only preserve the past but also actively shape our perception and understanding of heritage.

When heritage is transformed into a digital archive, it becomes data. Similarly, it shares the problems of data discussed by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein in *Data Feminism*.¹ They emphasise that data reflects existing systems of power rather than the objective truth. The same applies to archives.

With AI becoming an emerging force, this becomes even more complex. It is used to organise large collections, establish patterns and generate descriptions, overall improving the accessibility and contextualisation of heritage.

The issue lies in the way AI perpetuates the colonial, patriarchal and other dominant perspectives. The objectivity is therefore deceptive and does not reflect the interests of the minoritised communities.

Despite these substantial issues, digital archives remain a powerful tool. They challenge the notion that cultural knowledge is only accessible to some and increase the public interest. They create new research opportunities and allow dispersed communities to reconnect with their heritage.

When discussing digital archives, we should not only question whether heritage should be digitised, but also how we can expose these biases and issues of visibility. Acknowledging positionality and challenging these oppressive systems can transform digital practices to benefit their communities and truly democratise archives.

1. Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, *Data Feminism* (The MIT Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11805.001.0001>.

Heritage, like data, is never neutral.

Digital archives and their searchability not only preserve the past but also actively shape our perception and understanding of heritage.

THE BILLIONAIRE'S GRIP ON THE MEMORY OF THE STATE

Georgia V.

Tech billionaires like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel are increasingly promoting absurd ideas about the role of technology in humanity's development. According to them, technology is the key to bringing about the end of capitalism as quickly as possible. Instead of regulation and legislation imposed by a government, technological evolution can guide us as a society in the right direction. Humans would be more efficient and freer than ever. At least, that's what they promise us.

Meanwhile, colonial libertarian tech ideologies by billionaires such as Peter Thiel currently shape the American political landscape as his tech companies gain increasing control over government information systems. Through AI information software company Palantir, American defence and security forces become dependent on this tech's information processing tools. This text will explore how

these dynamics influence the institutional memory of the state.

Peter Thiel founded Palantir in 2003. In the aftermath of 9/11, he created the company to prevent terrorist attacks through data analysis. Inspired by ideas about fraud prediction software from his work at PayPal, he and co-founder Alex Carp believed that data could predict security risks.

Furthermore, Thiel's ideas on what role technology plays in the development of human society intersect with his understanding of Christian mythology and literature such as *Lord of the Rings*. His interpretations of these texts and the works of philosophers such as René Girard have greatly influenced Thiel's founding of tech companies like Palantir, which is being used by the Israeli army, American immigration police force ICE and European defense and police forces as well.

Left: Peter Thiel, CNN/Getty Images;
Elon Musk, CNBC.



According to Silvana Mandolessi (2023), media and AI software function as tools for shaping its user's experience of the past and present. Mandolessi uses the memory theory of *technogenetics* by Stiegler (2010), in which he refers to the growing intersection of human memory and technology. Stiegler views that human collective memory depends on the external storage systems that we have developed, which now also have become digital. The streamlined technological storage of knowledge has made information more accessible than ever, which shapes the daily experiences and understandings of users as we relate our own individual memory to the media that we engage with.

Stiegler sees that with the use of algorithms and artificial intelligence, information is provided according to its own logic. In this sense, algorithms become gatekeepers of information and the ways in which users are allowed to engage with it. Search engine software by companies like Google functions as a filter that orders and selects the information that it predicts to be of interest in relation to the user's search prompt. Mandolessi argues that the growing use of algorithms and AI is troubling as it is often obscured why certain information is seen as relevant by AI software. As a user, you cannot get a clear insight into the terms on which this tool is operating.

Historical data become predictive resources that guide the present interventions, which assert systemic violence towards specific groups of people that the system identifies as “security risks.”



Deccio Serrano/NurPhoto via AP.

In the case of Palantir, AI software becomes a gatekeeper for state memory and knowledge, which is being employed by a privatized machine that the state itself does not have access to. Palantir has been employed since 2008 by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and has further been enrolled into government bodies and American law enforcement. Palantir organizes large amounts of information into meaningful patterns through algorithms and AI. The platform determines which connections become visible, which events appear significant, and which individuals become subjects of investigation.

In the case of ICE, Palantir is used to detect potential illegal residents within the United States. Based on the processing of personal data, the software depicts whether someone could be a part of this group. It is however not clear on what terms personal data is being analyzed by the software, which ICE officers do not have access to. The AI tool provides the script for their deportation operations but does not reveal the assumptions that underlie its design. If users cannot fully understand why certain individuals or events are marked by the system, Palantir's results risk being understood as objective truth despite reflecting particular hidden assumptions.

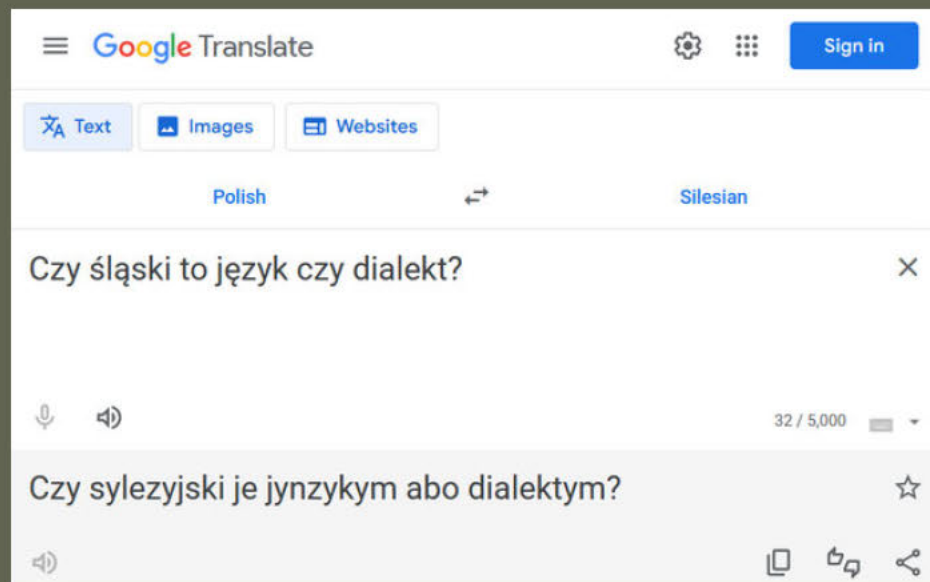
Ultimately, Palantir actively participates in producing institutional memory rather than only storing it. Like search engines shaping collective memory, Palantir shapes institutional knowledge by deciding which data become important. The platform therefore acts as a gatekeeper, influencing how organizations remember the past and anticipate future risks.

Historical data become predictive resources that guide the present interventions, which assert systemic violence towards specific groups of people that the system identifies as security risks. Based on the theories by Mandolessi and Stiegler, I view that Palantir and Thiel himself are examples of how privatized war technology operates as a powerful tool for inserting individual ideology into government memory and procedures.

Mandolessi, S. (2023). "The digital turn in memory studies." *Memory Studies*, 16(6), 1513–1528.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980231204201>.

WHEN GOOGLE SPEAKS SILESIAN

Julia K.



Silesian language on Google Translate. Image from "Silesian added as language on Google Translate," *Notes from Poland*, 30 June 2024.

In 2024, Google Translate added Silesian. AI can increasingly recognize and generate text in Silesian. Yet in Poland, political debate over whether Silesian deserves official recognition continues, with parliament supporting recognition and presidential vetoes blocking it. How can a language be digitally recognized while remaining politically contested?

The recent debate over the Silesian language has unfolded alongside a less visible but equally significant development: its growing presence in digital spaces. In June 2024, Google Translate added Silesian to its list of supported languages, making automatic translation available to millions of users.¹

At the same time, Silesian has become increasingly present on Wikipedia, in online dictionaries, and in AI-powered tools capable of recognising and generating text in the language. Unlike legal recognition, these developments do not result from parliamentary votes or presidential decisions. They emerge from different criteria — language data, user demand, and technological development — which shape whether a language can be used in everyday digital communication.²

This creates an unusual situation. While the legal status of Silesian remains contested, its digital use continues to expand.

A speaker may still have limited opportunities to encounter Silesian in education or public administration, yet they can translate it online, use AI to write in it, or engage with communities producing content in the language every day. In a region where language has long been intertwined with questions of identity and belonging, this shift matters.³ Digital platforms do not replace the role of the state, nor do they grant legal rights.

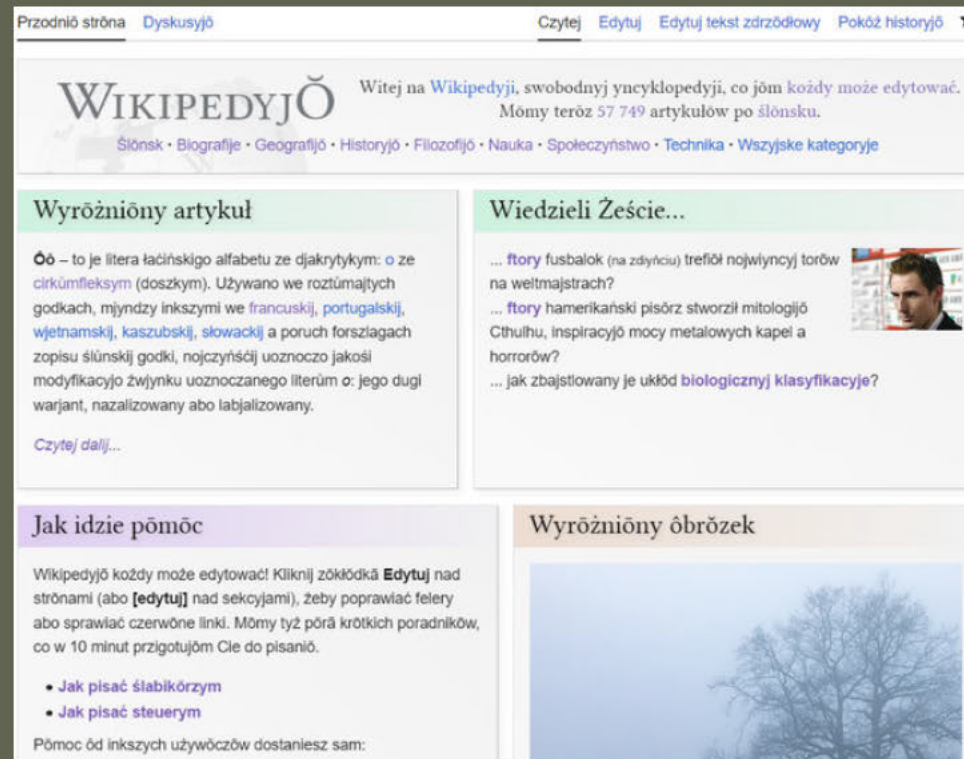
They do, however, create new conditions in which minority languages become usable, discoverable, and part of everyday communication. The debate therefore extends beyond whether Silesian should receive official recognition. It also raises a broader question for contested heritage: when different institutions shape the public presence of a language according to different logics, where is its future actually being negotiated?

Perhaps the greatest irony of the Silesian debate is that it remains centred on official recognition at a time when recognition itself is no longer the only force shaping a language's future. Legal status can protect a language, but it cannot guarantee that people will encounter it, use it, or pass it on. If linguistic heritage is ultimately sustained through everyday practice, then perhaps the most important question is no longer only who recognises it, but what allows it to remain a living part of daily life.

1. Giaccardi, Elisa, and Leysia Palen. "The Social Production of Heritage through Cross-media Interaction: Making Place for Place-making." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 14, no. 3 (2008): 281–297.

2. Kamusella, Tomasz. "Silesian: From Gwara to Language After 1989." *Rocznik Polsko-Niemiecki / Deutsch-Polnisches Jahrbuch* 24 (2016): 78–119.

3. Tilles, Daniel. "Silesian Added as Language on Google Translate." *Notes from Poland*, June 30, 2024. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/06/30/silesian-added-as-language-on-google-translate/>.



Wikipedia in Silesian. Image: Śląska Wikipedia, Wachtyrz.eu.



03

ART & THE ARCHIVE

MOMENTS CONTAINED

Carlijn S.

Moments Contained is a sculpture by the artist Thomas J. Price (see right). The young black woman is a fictional character. It is nearly 4 metres high. For Price, the sculpture is an effort to challenge dominant understandings of monuments, monumentality, and value. It stimulates the viewer to think about modes of representation, and who gets to be seen. The philanthropic foundation Droom en Daad purchased the sculpture in 2022 and donated it to Rotterdam. It was unveiled on June 2, 2023.

The following text constitutes an act of imagination in the form of a letter. What would I say to the sculpture, and what questions would I ask if she could respond? I approach the sculpture with the belief that *Moments Contained* represents a significant step toward a future where public art in Rotterdam becomes increasingly diverse and inclusive, reflecting the society of the city.

Above: Thomas J. Price, *Moments Contained*.
Below: Photo by Aad Hoogendoorn, via BKOR.



Dear ...,

As a citizen of Rotterdam, I encounter Rotterdam Central Station regularly. You are hard to miss. I feel your presence each time I walk through the square, and I catch you gazing into the distance.

Yet, I have never taken the time to sit with you for a moment. To contemplate what you are doing here on this square or how you are feeling. I have never taken the time to get to know you.

You were brought to life by the artist Thomas J. Price in 2022. And since June 2, 2023, you are officially a citizen of Rotterdam. I know you bear the title *Moments Contained*.

I wonder if you have a name. And if so, what is it? I won't speculate too much about your name, nor will I give you one, for the power of naming is not something I want to take from you. But if you ever find the time to write me back, or talk to me, you can share it with me if you wish to. In this letter, I am keeping it simple; you are just you.

Carlijn S.
Rotterdam
10 July 2026

So, dear you,

As I said, I have seen you many times before in the square. This week, I felt a strong desire to connect with the moment you embody. I wanted to experience the moment that is crystallised within you. I wanted to be part of the moment that you contain.

I can say that I felt safe in your presence. Warm. Calm.

You seemed pensive. It was almost as if the questions I was asking you in my mind were heard. As if you were considering possible answers.

The weather was lovely. There was a pleasant breeze, and for the most part the days were characterised by a clear blue sky. I was sitting next to you while I felt the sun shining on my face. I wondered if you ever get too hot in those jogging pants. I have to say that they look good on you, but I can also imagine that the square must get really hot in summer. I also hope you don't catch a cold in winter. I will come and visit you again in winter and bring you a scarf if you need it.



Photo by Aad Hoogendoorn.

Over the past few days, I have noticed that you are a famous citizen of Rotterdam. Occupying a prominent place in the square in front of Central Station, there is no way getting around you. You affirm your presence with your 4 metres tall.

As people walk past you, they look up at you. Tourists ride by on bicycles and stop to take pictures. One lady even fixes her hair before she asks her (I assume) husband to take a picture of her

and you. I think they are German. I also see people walking with a small brochure. It appears that you've become part of some kind of public art walking tour in Rotterdam.

Next to me, there are young boys doing boyish things. They are wrestling playfully, playing football with a pair of crocs, and one of them even gives you a panna. It is as if they are inviting you to play along.

I see a school class gathering around you. The teachers are telling the students something about you, and they are listening in awe. It is a very diverse group, and again many of them gather for a picture with you.

I see day-trippers pausing at your feet. A mother and a son, each on one side of you, smile for the camera.

I see people with heavy luggage who leave it unattended for a short time as they stop to take a selfie. After looking up at you one more time, they continue their journey.

It is almost as if you are a celebrity. The former mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Abutaleb, mentioned during your unveiling that you may become the most photographed sculpture in the city. Do you find it exhausting sometimes? To be so well-known? To have your picture taken constantly?

After sitting on the square with you for a while, I begin to take account of the feelings I am experiencing. Safe. Warm. Calm.

I feel safe in your presence because you look so strong and confident. With your chin slightly tilted, one foot positioned in front of the other, and your hands casually resting in your pockets.

You are watching over me. You are watching over the city.

I feel warm in your presence because I can see that you have become a friend to many citizens of Rotterdam. Especially heartwarming is the moment I see two young black girls approaching you. They are wearing their hair the same way you do, in a high bun. They strike a pose in front of you, raise their hands, and make peace signs while their mothers are taking pictures. Your friendly face is hard to dismiss. The warm atmosphere you create is difficult not to sense.

I feel calm in your presence because you offer people from all walks of life a place to stand still, to breathe, to look, to be. To contain a moment of rest and contemplation in a space that seems constantly in flux, dynamic, imbued with noise and hurry.

But alongside these feelings, I also experience a form of anxiety. Should I fear for you? Not so long ago, in January 2026, a man tried to deny you and your power by writing racist slurs at your feet.

It pains me that people have called your arrival on this square an insult to the city, and a cliché.

That you have not achieved anything, except that you are the winner of the oppression Olympics. That you are therefore not worthy of a statue.

In light of the surge of conservative sentiments, blatant ignorance, and narrow-mindedness, I am afraid people will hurt you. Undermining your presence and your power is not only a denial of you, but it is also a denial of the multicultural reality of Rotterdam.

I wonder if you need protection. If somebody needs to watch you day and night to make sure people don't abuse your body, your space.

I wonder if you are vulnerable. I notice you have your fists clenched in your pockets, as if there is a constant tension in your body, ready to fight back when needed. I think this is a sign that you are aware of the dangers that surround you, but it also tells me that you are strong enough to assert yourself, that you are independent, and that you do not intend to cave.

Your bronze skin is your shield. Negativity rebounds right back into the faces of those who disrespect you. A sigh, an eye roll, an angry shaking of the head, an insult. It may hit your surface, but you don't absorb it; you repel it.

You are a citizen of this city, you claim your space, and you welcome other people to do so as well. You are the neighbour that the citizens of Rotterdam needed. You participate in the urban fabric and engage with the people who are part of it. People say hello, people dance around you, people play with you, and perhaps most importantly, people recognise themselves in you.

You embody the city. You are the city.

Your presence and the reality you contain are undeniable.

I realise that I might be putting a lot of weight on your shoulders. That is why I promise that I will do anything in my power to make Rotterdam a place for everyone.

You inspire me to contribute to a cityscape in which the multicultural reality of Rotterdam is reflected. So that everyone feels welcome. So that the public space belongs to all.

I therefore hope that, when I come to visit you again and again, your fists will slowly relax and the tension in your body will gradually disappear.

I wish you all the best,
Carlijn

WE HAVE AN APOCALYPSE PROBLEM

Krista J.

We have an Apocalypse problem. Theologian Catherine Keller called it an 'apocalypse habit,' but this is starting to sound like someone trying to downplay an addiction to heroin as something they do recreationally on the weekends. Although some might locate the predilection to narrate our lives through terminal events as a contemporary obsession, Kate Rigby's analysis of the novel *Moby Dick* (published in 1851) recounts that as far as the canon of the Western novel is concerned, the habit was initiated then and there. The epic battle between whale and whaler is fundamentally a cautionary tale about the apocalyptic consequences of unchecked human ambition and societal structures built on exploitation and domination. As a professor of environmental humanities, Rigby emphasized the environmental dimensions of this apocalyptic vision. She noted how Ahab's projection of evil onto

Moby Dick parallels the historical projection of evil onto wilderness and nature by colonial "pioneers."

Encountering the work of visual artist Terike Haapoja at an exhibition in Paleis Het Loo brought this lecture back to mind. Her work *Foreign Beasts And Other Rarities* recontextualizes the history of the former royal palace by narrating multi-species perspectives of colonial trade and making explicitly visible the commodification of animals. The work included an image from the 1600s of a beached whale, often described as *monstrum horrendum*. The central whale, dead on its side and surrounded by people, is treated as both spectacle and commodity. The North Sea is prone to whale-stranding events and there are many similar images of beached whales, most paintings, etchings and engravings made by Dutch and Flemish artists.

Paleis Het Loo, photo by Jonathan Andrew.



What kind of stories, art, and practices can help us live with uncertainty, vulnerability, and interdependence?

How can we practice the middle, instead of the end, where life, resistance, and creation are always already underway?

I am reminded of a similar etching I encountered in the personal archive of someone whose family history is connected to the once profitable Dutch whaling industries. That etching was very similar to the one seen in the exhibition at Het Loo, but the artist added a specific piece of symbolism in the left corner: an image of the patroness of Amsterdam falling from the sky. I was told this was added to the etching after the plague claimed nearly 25,000 lives in Amsterdam in 1664. Here, the spectacle of the stranded whale, *monstrum horrendum*, becomes recontextualized as a bad omen.

Moby Dick of course famously ends with the death of the whaler, while the storyteller Ishmael survives. And so the story of impending doom must be told. Terika Haapoja's work is rooted in the violent histories of Dutch prosperity, the doom has already

happened. Her artistic perspective seems to be a retracing of steps but following different footprints; a walk through a historical site like Paleis Het Loo becomes shaped by different forms of attentiveness. If it is, as Sun Ra proclaimed many years ago "after the end of the world <don't you know that yet>," then perhaps the counterapocalypse is not about predicting the next disaster but a condition we are already living through? Thinking alongside Joanna Zylinska's concept of a feminist counterapocalypse we can ask who is tending to the present: what kind of stories, art, and practices can help us live with uncertainty, vulnerability, and interdependence? How can we practice the middle, instead of the end, where life, resistance, and creation are always already underway?

Haapoja, T. (2023–2024). *Foreign beasts and other rarities* [Exhibition]. Paleis Het Loo, Apeldoorn, Netherlands.

Keller, C. (2018). *Apocalypse now and then: A feminist guide to the end of the world*. Beacon Press.

Keller, H. (1988). *Monstrum horrendum: Walstrandungen in der Druckgraphik des 16. bis 18. Jahrhunderts*. Eine motivkundliche Untersuchung. Habelt.

Ra, S. (1970). *It's after the end of the world* [Album]. Saturn Records.

Rigby, K. (2026, July 16). Keynote lecture *Nonhuman Resistance and Multispecies (In)Justice*. Join the Orca Uprising, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands.

Zylinska, J. (2022). *Feminist counterapocalypse: On the nonhuman turn, extinction, and survival*. Open Humanities Press.



Above: Anonymous, Beached whale at Noordwijk in 1614, 1614–15.
Below: Anonymous, Falling patroness of Amsterdam, 1664–5.



All photos © Sergey Melnychenko, from the series *Frontline Rolls*.

FRONTLINE ROLLS: SERGEY
MELNITCHENKO'S HANDMADE
ARCHIVE FROM THE UKRAINIAN
FRONT LINE

Vita S.

In February 2025, artist and photographer Sergey Melnitchenko began sending disposable cameras to soldiers on Ukraine's front line. Each camera carried twenty-seven frames.

Alongside each of the cameras, Melnitchenko asked his recipients for letters, and requested that each camera was returned to him with a small object of the sender's choosing.

Frontline Rolls inverts the usual grammar of war photography. Melnitchenko has spent years photographing Ukraine, working as a front line volunteer since 2022. But here he took a step back. Each of the images he collected was taken by a soldier, his role was printing the photographs, translating the letters, photographing the returned objects and piecing them together into a photobook.

The rolls of film depict ordinary life. A cat asleep on a sleeping bag. Boots lined at a shelter door, as if at the door of any house. Domestic gestures are performed somewhere built to erase domesticity. Violence is present but appears mostly by absence, or written in letters; one soldier compared himself to the disposable cup he mailed home: used, replaceable, and yet still very much alive.

The ethics of war photography has long turned fixated on related anxieties: most notably that images of suffering numb, rather than sensitise their viewers through repetition, that a photograph stripped of context can arrest attention while failing to evoke understanding, and that whoever holds the camera usually occupies a position of safety the subject does not share. *Frontline Rolls* respond to each of these, though probably not by design. There is no outsider's frame here. No photographer composing someone else's suffering for a gallery wall. The soldiers author their own images, and the letters and objects that accompany them restore a first-person voice that images could never carry alone.

All photos © Sergey Melnychenko,
from the series *Frontline Rolls*.





There is something of the counter-memorial in this too. Where a conventional memorial fixes meaning in permanent, singular form, a name carved in stone, *Frontline Rolls* is unfinished by design, still accumulating while the war it documents continues, its authorship distributed across dozens of hands rather than one artist's vision. It asks to be regarded not from a safe distance, but as testimony still being written.

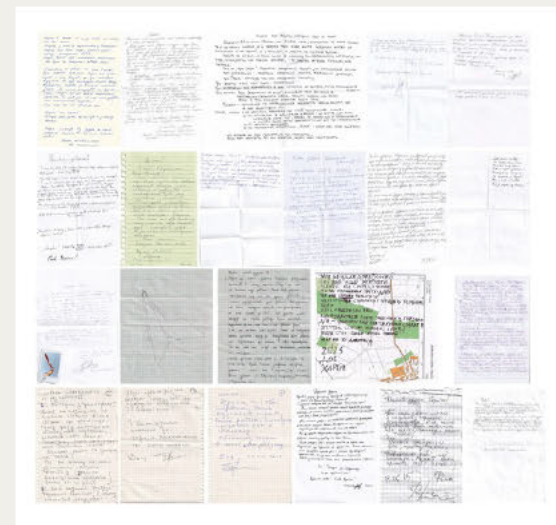
Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

Assmann, Jan. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 125-133.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

PhMuseum. (2026, May 27). *Dispatches from the front: Sergey Melnitchenko on Ukrainian collective memory*. <https://phmuseum.com/news/dispatches-from-the-front-sergey-melnitchenkos-collective-memory-project>.

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04

FIELD COMMENTARY

Balthasar Florisz van Berckenrode, *Plattegrond van Amsterdam*
(blad middenboven), 1625, via Rijksmuseum.

WHERE IS HOSPITALITY, AND REPAIR

Emilia B.

One can welcome a stranger without ever learning their name. Hospitality does not necessitate the classification, possession, or understanding of another. It asks only for care, even for that which exceeds our knowledge. In doing so, it unfixes the boundaries of home, allowing its associated affect to extend across space and time, through departures and returns.

Institutions formed through colonial dispossession have become skilled practitioners of a different hospitality. They have learned to invite the “other” in — not out of a desire to share the space, but because the gesture allows them to retain the authority of the host. In receiving those they dispossessed as guests, they preserve their power to determine the conditions of entry, the terms of recognition, and the boundaries of belonging. In the heritage sector, hospitality converts the arbitration of possession into an act of generosity, allowing ownership to survive its own critique.

HOME? ON RESTITUTION,

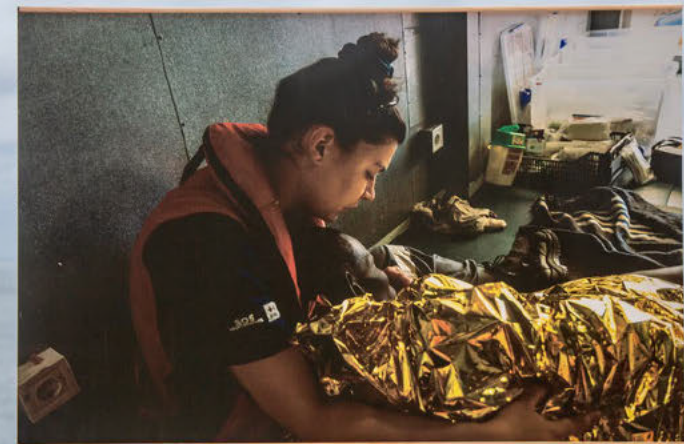
Across Europe, institutions are under pressure to recognize the dispossession, violence, and asymmetrical power embedded in their colonial assemblages, including collections of Indonesian items held in the Netherlands.¹ Restitution has become a defining marker of decolonial change, promising not only the return of objects but also the possibility of repair. Yet, can material return achieve the epistemological transformation demanded by decolonial work?

The Dutch Research Council-funded project *Exploring New Futures for Indonesian Objects* calls for a paradigm shift in the study of colonial collections. Beyond physical transfer, it understands the 2023 repatriation of 355 items from the so-called Lombok Treasures from the Netherlands to Indonesia as a window into local knowledge, memories, and histories.² The project positions objects as narratives rather than discrete items. In doing so, it asks: what is in a name?

The events of 1894 have been described as the Lombok Expedition, the Lombok War, Lombok Violence, the Attack on Cakranegara, and the Sack of Cakranegara. The taken items have been termed objects, artifacts, loot, booty, collections, treasure, harta karun, harta kekayaan, harta karun cakranegara, benda, and benda sakral. Who determines whose language? Whose history? Whose objects? As terms shift, do they change meaning?

The project’s terminological distinctions are not merely semantic.

Repatriation, with etymological roots in *patria* or fatherland, privileges a framework of national belonging.³ Return carries administrative and political meanings tied to transactional transfer of state ownership.⁴ Restitution, meanwhile, attempts to gesture towards reparation, repair, mourning, renewal, and the possibility of pathways to new futures beyond the terms of colonial acquisition.⁵ It strives to reverse institutionalized legacies of the classification and segregation of objects as material traces of cultural practices, languages, and lifeways.





Images from Collectif PEROU,
Nous sommes le rivage.



Authority, however, proves more difficult to return than the objects themselves. As ownership changes hands, the institutional, legal, and national frameworks that enabled dispossession remain intact.

What may be required, then, is not simply a shift from possession to relation, but from object to practice. PEROU's *Nous Sommes Le Rivage* offers a promising provocation towards the undisciplining of heritage.⁶ In pursuing UNESCO recognition of living gestures of hospitality along routes taken by exiled people across the Mediterranean, the project frames action as heritage and heritage as action. Rather than a scripted performance between host and guest, hospitality emerges as an ever-evolving relational practice of care, welcome, and endurance. *Nous Sommes Le Rivage* calls for official recognition that we create, maintain, and become the shore.

Restitution may create the conditions for institutions to move beyond property relations towards relational practice, redistributing not only objects but the power to make meaning of their narratives.

Through the practice of hospitality, it may generate spaces that are continually made and remade through acts of care, wherein encounters remain open to opacity rather than organized by authority.

1. Sadijah Boonstra, Bronwyn Anne Beech Jones, Katharine McGregor, Ken M. P. Setiawan, and Abdul Wahid, eds., *Rethinking Histories of Indonesia: Experiencing, Resisting and Renegotiating Coloniality* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2025).

2. "Exploring New Futures for Indonesian Objects: Dismantling Colonial Knowledge Production and Recovering Lost Histories and Memories," *Past Future Heritage*, Universitas Gadjah Mada, accessed July 11, 2026, <https://pastfutureheritage.fib.ugm.ac.id/>.

3. Ciraj Rassool and Victoria E. Gibbon, "Restitution versus Repatriation: Terminology and Concepts Matter," *American Journal of Biological Anthropology* 184, no. 1 (2024).

4. Rassool and Gibbon, "Restitution versus Repatriation."

5. Rassool and Gibbon, "Restitution versus Repatriation."

6. Collectif PEROU, *Nous Sommes Le Rivage*, accessed July 11, 2026, <https://www.noussommeslerivage.eu/>.

TOURISM: A MEANS TO A HERITAGE END, OR AN END IN ITSELF?

The idea that a heritage site could remain perfectly accessible, intact, and relevant without some form of dedicated management or steady income stream is an idealistic thought that bears little grounding in reality. And it is in a site's management that the question of funding arises: from whom does it come, and with what strings are attached? Here tourism becomes the means to the heritage end. In most cases, it creates a reliable, marketable product that creates access to a heritage "site" or "thing" that could otherwise easily fall through the cracks of contemporary relevance.

And yet, at first thought, the tourist industry is one that can easily overwhelm or dilute a site. Take Venice, a city ravaged by tourism. A city that has itself become an exhibit requiring paid entry. A gothic car-free floating city made theme park by the ills of overtourism. And this curse spares few cities across the world considered to possess some historical, aesthetic, or cultural significance. And yet, to eliminate tourism, and the infrastructure it lends a city, would be to perhaps compromise the relevance, or reduce access, to certain (his)stories and artefacts of our shared past.



Sterling Lanier, 2020 (Unsplash).

Here I ask the question: is tourism a means to an end, or has it become an end in itself? Is the packaging of heritage into distinct, neat packages that can be quantified, sold, and measured a dilution or reduction of the value of a heritage site? As with anything, the answer can hardly be a binary yes or no; just as heritage, or what constitutes a heritage site, cannot easily be defined, tourism also comes in many forms.

I suppose it all boils down to a question of definition. What is this thing we call "heritage," that some perceive to have its value reduced

from the increasingly pervasive tourist industry?

It is not a question that lends itself to any straightforward or definitive answer. To argue that heritage means a singular thing that can be neatly mapped within rigid borders, something fully seen or visited, something to be "ticked-off" as the background to a selfie that boasts something as "experienced" in the past tense, is to disregard its bloody and messy insides. Heritage only makes sense when understood as a living and intricate whole with a beating heart.

Here, David Harvey's conception of heritage as a "process" rather than as a fixed object becomes particularly useful. For Harvey, heritage is a verb — heritage is actively experienced, negotiated, and continually reconstituted. Viewed in this way, tourism need not negate the value of heritage, but can facilitate the action of heritage. Tourist infrastructure, for instance provides structure and anticipates needs that ultimately allow visitors to engage with the stories and artefacts that carry such meaning; a cafe to rest after hours wandering a museum, a bus to take you to sites inaccessible by foot, something as simple as a map to show you where to go.

Of course, these same structures also commodify this heritage "process." Buying a ticket risks reducing heritage to a transaction, one measured through expectations met or unmet, visitor satisfaction scores, and value for money.

Yet, even within this commercial framework, heritage itself remains far more unruly than something that can simply be bought, consumed, "ticked off."

The conclusion of this short reflection offers no final word or opinion, but rather attempts to walk the path of thinking about tourism more generously. While over-tourism can be ruinous for local communities and visitors alike, tourism itself should not be reduced to its most damaging manifestations. At its best, it can foster encounters with heritage that are active, participatory and meaningful, making possible engagements and experiences that might otherwise never occur.



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Heritage only makes sense when understood as a living and intricate whole with a beating heart.

RECKONING WITH HIERARCHIES

Anonymous

During my engagements with the 'heritage field' one thing struck me. Hierarchies, institutional boundaries and bureaucracy are inherent to heritage organisations, governments and academic institutions. This matter is twofold. On the one hand the hierarchies and bureaucracy cause a discrepancy between policymakers/civil servants, academics and society/non-authorised experts. On the other hand, the hierarchies and bureaucracy limit change and keep the status quo. Solving an issue becomes unnecessarily complicated.

The repeated question from my intern organisation whether I can draw from my studies to come up

with an answer to certain issues, kept making me feel uncomfortable. Academia gave me the language to name the problem, not to solve it. I was not prepared to solve anything, only to criticize. Of course, I am just an intern so solving complex issues is not my job, but why was I not at least taught a framework? Why is it not part of academia? One can argue that the goal of academia is not to formulate a solution, that insinuates a finish line. Academia argues that one must always stay critical and keep the dialogue going. However, that feels detached from reality and something straight from the Ivory tower, as people from the everyday do ask for solutions.

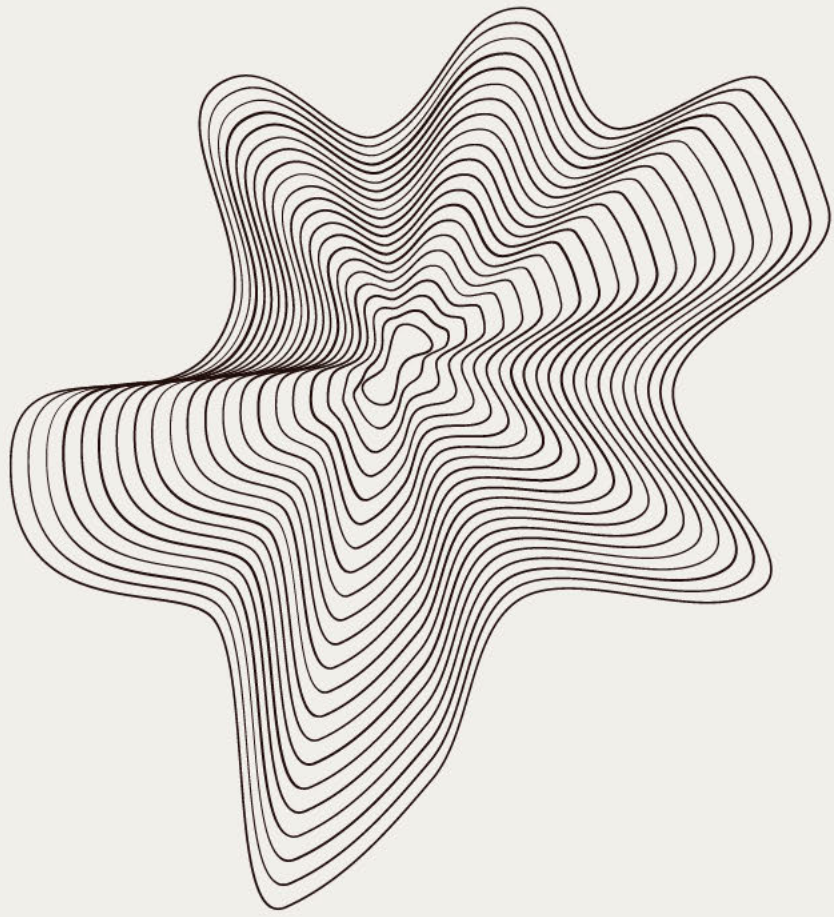
*Academia gave me the
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Requests for change often come from the periphery, not the centre. The centre benefits from keeping the status quo the same, they remain in power and reproduce the same structures.

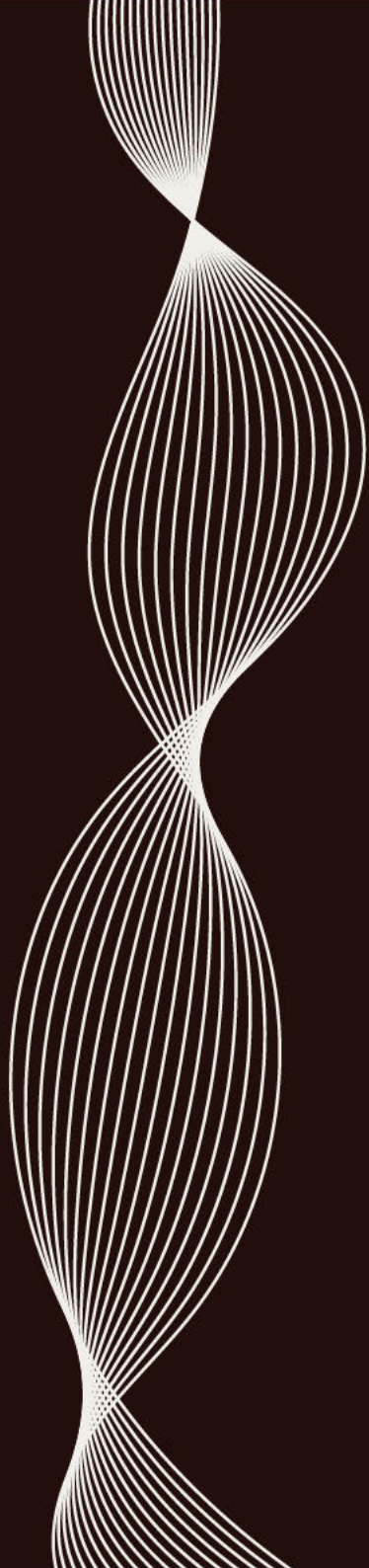
In conversation with people from the 'professional' heritage field another hierarchy popped up that I contextualized within Laurajane Smith's 'Authorised Heritage Discourse.' Authorised professionals, my colleagues, from the field placed themselves above people from the everyday and non-authorised heritage custodians. This way they invalidate lived experience as a way of being an expert by experience. Denying them access to spaces, funds, recognition, or simply having a say. Requests for change often come from the periphery, not the centre. The centre benefits from keeping the status quo the same, they remain in power and reproduce the same structures. Besides, if a nonprofessional has finally made themselves heard or taken seriously, this still does not guarantee success.

The minefield of bureaucracy, rules, policy and political circumstances is impossible to navigate for someone that is not familiar with the rules and habitus of the relevant institutions. The nonauthorized custodians lack (access to) the right cultural capital to make change happen.

So, change must be supported from the centre, academics and policymakers must critically reflect on themselves and listen to the non-authorised custodians. Emphasizing empathy and reflexivity in the workspace would be a great first step to accommodate the 'outsider.' A professional is someone seeing growth in having conversations with nonauthorized heritage custodians, someone engaging in academic discourse, and translating it to something actionable in the everyday.



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