

## PhD vacancy

### University of Amsterdam

The University of Amsterdam (UvA) is a university with an internationally acclaimed profile, located at the heart of the Dutch capital. As well as a world centre for business and research, Amsterdam is a hub of cultural and media activities. The University of Amsterdam is a member of the League of European Research Universities.

### The Faculty of Humanities

The Faculty of Humanities undertakes teaching and research with a strong international orientation in a large number of disciplines within the field of language and culture. The faculty is situated in the center of Amsterdam and maintains close contacts with many cultural institutions in the city. It employs almost a thousand staff members and its courses are attended by approximately 6,500 students.

### ASCA

Located at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam, the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis brings together scholars active in literature, philosophy, visual culture, religious studies, film and media studies, argumentation theory and science dynamics. Specialists in their own respective fields, they share a commitment to working within an interdisciplinary framework and to maintaining a close connection with contemporary cultural and political debates in the society at large and with the cultural institutions outside of the narrow confines of the academic world. Within ASCA they have joined forces to provide a stimulating environment for scholars, professionals, and graduate students both from the Netherlands and abroad. The institute supervises internally and externally funded PhD projects, offers regular seminar and hosts yearly workshops and conferences.

ASCA has a vacant PhD position per 1 September 2009 as part of the NWO funded project *New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art*, a collaboration between the University of Amsterdam, the University of Maastricht and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage. The PhD candidate will be based in Amsterdam, and supervised by Prof. dr. Deborah Cherry (UvA).

*New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* examines how and why contemporary art practices pose particularly difficult conservation problems which cannot be solved along the lines of the so-called 'scientific freeze' paradigm that has been standard in conservation theory and ethics. Our interdisciplinary research brings theoretical and critical studies together with empirical investigation to interrogate the impact of museum conservation practices on the material constitution, meaning and agency of a number of problematic art works and to provide a philosophically argued model for conservation theory and ethics.

### Tasks

The candidate is expected to research and complete a Ph.D. dissertation within a period of four years, and to participate in the group's research events and activities, such as conferences, workshops, publications.

**Requirements** MA-diploma in one or more of related disciplines. Expertise in conservation and conservation studies is not a specific requirement.

**More information** The *Application Guidelines* give precise information about the application procedure. This document can be found on the ASCA website ([www.hum.uva.nl/asca](http://www.hum.uva.nl/asca)). Further information can be obtained from the project supervisors, Prof. dr. Deborah Cherry ([D.A.Cherry@uva.nl](mailto:D.A.Cherry@uva.nl)) and/or Dr. Renée van de Vall ([R.vandeVall@LK.unimaas.nl](mailto:R.vandeVall@LK.unimaas.nl)), or from the managing director of the research institute Dr. Eløe Kingma ([ascafgw@uva.nl](mailto:ascafgw@uva.nl)).

**Appointment** The PhD candidate will be appointed for a period of four years (full time), beginning per September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009 at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam under the terms of employment currently valid for the Faculty. A contract will be given in the first instance for one year, with an extension for the following three years on the basis of an evaluation of, amongst other things, a written piece of work. The salary (on a full

time base) will be € 2042 during the first year (gross per month) and will reach € 2612 during the fourth year, in accordance with the CAO for Dutch universities.

### **Applications**

Applicants are invited to write an application statement of max. 500 words. This limit will be strictly adhered to. The letter should state clearly in what ways the candidate can develop the PhD proposal, and contribute to the overall project; it must provide a precise workplan for the dissertation, including proposed methods and a time schedule. In addition to the proposal, the committee needs a short C.V. (not more than 1 page), including current addresses, and a transcript of your MA-marks.

Applications for this position (preferably in pdf format) should be sent to the ASCA office [asca-fgw@uva.nl](mailto:asca-fgw@uva.nl). Deadline of submission April 8<sup>th</sup> 2009. Applications received after this date or those that are incomplete will not be taken into consideration.

Attached is the description of the project.

#### *New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art.*

On the occasion of the first European Contemporary Art Manifestation *Manifesta 1* in Rotterdam in 1996, the Natural History Museum showed a series of wooden cabins created by the Dutch artist Suchan Kinoshita, one of which, *Hok 1*, was later acquired by the Maastricht Bonnenfantenmuseum. *Hok 1* was built of used multiplex boards and contained a table, chair and a collection of hourglasses of various shapes and sizes and containing various substances, like honey, oil, 'museum dust' or ink. After entering the small cabin, the visitor could sit down at ease and turn the bottles to see and hear how the substances would flow in different paces from the upper into the lower part.

On moving from *Manifesta* to the Bonnenfantenmuseum, *Hok 1* had to be adjusted to its new surroundings. The shape of the cabin was slightly changed, the chair was removed and a little lamp was added. The work also changed in a conceptual sense. As it was no longer part of a series, it became a singular work. Outside the setting of the Natural History Museum, its references to scientific experiment and time measurement became less pronounced. The artist did not object to these changes, as she considered *Hok 1* to be a mobile work. However, the change of scene also had some unexpected consequences. The museum public was not as cautious as the *Manifesta* visitors had been. The fragile glass bottles frequently broke and one was even stolen. The number of bottles decreased, changing the overall appearance and atmosphere of the work. After trying out various scenarios for the replacements of the bottles, the artist decided to lock the cabin. Visitors had to ask the guard for the key if they wanted to enter, a measure affecting the suggestion of playfulness that was characteristic for the earlier installation. (van Saaze 2001)

The example of *Hok 1* demonstrates some of the profound practical and theoretical problems involved in the conservation of contemporary art. Unlike traditional artworks like paintings and sculptures, installations like *Hok 1* cannot be transported in one piece from one context to another, but have to be re-executed to match their new surroundings and will inevitably change in the transition. Frequently the measures needed to maintain the physical integrity of the work endanger its more intangible, transient and performative aspects. There is no once-and-for-all answer how to proceed in such cases. Each work differs and necessitates asking anew what it exactly *is* that should be conserved and which features and values are likely to survive and which risk to get lost in the conservation process.

This kind of contemporary art practices ask for a reconsideration of the aims and strategies of conservation and the tasks of conservation professionals and require a reformulation of the basic principles of conservation theory and ethics. It is the aim of this interdisciplinary research project to provide in both needs, which are urgently felt within the professional field. The project will investigate and compare the strategies that are currently being developed by museum conservators to cope with the problems that are typical for the art of the last 50 years. Starting from the premise that there are various aspects of a work that might be continued through conservation, like its concept, function, appearance or material constitution, and various ways to create continuity, like preservation, replacement, remaking, or documentation, it takes as its central question:

*Whether, to what extent and if so, how, do museums try to create continuity in the biography of works of contemporary art by establishing, maintaining or severing relations between various stages in its career?*

### **Societal and cultural relevance**

Until very recently, the dominant paradigm in conservation theory and practice has been the strategy of the scientifically based 'freezing' of material objects. 'Scientific conservation' is based on the assumptions that 1) the principal aim of conservation is to preserve the integrity of the object, and that 2) this integrity is located in the object's physical features and constituents. Therefore conservation should involve scientific research into the work's 'true identity' by investigating the material properties of the original object. These are the properties that should be preserved for the future or that one should aim to return to by means of restoration. Preservation and restoration practice should, furthermore, minimize intervention and take no measures that cannot be reversed. (ICOM codes and charters; cf. Villers 2004; Muñoz Viñas 2005)

Obviously, there are many instances for which the principles of scientific conservation, minimal intervention and reversibility have proven their worth. The notorious example of the restoration of Barnett Newman's *Who is afraid of red, yellow and blue III* may be invoked to remind that one should not discard their value too easily. (Cf. Ex, 1993). Yet as a general paradigm for conservation the scientific strategy is increasingly considered to be wanting, because it doesn't meet the challenges raised by artworks with a more conceptual, dynamic and performative character. Since the early '60s, experimental genres like conceptual art, happenings, performances, installations, new media and activist art have profoundly challenged the idea of the work as a fixed, immutable object, both by the use of fragile, ephemeral or degradable materials or of rapidly ageing media technologies and by the works' conceptual dynamics. Installations, for instance, may vary considerably in subsequent re-installations. Moving 'from one place to another', they acquire 'locational identities' (Kwon, 2002), shaped by contextual factors like site and temporality and the interpretations and interventions of artists, curators and visitors. This variability not only implies that works have no fixed identity, but also that they don't necessarily stop changing when they enter a museum collection, as the vicissitudes of *Hok 1* clearly show.

From an art-historical and art-critical perspective, one may question whether these works actually should be conserved. Many site-specific and time-based works, in particular those of the '60s and early '70s, are explicitly intended to resist the forces of commodification and institutionalization operating in the capitalist art market and therefore designed to defy the status of a collectible 'art object'. In the mundane reality of artistic and museum practices, however, the picture is more complicated. With the passing of time, artists have become less reluctant to co-operate with museums; vice versa, museums have searched for ways to represent these influential genres in their collections. As a consequence, the supposed neutrality of museums as institutional contexts is, as it were, being questioned 'from within', through the conservation problems installations and other experimental genres are confronting their staff with. The museum proves to be another, and rather specific, 'locational' environment, as the ways in which artworks are collected, stored, documented, exhibited, researched, preserved and restored proves to have a further impact on their state and identity. New strategies in conservation indeed acknowledge that conservation is an intervention, a set of complex processes that change the meaning and often also the material condition of the work and its future state. (Real 2001, Laurensen 2004 and 2006, Buskirk 2003, Barker and Bracker 2005, Wharton 2005, Weyer 2006, Scholte & Te Brake-Baldock 2007, van Saaze forthcoming)

### **Previous research, scientific innovation**

In the past decades several important museums and cultural heritage institutions have initiated innovative research projects in order to come to terms with the growing need for alternatives to the scientific approach, in close connection with the investigation of practical conservation problems and following an interdisciplinary, networked and case-based approach. What is still lacking is a systematic comparison and a theoretical articulation of the results of these case-studies. This research project aims to provide for these lacks by developing an empirically grounded and philosophically argued theory for the conservation of contemporary art and providing a policy and field report with practical recommendations. Its contribution to existing empirical and theoretical research will consist in the investigation of the relatively neglected topic of the impact of *conservation as such* on the state and identity of contemporary artworks, through the comparative analysis of a variety of current conservation practices. We focus on *museum* conservation because museums, as institutional structures arranged for the collection of

heritage objects, presuppose the very principles that are contested in contemporary art practices and therefore most urgently feel the challenges these practices pose to the established art world. By combining art-historical research with the research strategies developed in the context of Science and Technology Studies, in particular those of Actor-Network-Theory, the project aims to shed new light on processes of cultural heritage formation and the constitution of the art-historical canon. The history of contemporary art is usually written as if the artworks involved primarily matter in the instance of their initial appearance and through their impact on the art critical discourse of their time. However, their significance for later generations is very much dependent on whether and how their existence will be physically, conceptually and experientially continued (cf. Buskirk 2003). To a large extent, the project will argue, this continuation is shaped in the day-to-day practices of museum conservation.

### **Theory and methodology, programmatic surplus value and coherence, accessibility of sources**

The project is designed as a comparative analysis of a limited number of 'thickly' described case-histories of individual art works with an emphasis on day-to-day museum practices. We have selected works of art of which the continuity is endangered by changes in their material constitution (project 2), by changes in their spatio-temporal context (project 3), or both (project 4 and 5). The heuristic model used as a framework for the description and comparison of the cases will be the cultural biography, following the lines set out by the cultural anthropology of things and the study of material culture (Appadurai, Kopytoff 1986; Merrill 1998; Gosden & Marshall 1999; Hoskins 2006; Latour & Lowe forthcoming). The central idea of the biographical approach is that the meaning of an object and the effects it has on people and events may change during its existence, due to changes in its physical state, use, and social, cultural and historical context. In contrast to the notion of 'history', indicating the generic description of changes of classes of objects, a 'biography' describes the trajectory of an object that is valued for its uniqueness, like a work of art, yet is embedded in cultural expectations with regard to its development (Appadurai, Kopytoff 1986). The metaphorical attribution of 'life' to an artwork may seem rather unscientific and, moreover, suggest a organic whole possessing a singular and fixed identity – a suggestion challenged by the art practices under investigation. However, as conservators themselves frequently use the analogy with living organisms to indicate the intangible qualities without which a work would lose its artistic significance, we have chosen to hold on to this analogy. The concept of biography enables us to describe – and thereby construct - the art works' 'lives' as individual trajectories that nevertheless may show similar phases and patterns of change. Rather than as solid entities, however, the artworks we study will be considered as variable assemblages (Latour) of things, events and people.

The project as a whole is loosely designed as a matrix structure. Project 2 and 3 are 'horizontal', following works throughout their life-spans; project 4 and 5 are 'vertical', concentrating on specific biographical stages. Information about the cases is shared by the whole group in order to enable cross-comparisons. By looking for recurring patterns, regularities and stylistic mechanisms in museum conservation practices, ethnographic descriptions of individual examples can enable theory construction on a 'middle range' level, in between general theory and particular case (c.f. Wyatt and Balmer 2007, Geels 2007).

Empirical material will be gathered through archival research, interviews with museum professionals, artists, technicians and other relevant actors, and through (participant) observation of museum conservation practices. Access to primary sources is facilitated by contacts between the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage/ INCCA and the staff of relevant international museums, galleries and archives. Researchers and supervisors will meet at least every three weeks to discuss work in progress and exchange information. ICN will facilitate a shared database.

### **Description of PhD proposal**

Promotor: prof. dr. Deborah Cherry, University of Amsterdam

Contemporary artists are highly experimental in the materials that they use. So much so that the deployment of fragile, ephemeral, degradable, and temporally specific materials has become characteristic of the art of today. As a result, several works created in the past decades no longer exist in their original form: they have either degraded severely, are in the process of change and decay, or have been entirely or in part remade in more recent forms of their original materials. Equally, rapidly ageing technologies and the switch from analogue to digital signals the profound historical and technical changes within which lens-based and sound works must continue to exist. This

material condition calls into question contemporary art's potential for survival, and thus poses many practical and theoretical questions for conservation. This subproject will trace the biographies of selected art works in museum collections. It investigates the various approaches with which museums try to create continuity in the biography of a work of art, such as chemical stabilisation, substitution, replication, and partial or whole remaking, and asks what these strategies entail for the works' material, conceptual and aesthetical constitution. How did these strategies develop and what was the role of the various stakeholders, such as the museum, conservators, the artist, and on occasion specialist teams of makers and fabricators in deciding between possible options? How were questions of value, authenticity and originality addressed in the conservation processes? What material and theoretical differences can be identified between the original and the copy, between first and future states?

### 1. Degradable organic and chemical materials.

Damien Hirst, *Mother and Child Divided* (1993), Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo; exhibition copy (2007), Tate Gallery, London.

Mark Quinn: *Self* (1991), a.o. in Saatchi Collection

Several of Hirst's early formaldehyde works have now been entirely remade, because of contamination or degradation of the artist's initial examples. In *Self* and other examples Quinn uses highly volatile substances, notably human blood, which can only be sustained, and the work therefore continued, through chemical additives and/or refrigeration. Although Hirst's work was arguably deploying a material with a relatively longer life, the formaldehyde has either decayed or become contaminated. By contrast, Quinn is consciously working with an organic substance with a short-shelf-life and this quality is central to the meaning of the works, so much so that the artist himself initiated a series, making a new *Self* every five years or so. As each *Self* ages, it changes colour and texture, growing old alongside the artist. The research will trace the complicated lives of the works, from initial version, to more recent interventions and/or replication, examining and reflecting on the material changes to concept and execution through their remaking.

### 2. Temporally-specific transient materials from contemporary consumption culture

Thomas Hirschhorn, *Doppelgarage*, 2002 Pinakothek der Moderne, München

Felix Gonzales Torres, *Untitled (A Corner of Baci)*, 1990. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Hirschhorn's practice is noted for his eclectic use of adhesive tape, aluminium foil, transparent plastic film, marker pen, etc., in frequently challenging combinations for the conservator, alongside the introduction of many 'found' objects in plastic and other materials. While much has been said about politics and content of Hirschhorn's art, the choice of substances and products from the everyday world is equally important, as the artist has admitted (Buchloh et. al. 2004). Many of his materials rapidly degrade, thus posing the question about whether the original form can be retained or whether in future installations the re-made example can simulate earlier versions. At present his materials are still in production but this may well change, and conservation strategy seeks to arrest what may well be inevitable decay and impossible replication. By contrast, Felix Gonzalez-Torres (and the artist's foundation) allowed curators and conservators some leeway in replacing the sweets of the candy spills, so permitting a form of replication. But some candy spills specifically refer to particular candies, such as *A Corner of Baci*, making an exchange of materials impossible.

### 3. Aging media technologies

Bruce Naumann's *Rotating Glass Walls* (1970, Boymans Van Beuningen)

Kutlug Ataman *Küba* 2004 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

The transfer from analogue to digital technologies for storage and projection as against the preservation of older, sometimes obsolete technologies raises important questions about material state and forms of longevity. Digitalisation offers practical solutions to future life, and through selected case studies, the project explores impact of digitisation, and its potential impact on the quality of the image and projection formats. In Kutlug Ataman's work

new media are nested within older forms of projection/display. In Nauman's case proposals by the museum to replace the projection equipment, agreed by the artist, have completely reconfigured the work from its first installation.