

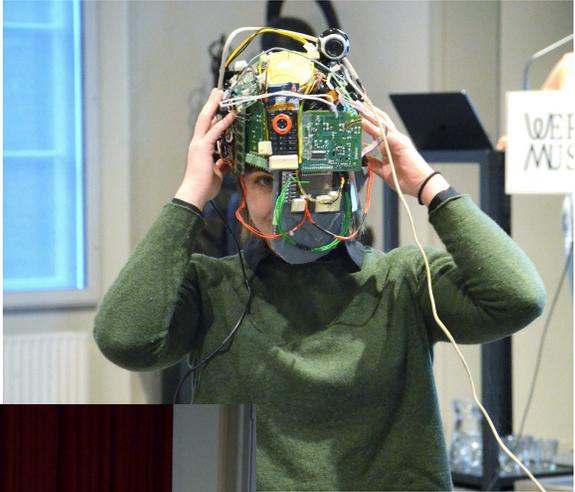


Achille Mbembe

Challenging the Universal Right to Breathe

The Universal Right to Breathe







INTRODUCTION

In line with its educational objectives, the International Spinoza Prize Foundation organised the Achille Mbembe Challenge for young people. As a prelude to the award ceremony, the foundation devised a design competition in collaboration with the Wereldmuseum and Baltan Laboratories. Around the summer, pupils, students and their teachers were invited to create a design based on Mbembe's concept of "The universal right to breathe". This concept perfectly summarises the theme of Spinozalens 2025 – future-proof solidarity. For the laureate of the Spinozalens, it is not only about solidarity between people, but also between people and all living organisms.

Participants in the Achille Mbembe Challenge could choose between three themes in which the right to breathe, literally or figuratively, plays an important role: climate justice, restitution of heritage, and digital colonisation; three themes that play an important role in Mbembe's work. The participants received coaching from the three partners who organised the competition and, in most cases, from their own teacher.

On 15 November 2025, seven finalist teams presented their designs to a jury at the Wereldmuseum Leiden. The jurymembers were Martine Gosselink, historian and director Mauritshuis (chair), Katleen Gabriels, associate professor philosophy of technology at Maastricht University, Daphina Misiedjan, assistant professor human rights an environment at International Institute of Social Studies, and Erica Gargaglione, cultural worker and recently graduated at the Piet Zwart Institute in Experimental Publishing.



1. INSPIRING PARENTS

Alicia, Victor and Rosie from Sint Jan Berchmanscollege in Brussels gave a remarkable interpretation of the theme “retribution of stolen heritage”. They rightly point out that heritage encompasses much more than just museum pieces. The cultural roots of pupils and teachers are also part of it.

The Challenge made Alicia and her team more aware of the fact that pupils of colour relatively often leave school before obtaining their diploma. That is why they came up with the project “Inspiring Parents”. By “inspiring”, they refer to the French “inspirer” and thus indirectly to Mbembe. Inspirer means not only to inspire, but also to breathe in. Alicia, Victor and Rosie want to create more breathing space for students of colour at school. As a first step, they designed a survey for all parents of children at Sint Berchmanscollege.

Once the results of their research are known, it will become clear how parents of colour need to be more involved in their children's school. Alicia, Victor and Rosie believe that if their involvement increases, their children will also stay in school longer. They also involved and talked to their own parents, to gain deeper insight into the problem at stake, because not all their parents have Dutch as their mother tongue.



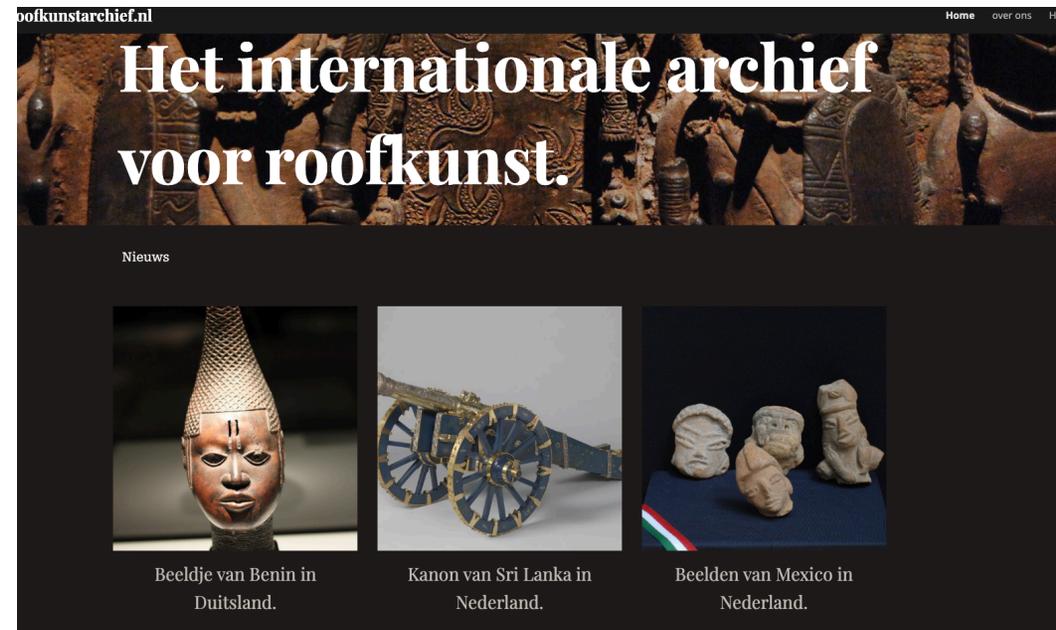
**1 kader.
Een tal van
verhalen.**



2. ROOFKUNSTARCHIEF.NL

Lucy, Hugo, Iván and Stan from Pleysier College Westerbeek in The Hague considered the restitution of stolen heritage and came up with ambitious plans. Inspired by Achille Mbembe's notion of the African archive, they literally designed an archive: not only for looted art from Africa, but from all continents. The website should allow visitors to see whether objects have been removed from their region.

The website and the actual restitution should be financed by the European Union. In collaboration with the African Union, the EU must also ensure that everyone with roots in Africa knows how to find the website. The site www.roofkunstarchief.nl is already online, although most of it still needs to be filled with looted art that is currently in European museums.





3. MBOK@: THE WORLD, A VILLAGE

Naser, Améline, Esther and Serafien, also from Sint Jan Berchmanscollege in Brussels, designed an app that aims to counteract the “necropolitics” – an important notion in Mbembe’s philosophy – of current mainstream apps. Naser and his team wondered how to design a social medium where every voice could be heard. They drew inspiration from the prehistoric settlement of Catalhöyük. There was no central public space there. People could only reach their homes via other houses. In other words, it was a society without hierarchy.

Naser and his team wanted to find out how to design a new social medium based on the Catalhöyük model. How do you deal with hate messages? And how do you give critical voices a platform? The pupils sought answers by crafting by hand a model of a village with the same structure as the prehistoric settlement. For each problem – such as the question of who should make decisions when there are millions of users – they came up with an architectural solution. In turn, the architecture helped the pupils to refine their ideas about the app.



Team 3: MBOK@: The world, a village



4. IF WALLS COULD SPEAK

On behalf of the entire class, Gijs, Marion and Inge, students from the orientation year at the mbo-college Firda in Drachten, presented the design "If walls could speak". To do this, they collected, with the whole class, plastic waste from the beaches of the island Terschelling. They turned the waste into tiles and wrote short texts or drew pictures on them to encourage people to take better care of the earth. The intention is that the tiles will eventually form a wall.

To give the project an international dimension, the students want to create a Do It Yourself box, where people from distant countries can also make their own tiles with their own words of wisdom or drawings on them. Gijs and his team see their design as a silent protest. They believe that something beautiful like their tiles will reach more people than harsh action.



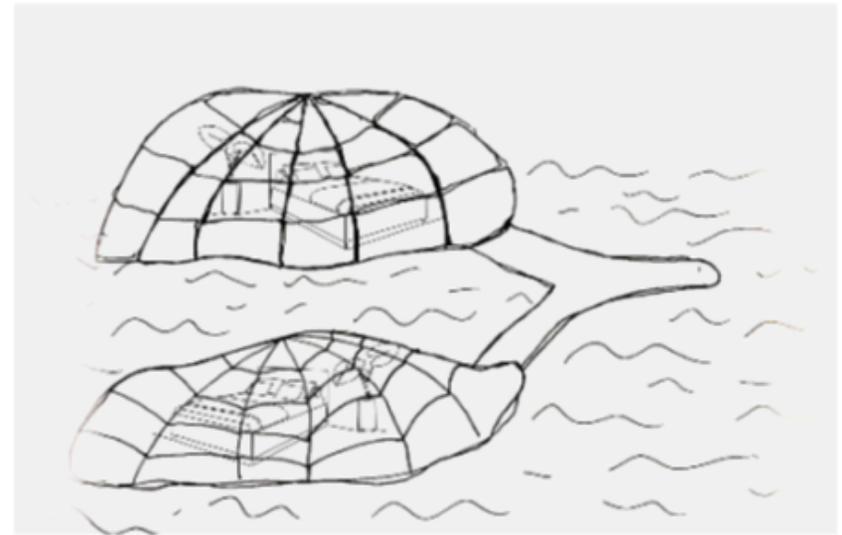
Team 4: If walls could speak



5. (DON'T) BE SO NOSY

Eva van der Zand, a master's student at Jönköping University in Sweden, is working on an art project for the Bosch Parade. Eva has taken the unequal distribution of clean air as the starting point for her project. Among other things, she wants to create a floating glass installation in the shape of a nose and lungs, the most important organs involved in breathing.

The installation is intended to become a residence for philosophers, artists, lung patients and anyone who wants to reflect on breathing. Eva hopes that in the future, artists from distant countries with extreme air pollution will also be able to stay at her residence.



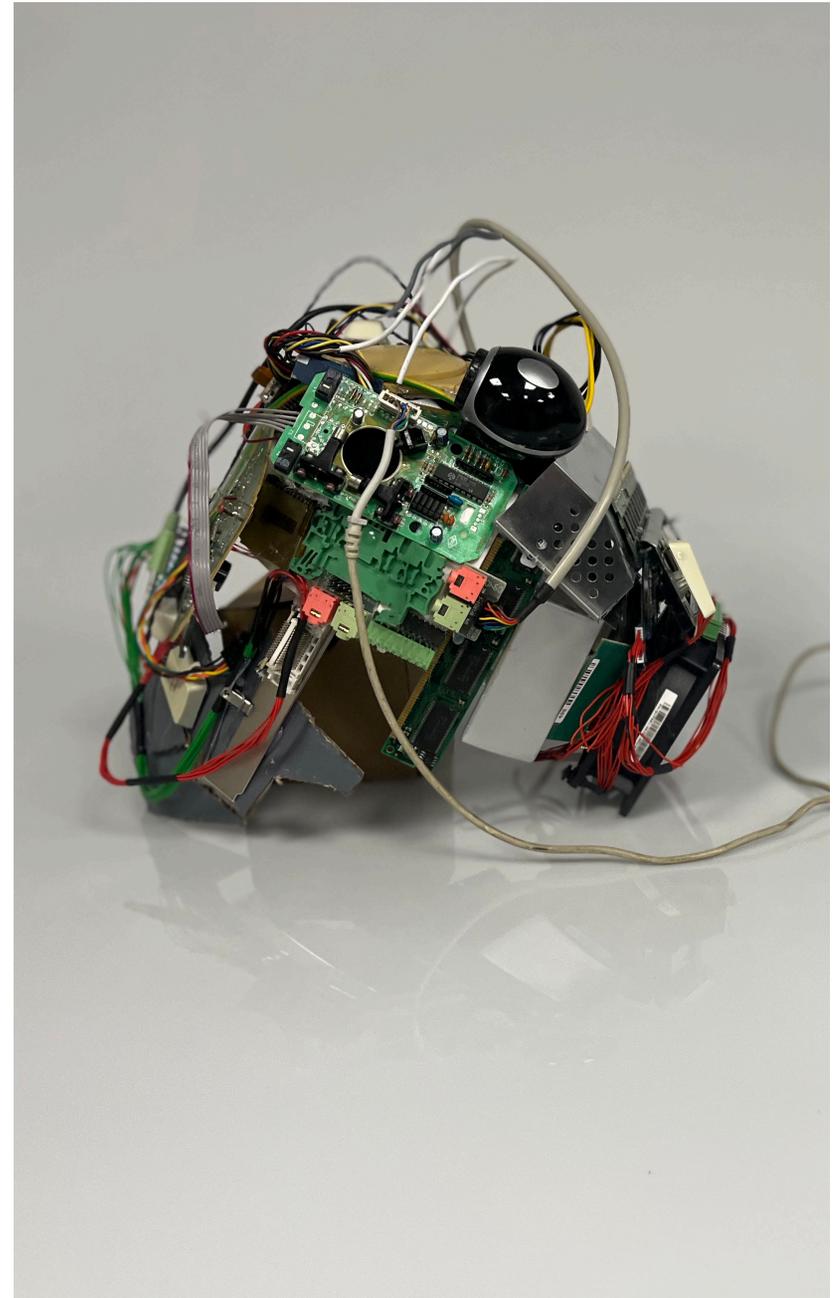
Team 5: Don't be so nosy



6. INTERFACE

Luuk Schaeffer, a fourth-year student in the Digital Design and Motion programme at the mbo-college Sint Lucas in Eindhoven, decided not to create a digital design for the Achille Mbembe Challenge. This was far too easy, he thought. Instead, he made a tangible object: a helmet made from old computer parts. Luuk calls the helmet 'Interface'.

In a short video, he shows with a touch of Irony what the helmet stands for. The helmet symbolises the manipulation and data theft of Big Tech companies, against which we are still insufficiently protected. The design also takes away an important means of power from these companies, namely facial recognition. With his design, Luuk mainly wants to start a conversation about the quick and often automatic way in which we give up our privacy.



Team 6: Interface



7. SAJHA KHETI: OUR KNOWLEDGE. OUR DATA. OUR BREATH

Asmita, Gyanendra and Iacob, third-year Business Administration students at the University of Applied Sciences Europe in Amsterdam, and intern designer LeAnne, designed Sajha Kheti. The design consists of an app and the outline for an information campaign to stop the exploitation of Nepalese farmers. Currently, farmers upload photos of their crops to supposedly useful apps from foreign companies. These companies use the farmers' data to train AI systems and then sell the technology to international traders. This allows the traders to predict when the farmers will harvest. Just before the harvest, the traders then cause the prices for crops to drop.

Sajha Kheti aims to reverse this trend. It will be a cooperative platform that returns 80 percent of its profits to local farmers. Data will remain in Nepal, and farmers' traditional ecological knowledge will be linked to locally trained AI. If the app is successful, it could also be implemented in other countries in the Global South, according to Asmita's team.

Our Knowledge

Our Data

Our Breath



Sajha
Kheti

More Than an App
A Movement
For Digital Freedom
and Justice



MADE POSSIBLE BY

Anton Jurgens Fonds
Baltan Laboratories
Boom Uitgevers
Brainwash Festival
buroLab
Cultuurfonds
Filosofie Magazine
Gemeente Den Haag
IAS (Amsterdam University)
KU Leuven
Kunstmuseum
M.A.O.C. Gravin van Bylandt Stichting
MAS
Mauritshuis
Novo Nordisk
Universiteit Utrecht
Stichting de Filosoof
Stichting Utopa
Socrates & co
Université Libre de Bruxelles
Wereldmuseum

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