

Jury report Achille Mbembe Challenge – Speech Martine Gosselink, chair of the jury of the Achille Mbembe Challenge at the Award Ceremony of the Spinozalens 2025, 24 November 2025

On 15 November, seven finalist teams presented their designs to the jury at the Wereldmuseum Leiden. Apart from me, the other jury members were lawyer Daphina Misiedjan, philosopher of technology Katleen Gabriels, and cultural worker Erica Cargaglione.

I can already tell you that we were deeply impressed by the presentations.

First, I will discuss the pupils' designs and announce which pupil team we selected as the winner. Then, I do the same for the students.

PUPILS

Design: 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-Jan 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.

The jury members appreciate the clear focus of this project and the semantic twist the pupils gave to the concept of “inspiration”. Of course, we are very curious about the results of the survey. And we'll give you a hint: it will probably take several types of activities and measures to increase parental involvement.

www.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.

The jury is delighted that this design has already led to tangible results. In our opinion, Lucy, Hugo, Iván and Stan have demonstrated that they understand Mbembe's ideas well. They approach restitution at the institutional level, where the responsibility lies. And they also focus explicitly on people from countries of origin. Only when you know your own roots can you develop your own identity, as Lucy and her teammates rightly argue.

Another tip from the jury: if you continue with your design, first try to define what looted art actually is. Only then will you know which objects should be included on your site and which should not.

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 necropolitical approach - 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 Çatalhöyük. 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 Çatalhöyük 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.

The jury finds it remarkable that Naser and his team took a historical example as their starting point. You have built a beautiful model! We find the idea of communal ownership of a non-profit app very appealing. It expresses idealism. But if you decide to pursue this further, bear in mind that utopia can easily turn into dystopia. People who have a very clear idea of 'good' and 'evil' do not always have the best intentions towards others, precisely because they do not take into account the complexity of values and norms.

Final verdict of the jury

Dear pupils, you have made it very difficult for us. The jury was unable to reach a unanimous decision. Consider that a great compliment. In the end, “Inspiring Parents” received one vote from the jury, the other vote went to “www.roofkunstarchief.nl” and... two votes went to MBOK@. This makes the app the winner. All jury members ultimately agreed that this was the most detailed and well-thought-out design.

STUDENTS

If walls could speak

On behalf of the entire class, Gijs, Marion and Inge, students from the orientation year “design and media” 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.

The jury finds the idea behind the design creative and very strong. It is also a nice reference to the Dutch notion of 'Tegeltjeswijsheid'. The design offers a way to be constantly reminded of the plastic soup. By removing the plastic from the water, the sea and its inhabitants are given the chance to breathe again, as Gijs explained during the presentation. And, here as well, a suggestion from the jury: perhaps the team could pay a little more attention to the aesthetics of texts and drawings on the tiles.

(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.

According to the jury, Eva's design has the potential to become an interdisciplinary project, but it still needs a bit more focus. We find the tension between privacy on the one hand and collective responsibility on the other, which she wants to express in it, interesting. We are curious about the final version of this design.

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; I recommend watching the video on the Spinozalens website! 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.

According to the jury, Luuk has certainly succeeded in his aim. The helmet immediately raises numerous questions. What do I pay attention to? Who am I with all this technology that penetrates so deeply into my life? Luuk's artwork is a sophisticated object: it takes your breath away, precisely to give you breathing space. The name for the helmet – Interface – is particularly well chosen.

Sajha Kheti: Our Knowledge. Our Data. Our Breath

Asmita, Gyanendra and Jacob, 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.

The presentation that Asmita and her team gave to the jury was crystal clear. The design has a clear focus and is extremely relevant, especially when you consider that around 65 percent of the Nepalese population works in the agricultural sector and is exploited by foreign

companies. Mbembe's ideas resonate in all kinds of ways in Sajha Kheti. The project has enormous potential.

The students didn't make it easy for the jury either, although two projects clearly stood out: Interface and Sajha Kheti. I'll start with Interface. The helmet can certainly spark conversation, it is a wonderful work of art, which is why I will do my utmost to find a home for it in a technology museum.

However, it will probably have less impact than Sajha Kheti, who are the winners! Sajha Kheti is a design with enormous potential. We therefore hope that the prize will help the creators to realise the app and the campaign.