Towards an ACHS Netherlands Chapter: Relational Heritage Spaces Workshop

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On 27 January 2026, we welcomed scholars and heritage practitioners to the University of Groningen for *Relational Heritage Spaces*—a participatory workshop that launched the Netherlands Chapter of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies. We gathered in the wonderfully atmospheric old courtroom of the University of Groningen's Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society to **discuss the concept of "relational heritage"**, functioning as both an analytical lens and a practical question. The choice of topic is based on the 2026 ACHS theme and forms part of ongoing explorations of heritage not as a fixed object or site, but as a web of relations between people and things, institutions and communities and past and present. We have also asked: how can relationality be interpreted in our concrete practices?

Around **25 participants joined us from universities, museums, and heritage organisations** across the country, many of whom were **PhD candidates and early-career researchers**. Thanks to support from the Faculty of Arts, the workshop was free, open, and fuelled by shared food and drinks. Our aim was simple: to share ideas and **begin building a network that connects critical heritage scholarship and practice** in the Netherlands.

Fig. 1. Hester Dibbits during her keynote lecture.

Before the workshop, we circulated a **short survey to get a sense of participants' interests**. The responses showed strong enthusiasm for a Dutch ACHS Chapter and revealed a wonderfully diverse range of research areas—from digital heritage and provenance to climate change, sound archives, rural heritage, and the political uses of the past. Many respondents also highlighted the need for a space to meet, collaborate, and think together across institutions and disciplines. **Results of the survey can be found here**: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mj_rCu7tr9p0KVYq47JCBTBYVbVGd1dp1UeUw5QGty0/edit?tab=t.0

The morning opened with a keynote from **Hester Dibbits (Reinwardt Academy)**, who invited us to return to the deceptively simple question of what heritage *is*. She emphasised heritage as a **process shaped by emotions, attachments, and social dynamics**—messy, relational, and never fully settled. Focusing on socially engaged heritage work, she argued that relationality requires moving beyond fixed communities **toward dynamic networks of attachments and meanings**. Heritage, in this sense, is not about securing consensus but about investigating feelings, emotions, and social dynamics. Drawing on ethnographic and anthropological approaches, she **emphasised embodied research and reflexivity** as crucial tools for understanding how relations between people and things are formed, remembered, and sometimes erased. A relational approach, she concluded, does not eliminate conflict. It makes complexity visible and workable.

Fig. 2. Cindy Zalm during her keynote lecture.

Cindy Zalm (Wereldmuseum Amsterdam) followed with a **practitioner's perspective**, reflecting on how collections carry the weight of historical relations and how museums today navigate the tensions between openness, care, and responsibility. She examined **how collections are themselves products of historical relations**, such as military, scientific, administrative, and often shaped by colonial hierarchies. Museum catalogues and classification systems, far from neutral, continue to reproduce these legacies within contemporary digital infrastructures. At the same time, museums are shifting from hierarchical to more dialogical forms of collaboration with originating communities and stakeholders. Yet this shift raises tensions. Principles such as FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable) must be balanced with CARE (collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility, ethics), a balance that is difficult to implement in practice. Zalm **framed these dilemmas through relational questions**: how do objects connect to communities today? How do we move from preservation alone toward relevance? Caring for collections, she argued, cannot be separated from caring for people.

In the afternoon, we shifted into hands-on work. Hester guided us through an "**Emotion Networking**" exercise using a museum object selected by Cindy. The exercise invited reflection on the different emotional resonances the object evoked within the group and how these resonances changed our own perspective on feelings about this object. Designed for contested heritage contexts, the method foregrounds collaborative learning, intersubjectivity, and reflexivity. Rather than debating opinions, participants explored **how emotions shape their engagements with heritage** and how these emotion networks intersect.

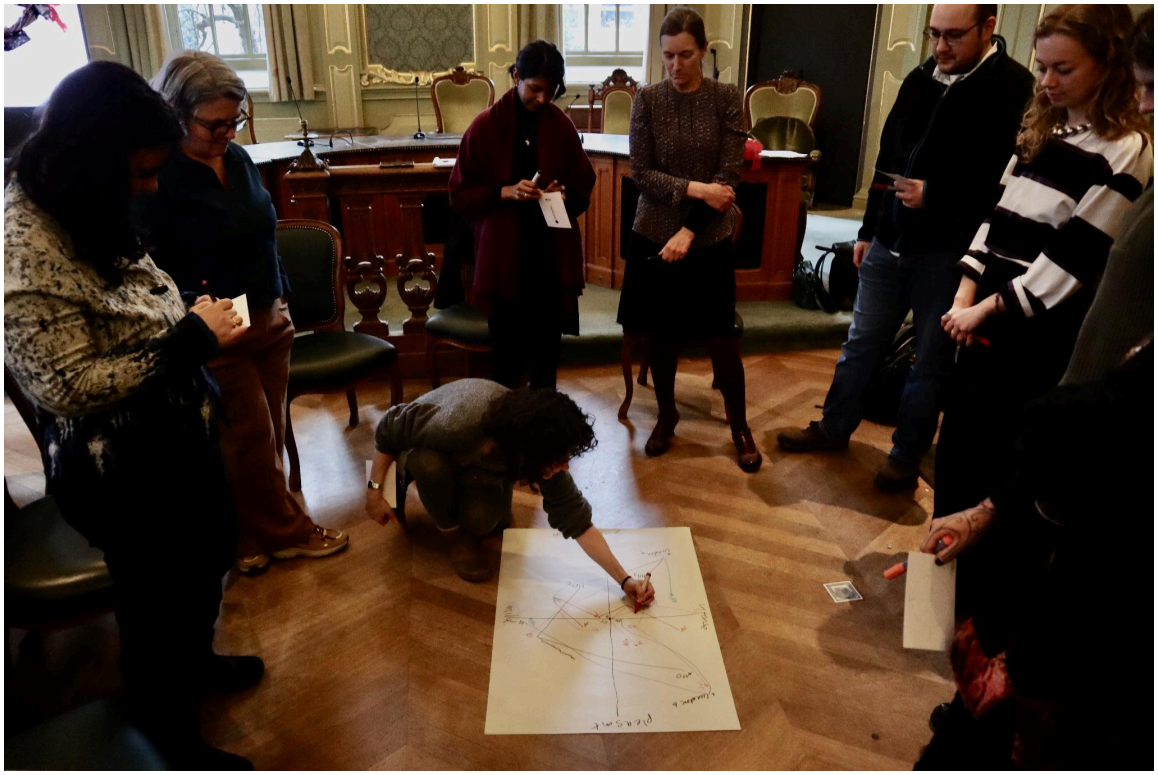

Fig. 3. Participants of the workshop during the "Emotion Networking" exercise.

This exercise was followed by **round tables** structured around two themes: **agents and tensions**. Who are heritage actors and agents? What does agency entail across different disciplines? Can objects themselves be considered heritage actors, and if so, under what conditions? Participants were asked to **respond from within their own research domains and backgrounds**. The discussion revealed that while terms are defined differently across disciplines, conceptual synergies can emerge through dialogue. The exercise highlighted both the diversity and the connective potential within the emerging network.

By the end of the day, the foundations for an ACHS Netherlands Chapter felt firmly in place. **Our next steps** include consolidating the network through a mailing list, forming a small coordinating group (please contact us if you are interested!), and identifying thematic clusters for future collaboration. Future meetings will develop shared research lines and articulate the contribution of scholars and practitioners based in the Netherlands to critical heritage studies within the broader ACHS community.

We are grateful to everyone who joined us—and to **Talisha Schilder** for her careful documentation of the day.

Fig. 4. Participants of the workshop.