

Junior Researcher Workshop (In)Human Time (Amsterdam, 23 May 18)

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, May 23, 2018
Deadline: Mar 26, 2018

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Junior Researcher Workshop (In)Human Time: Artistic Responses to Radiotoxicity

In association with "As Slowly as Possible": A Symposium of the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, 24-26 May 2018

Radiotoxicity – the toxic effects of a radioactive substance on living cells or tissue – is notoriously intangible. Not only is ionizing radiation imperceptible to the unaided human senses, diseases caused by radiation exposure often develop only years or decades later, making it hard to make juridical claims. To complicate matters, radiotoxicity does not only rupture human time, but opens the inhuman perspective of a deep future, forcing thousands of future generations to live with the radioactive contaminants released today. What role does art and visual culture assume in debates on radiotoxicity and its complex temporalities? How have artists responded historically to the phenomenon of radiotoxicity and how has this changed with major 'nuclear events' like the detonation of the atomic bomb, the Three Mile Island accident or the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear disasters? And what aesthetic strategies do artists develop to make radiotoxicity tangible? These and related questions shall form the frame for this workshop.

While the term 'deep time' has been introduced by John McPhee as recently as 1981, the concept was developed more than two centuries ago in early modern British and Scottish scholarship and has undergone several transformations since (see for example Paolo Rossi 1984 and Martin J.S. Rudwick 1995, 2002). In the last couple of years, the concept of deep time has gained unprecedented momentum with the Anthropocene debate that was kicked loose in the year 2000 by Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen and his colleague Eugene Stoermer. The Anthropocene is the most recent proposed geological time period superseding the Holocene. Notwithstanding the many problems this term raises, the Anthropocene urges us to think beyond human timescales without losing sight of the human legacy within them.

One of the practices to which this kind of understanding is pertinent is the long-term storage of radioactive waste. High level radioactive waste and its inconceivable aftermath brings us into proximity with deep time and urges us to find long-term storage solutions for the countless generations to come. In this regard, not only it points to a deep past (the Uranium Oxide that is used to fuel reactors is mined from deposits as old as the Earth) but importantly poses the challenge of engaging with a deep future, that is, the millennia to come in which waste elements like plutonium pose a threat to the living environment.

In many ways, then, thinking nuclear matter's temporalities means to think across timescales, inviting questions about the social obligations toward future generations. At the same time, radiation's temporality is also an inevitable part of the current moment: all over the world, bodies and environments carry the traces of the radiation they were exposed to decades earlier (Joseph Masco 2004). In the face of this 'slow violence' (Rob Nixon 2013), we might consider 'staying with the trouble' (Donna Haraway 2016) to engage with the ways in which nuclear matter not only opens up the inhuman perspective of deep time, but also disrupts biological time and human rhythms, as becomes evident in reproductive issues and disease.

In the light of the above, we ask: What role could art and visual culture play in the discourses surrounding radioactivity and -toxicity and its complex temporality? How have artists responded historically to radiotoxicity and how has this changed over the past decades? How do they render radiotoxicity sensible? This workshop welcomes papers exploring one or more of the following themes around deep time and/or radiotoxicity in art:

Deep timescales, including deep pasts and futures, and their conceptual and aesthetic challenges

Radioactive waste and radiotoxicity in the arts and popular culture

The (in)human temporalities of radiotoxicity

The aesthetic, ethical and/or political dimensions of nuclear waste repositories

The representation of radio-contaminated landscapes

Historical perspectives on radiotoxicity in art

We are open to proposals coming from contemporary arts but also to papers offering a historical perspective.

Following up on earlier meetings that were part of the Nuclear Waste Weeks at the 'Environmental Humanities Center' at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, this junior researcher workshop takes the ASAP Symposium as an opportunity to bring together PhD students, advanced Master students, and early career researchers from various disciplines within the Humanities and Sociology to share their research.

Format

This workshop aims to be a working session in which there is ample time to discuss the participants' research and their questions in-depth. Papers will be circulated two weeks before the workshop, and during the workshop we will have 10 minutes (max!) presentations in which participants are encouraged to highlight problems and questions. After each presentation we will have about 30 minutes for each individual paper to give feedback and discuss in depth the issues raised. If you wish to participate, please drop an email with a short description of your research and an abstract of 250 words to r.e.de.vos@rug.nl until 26 March 2018 on one or more of the suggested themes. The deadline for the full papers (3000-5000 words) is 7 May 2018.

Organisers

Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou (Georg Simmel Centre, EHESS), Anna Volkmar (LUCAS, Leiden University), Ruby de Vos (ICOOG, University of Groningen)

23 May 2018, 13:00 - 18:00, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Reference:

CFP: Junior Researcher Workshop *“(In)Human Time* (Amsterdam, 23 May 18). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 24, 2018 (accessed Jan 8, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/17453>>.