Milko den Leeuw of Authentication in Art interviewing Harmen de Jongh, TAHDa associate

Can you please give a short introduction of yourself?

Dr Harmen de Jongh has more than 20 years of experience in setting up and running multi-disciplinary project teams in a synergy of scientific excellence and industrial relevance. He is author on more than 140 scientific publications in the field of protein chemistry, food physics and bio-spectroscopy and inventor of 8 patents on food applications. He received his Ph.D. in 1993 at the Centre for Biomembranes and Lipid Enzymology (Utrecht University, Netherlands), worked as post-doc at the Laboratory for Chemical-Physics of Macromolecules at Interfaces (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) and the New Chemistry Laboratory (University of Oxford, UK), was scientific supervisor at the Centre for Protein Technology (Wageningen University, The Netherlands) and worked for 18 years as team leader and senior scientist at the Wageningen Centre for Food Sciences and TI Food and Nutrition where he was in 2009-2010 Program Director of the 'Sensory and Structure' theme. He is the initiator of the Protein Competence Center in Wageningen and founded ProtIn consultancy in 2013. As part of his activities he intiated a research managment system for the AgroFood sector to drive innovative developments by finding congruencies in existing data-sets obtained by cross-correlation of information derived in a multiplicity of disciplines.

Can you explain TAHDa and what it stands for?

TAHDa stands for Technical Art History Database and is a research management system that relates digitized information to questions or interests a user may have by combining shared information items while leaving these within their context. The system does not accumulate or gather data, but provides a hierarchical structure that enables one to find links between entries wherever. The output of TAHDa provides a new view on the same item from another perspective in time, technical aspect, purpose or opinion. It leaves information in its original context as every piece of information, for example the description of an art work at a certain exhibition or a particular material analysis, is the result of a defined purpose or research question. TAHDa is not a closed platform, but a network where people can share and learn from others, while preserving all rights and privacies.

TAHDa seems to be a part of the 4th industrial revolution. Could TAHDa be the game changer in the development of new materials for artists, learning from the past?

Innovation in material science *starts* with learning from the past, not unnecessarily re-inventing the wheel. It is not only about characterization of end products, but also the route to these new developments, the hurdles encountered, application windows tested, sharing failures and successes. A material that might be useful in the application on canvas, might not be effective for ceramics but very innovative in, for example, the automobile industry. Exploring cross-border applications, techniques, and procedures is what will ultimately benefit material producers as well as end users. The stakeholders of TAHDa are therefore plural in background, vision, and ambition, but all share an interest in art objects.

Most IT-structures are very strong in correlation but not in causality. So the human facture is still needed. What TAHDa add to authenticity in relation correlation or causality?

Every interpretation of data, every combination of results, directed output, is a human activity and driven by a curiosity to understand, to create. Deriving correlations based on digitized similarities does not guarantee new insights. It is the overview of the information landscape, insight in possible links or relations that make any development in art (or impact on cultural heritage) valuable. TAHDa aims to provide that overview.

Not everyone might want to immediately jump in. Mostly because of privacy and long-standing traditions. The field of authentication especially is still strongly rooted in a 19th century model of hearsay and copied opinions. Can TAHDa build the bridge between tradition and modernity and bring more insights in history?

What TAHDa will provide is that multi-angle view on discussions. Inherent to the structure of the research management system is that non-founded information will appear as loose ends in the information landscape, not judged on its value, but put into perspective with other pieces of information. So, yes: TAHDa will be bridging tradition and modernity in art historic research, as it does not judge its actuality and leaves any insight within its original frame of context. Alternatively, insights acquired by bringing together information from different angles and in different perspectives will allow one to derive sound and more objective evaluation of, for example, authentication questions. As such, TAHDa would be an explicit format to support dossier-building in juridical cases. In an analogy: while digging for gold mid-19th century in California, they didn't find oil as they weren't looking for it. It did, however, mutually affect each other by way of a boost in goods transport, local economy, and entrepreneurship, and lead to the act that regulates land-property. A multitude of activities in the hunt for gold and oil set the contours for the economic history of America.

What are TAHDa's weaknesses?

TAHDa's weakness is that the stakeholders need to see the incentive to participate. One learns by sharing. Everyone stays owner of their own attributed information or views, but one can only learn from others by sharing. One of the mechanisms to create revenue for stakeholders is by applying the Blendle-system on information that has been shared with other users. From a technical side, by employing a straightforward entry-format, where no actual data have to be uploaded, the threshold to participate is very low. Alternatively, TAHDa will have funds to acquire existing data or to facilitate digitalization of new items. Another weak aspect is that the actual pieces of information remain with the owner, and any changes in, for example, a location on a server, a folder or an address, remains the responsibility of the owner. Users may use external providers to host their data and TAHDa can help facilitate that. However, inaccessible information will not show up in queries, creating missed opportunities in sharing.

Harmen, thank you for your time and patience in answering questions for AiA.
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