

## Honours Classes: 'Who Owns Life'

**Organising institution:**

Leiden University

**Faculty/Department/Programme/External partners:**

Faculty of Humanities, School for Art History

**Abstract:**

In these Honours Classes students are acquainted with biotechnological practice in a biological lab under the direction of Prof. Dr. Robert Zwijnenberg and bio-artist Boo Chapple. Hands-on ethical issues are discussed and humanities take part in the debate on contemporary technological progress.

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**Description:**

Prof. Dr. Robert Zwijnenberg is professor of Arts and Science Interactions and Director of the Arts and Genomics Centre of Leiden University. He is associated to the Faculty of Humanities, School for Art History, with the teaching assignment: theory of modern visual arts. Robert Zwijnenberg studies the relationship between natural sciences and bio art. He applies this new type of art with living material – cells, bacteria and zebra fish – in his lectures in order to raise philosophical, ethical, scientific and cultural questions. A wonderful example of an alternative way to make normative issues linked to the design of our society discussable.

Just like predictive medicine, 'Genomics' is very important for the future, for who and what we are as humans. This predictive medicine, which implies healing what is still healthy now, but will not be any more in the near future, may have far-reaching consequences. We can and must ask ourselves all kinds of ethical questions in this context. Should we, for instance, amputate a leg before it is diseased?

Together with Professor De Groot, this professor also gives Honours Classes 'Who Owns Life'. These classes are only accessible to excellent bachelors. In these Honours Classes students are acquainted with biotechnological practice in a biological lab, under the direction of Prof. Dr. Robert Zwijnenberg and bio artist Boo Chapple. Students work in a laboratory with zebra fish embryos and fertile chicken eggs. In this way they are confronted with questions like 'Where is the line between life and not-life, between life and death?' How can we link what goes on in laboratories to the debate on abortion and reproductive technology? What are the political conditions for access to genetic technology like DNA amplification and GFP transformation? Through literature and guest speakers the participants also reflect on ethical, political, legal and social consequences of humanities applications, like genetically modified plants and animals, predictive medicine, designer babies, etc. Each expert presents a specific theme and moderates a debate.

In this way this professor introduces the debate on biotechnology in humanities. Through imagination, art may give access to these technological activities. It is important for humanities scholars to think about this. Technological advancement cannot be stopped, but can be steered in a certain direction. According to this professor, it is both important and desirable for humanities scholars to participate in this debate.