

With contributions from:

Ren Loren Britton;  
Luna BuGhanem;  
Daniel Frota de Abreu;  
Robin Hartanto Honggare;  
Christopher Lee;  
Russel Hlongwane;  
LUMBUNG.SPAC /  
Reinaart Vanhoe;  
LUMBUNG.KIOS /  
Krista Jantowski;  
Simone C Niquille;  
NIEUWE INSTITUUT /  
Delany Boutkan, Federica Notari,  
Marina Otero Verzier &  
Katia Truijen;  
O grupo inteiro /  
Vitor Cesar & Ligia Nobre;  
Eva Posas;  
the MUTANTS / Lou Mo;  
Fusun Türetken;  
WORKNOT! /  
Arvand Pourabbasi &  
Golnar Abbasi.

koozArch x Nieuwe Instituut

# ON RESEARCH

KoozArch, in collaboration with Nieuwe Instituut, presents a publication marking the 10th anniversary of the Research Fellowship Programme.

2025





The Nieuwe Instituut Fellowship Programme, founded by Marina Otero during her tenure as Head of Research, brings together international practitioners and researchers working across architecture, design and digital culture, inviting proposals through an open global call reviewed by a distinguished jury of curators, academics and creative leaders. Selected fellows receive mentorship, archival access, workspaces and a stipend, with opportunities to transform their research into public programming, exhibitions, films or publications in collaboration with the Nieuwe Instituut. Over the past decade the programme has supported more than forty individuals and collectives, including Dele Adeyemo, Ramon Amaro, Andrea Bagnato, Daphne Bakker, Annet Dekker, Natalie Dixon and Simone C Niquille, among many others.

Dear Kooz friend,

We are delighted to share with you the fruits of the editorial collaboration between KoozArch and the Nieuwe Instituut on occasion of the 10th anniversary of Nieuwe Instituut's Research Fellowship Programme.

The editorial project unfolds through a series of ten in-depth critical contributions jointly developed by KoozArch and Nieuwe Instituut, structured around two complementary formats – five conversations and five essays – that aim to establish a reflective and discursive space that bridges the research developed by fellows of the Nieuwe Instituut's Research Fellowship Programme since its inception.

Through this collaboration, the series seeks not only to present and interconnect the diverse investigations pursued by past and current fellows, but also to consider their broader cultural and intellectual impact. By revisiting the fellowship's evolving body of research, the project aspires to offer insight into how these individual explorations have collectively shaped and influenced the trajectory of the Nieuwe Instituut. In doing so, it highlights the institution's ongoing transformation and its central role as a pioneering platform for architectural research, design innovation, and contemporary discourse.

The Research Fellowship Programme itself has provided a unique framework for supporting international practitioners and researchers working across the fields of architecture, design, and digital culture. Each year, proposals are solicited through an open international call, ensuring accessibility and diversity of perspectives. A jury of distinguished curators, academics, and creative leaders carefully reviews and selects the fellows, evaluating projects for their originality, critical depth, and potential contribution to the field.

Once selected, fellows receive comprehensive institutional support, including mentorship, access to archival resources, dedicated workspace, and a research stipend. This environment enables them to develop their ideas into a range of possible outcomes – from public events and exhibitions to films, publications, and collaborative projects with the Nieuwe Instituut.

Ultimately, this partnership between KoozArch and the Nieuwe Instituut aspires to amplify the voices and visions emerging from the Fellowship Programme, situating them within a wider conversation about the present and future of research and practice across the fields of architecture, design and digital culture.

We hope you enjoy,  
Kooz & Nieuwe Instituut



## CONTENT

- A Modest Host:**  
10 years of fellowship at Nieuwe Instituut  
with Marina Otero Verzier, Katia Truijen, Delany Boutkan, Federica Notari pg. 8
- Near and Far:**  
researching intersections of site, story, and space  
with Luna BuGhanem, Daniel Frota de Abreu, Robin Hartanto Honggare pg. 23
- Define and Empower:**  
The School of Mutants on collectivism,  
companionship, and hope  
by Lou Mo, with input from the Mutants pg. 36
- Against Collective Exhaustion:**  
WORKNOT! learns to love the messenger  
by Arvand Pourabbasi & Golnar Abbasi / WORKNOT! pg. 43
- Speculating with Spirits:**  
Simone C Niquille and Russel Hlongwane  
with Simone C Niquille, Russel Hlongwane pg. 50
- Being with the Many:**  
O grupo inteiro and lumbung.space  
with O grupo inteiro, lumbung.space and lumbung kios pg. 65
- Shields, Wedges and Support Structures:**  
hacks on the way towards changing everything  
by Ren Loren Britton pg. 79
- Refusing the Format:**  
Fusun Türetken & Chris Lee on  
Material, Politics, and Aesthetics  
with Fusun Türetken and Christopher Lee pg. 88
- Xigagueta: A Vessel for Contemporary Art,  
Writing and Thinking**  
by Eva Posas pg. 104
- On Remaining Porous:**  
research as a lived practice  
by Delany Boutkan & Federica Notari pg. 114
- Appendix: Fellows 2014-2024**  
pg. 121

## A Modest Host: 10 years of fellowship at Nieuwe Instituut

Conversation with Delany Boutkan, Federica Notari, Katia Truijen and Marina Otero Verzier.

Stocktaking after a decade of fellowships granted by Nieuwe Instituut – which have helped to define and bolster the work of dozens of scholars and practitioners – researchers Delany Boutkan and Federica Notari join Katia Truijen and Marina Otero Verzier, reflecting on what it means to be a modest host for those whose routes are still emerging, and how the institution can evolve its modes of support.

**FEDERICA ZAMBELETTI / KOOZ** We're so glad to have the chance to talk about Nieuwe Instituut Research Fellowship Programme. Thank you all for allowing us to share and build upon that knowledge. So Marina and Katia, you formed the fellowship programme together almost ten years ago. What guided the founding of this project within the wider context of Nieuwe Instituut?

**MARINA OTERO VERZIER** Ten years ago – I can't believe it. When I started working at Nieuwe Instituut, Katia was already there and there was an existing Fellows programme. The fellows were appointed directly, often through a connection with a forthcoming exhibition or programme. In certain ways, we felt that this model did not allow us to challenge the institutional framework. Of course, the institution was open to other voices, but through quite a filtered and controlled agenda. At the same time, we thought that research practices were rather instrumentalised: research would be mobilised for a predetermined outcome. So we proposed another take on this: a fellowship program organised via an open call, and that would allow people to follow their own research interests, without the constraint of an outcome.

We put more emphasis on the research methodology and the topic rather than the output. That was quite unique, because in the landscape in which we were operating, money for research must be carefully justified before it is awarded: you have to know whether something is going to be a publication, an exhibition, a product or whatever. We decided that no, research doesn't always have to be linked to an end product. Actually, if you look at basic, scientific research is open to indeterminate results. So we decided to go that way; it was not easy, but we managed to convince the Instituut of this approach as a way to bring new voices, new ideas, even new formats; that a certain fiction with the institutional framework could be desirable.

**KATIA TRUIJEN** Indeed. When Marina arrived, there wasn't yet a dedicated research department, instead there were different ways in which researchers were involved at the Instituut, indeed often more in instrumental ways. With every project we worked on, we asked what it actually means to do research in a public institution. What does it mean to work with academics, with artists, with all those who are involved with research in a non-academic environment

– but within this framework of a state-funded cultural institution, as a place to make research public, and to do research in public.

Each iteration of the fellowship gave us an opportunity to reflect upon what it means to do research today, in the conditions that we are confronted with, whether that's in terms of national funding, societal conditions or the political positions we hold. We also considered what it means to do interdisciplinary research, in the context of architecture, design and digital culture, and what it takes to bring these different strands in conversation with one another – it's been really nice to see how these conversations evolved. Each of the fellows has followed their own particular trajectory, with distinct moments of expression, gathering, and ways of using their time to do research, whether this involved six months of archival research – to really spend time on reading and thinking – or whether it was through connecting more with people in and around the institution and its network. So I think the role of the institute varied greatly for every fellowship.

“Each iteration of the fellowship gave us an opportunity to reflect upon what it means to do research today, in the conditions that we are confronted with, whether that's in terms of national funding, societal conditions or the political positions we hold.”

- Katia Truijen



**MOV** There were frameworks or conditions that we were very passionate about. One was to have no clear output, because we were more interested in the process and what people might find out during the process. Secondly, researchers received funding even without achieving a clear outcome. That was very interesting – especially as we wanted to offer a decent amount of funding. So basically we started on like €12,000 – later that increased as well. The idea was to give money to people, without knowing exactly what they are going to do with it. We thought it was okay if a fellow used the money to pay the rent, because there are moments in your life that you need money to pay rent – that doesn't mean that you are not going to do anything of value. But maybe a fellowship in a cultural institution for researchers ought to account for the difficulties and the precarities in the field.

Personally, I've always been extremely driven and hard working – but there was a moment when I received a little travel grant from Columbia University and I spent it on my rent, otherwise I couldn't survive in New York. There are so many people who ought to be supported, and who will do the work – it's a matter of trust. Basically, institutional constraints generally represent a lack of trust in the people they pay, as they require so much paperwork or other bureaucratic proofs – meaning that you have to justify whether you are worth that trust.

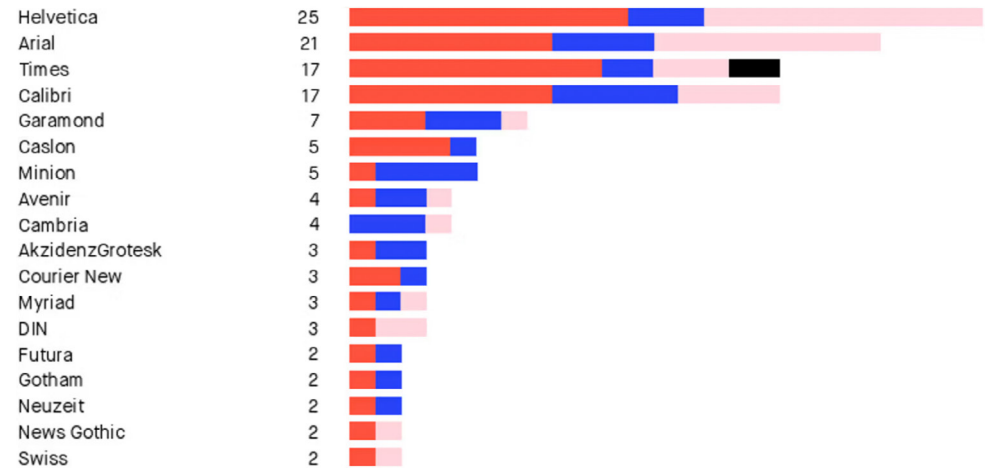
We tried to reverse that logic and say “we trust you”. We also tried to make the open call as open as possible – and at the same time, precise in what we were looking for. We were interested in methodologies for new forms of research, to look at other ways of being in the world, basically. That's what we are asking for: reimagining how we live together. We took a gamble on that, hoping that it could play well – but we were also open to failure.

“We were interested in methodologies for new forms of research, to look at other ways of being in the world.”

- Marina Otero Verzier

We also found it interesting to analyse the responses. This allowed us to see whether we were receiving greater numbers of proposals from the same country, city or university. Why is that interesting? Perhaps it allows us to see that we are putting too much emphasis on the written component of the application, or that the topics that we are emphasizing connect to a particular school of thought. That helps us to broaden our reach, so people don't think that these types of opportunities are not for them – for instance, because it's too academic. So over the years, we started to adjust things: allowing welcoming videos instead of texts; allowing people to communicate how they want – and to share this opportunity with as many people as possible. That was a beautiful learning process for us, always trying to think what can be improved.

**KT** Exactly. Sometimes former fellows have even helped us to shape the open call for the following year, or participate in the juries. Also, from the very first iteration, we'd never asked applicants for a CV or for letters of recommendation. Of course, during COVID we had a lot of remote fellowships,



Most common typefaces used in applications, Application Report Call for Fellows 2017, by Nieuwe Instituut Research Department in 2017: Marina Otero Verzier, Marten Kuijpers, Tamar Shafir, Katia Truijen and Klaas Kuitenbrouwer, Nieuwe Instituut.

which actually allowed people to do field research in their own geographies. Sometimes we were more interested in establishing a conversation between loosely thematic approaches. Other times, people could connect through methodologies or ways of working. One year we specifically invited collectives, which I think is also something that continued.

**MOV** Yeah. Perhaps Katia, Federica and Delany can explain this to a greater degree, but the point is that we try to offer a form of hospitality, which many institutions are not designed to give. Mostly, you impose institutional structures to host people. For instance, you have a contract and assignments. What happens when you host someone whose research has no predetermined output, who joins a research department without a fixed idea of where they are going? That requires a form of friendship, solidarity and generosity that is very difficult to articulate within the daily life of an institution – and we did our best. As coordinators of the programme, Katia, Delany and Federica went beyond their responsibilities as researchers at Nieuwe Instituut – it was an investment of time and love that was quite incredible.

**DELANY BOUTKAN** The term friendship that you use resonates so much with how we imagined to approach the fellowship... Federica and I tried to continue the amazing work that Marina and Katia set up in the institute after they left. Even though those who leave – never really leave the research team! The fellowship is and always has been a moment to start developing a relationship between the research team and the fellow. The six months of the fellowship are in a somewhat formal framework, they function within an agreement of sorts, with a set budget from an institution for example. But at the same time it's also very much about getting to know each other as people and as practitioners. I like the way Federica often puts it: we try to meet the researchers and the research where it's at. It takes time for us as a research team to figure out what you can do for somebody.

That's why it's always very important for us to ask the fellows, what do you need from us? Are researchers coming with a preconceived idea of how they want to engage with the institution, or are they open to different forms; do researchers prefer to have monthly meetings where, as we did with previous

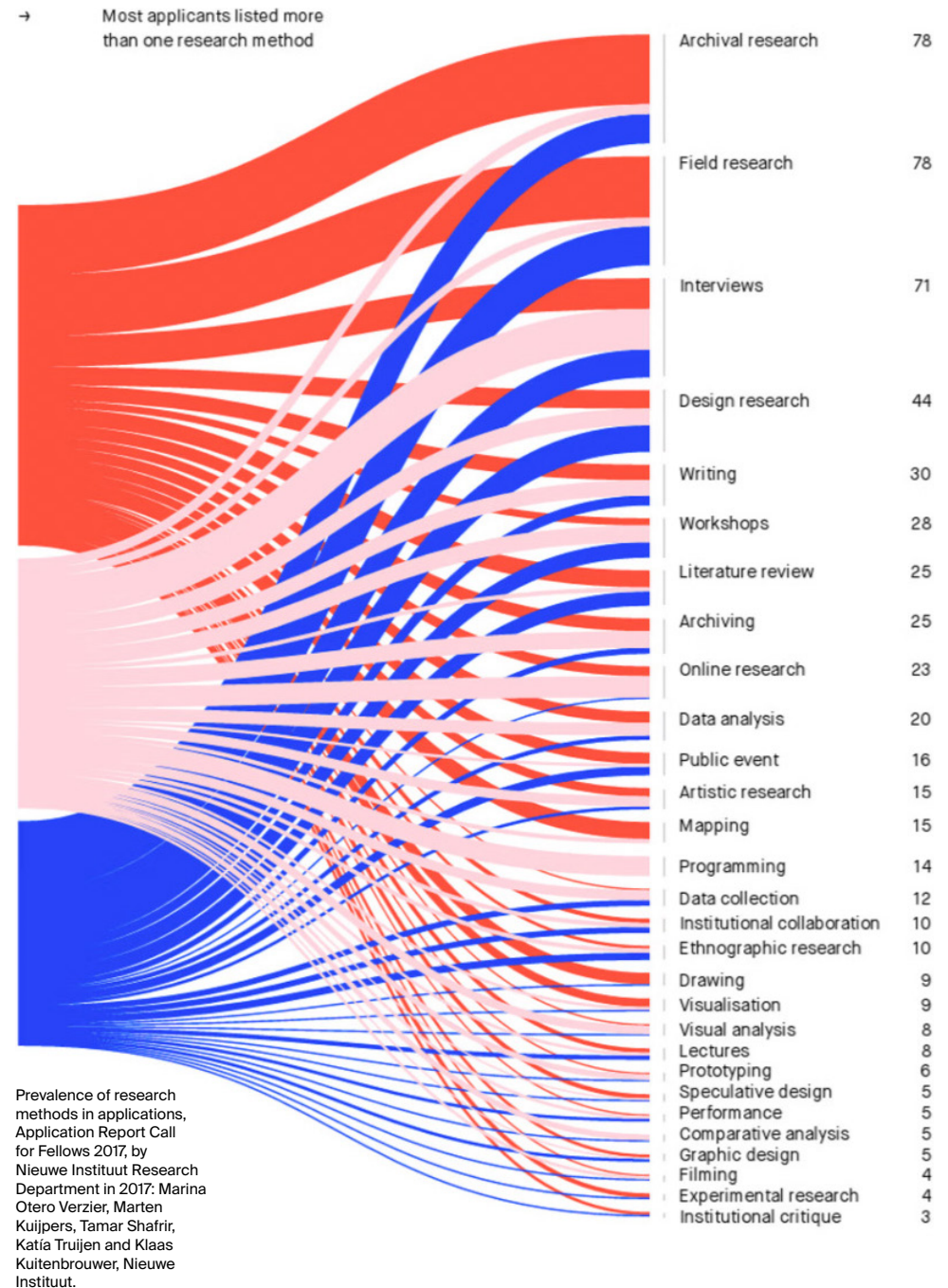
fellows, we listen to the sound of rain pre recorded by the fellows as part of their research for example? Or maybe fellows are more curatorial with their engagement; they will host specific sessions about aspects of their topic. It's about allowing for that flexibility in how you meet each other, what conditions the way that you meet each other and how you can host.

**MOV** There were some tricky moments related to migration processes and visas. Some fellows arrive from places they may wish to escape; they are automatically cast in the image of those who want to remain “illegally”, so to speak. The challenges and the possibilities of making people feel at home required different forms of engagement – from convincing legal or financial teams, to mitigating any risks that the institution perceives and so on. This is not specific to Nieuwe Instituut, but rather any institution that attempts to be bulletproof. Risk is always within a particular range of the possible – but you don't want too much risk, especially in an institution that depends on government funding. Navigating all of that is very draining – again, convincing people and the institution to extend trust, in many different ways – especially while making people feel at home, at the same time. These two things are extremely difficult: one requires a cognisance of structures of bureaucracy and persistence, while the other requires more or less the opposite: being open, accommodating, generous and understanding. This combination is so unique and I'm always in awe to see how Katía, Federica and Delany have been doing that work. That's really at the core of the success of the fellowship program.

**FEDERICA NOTARI** Well, first of all, thank you – also, on behalf of Delany and Katía – for the kind words. It's really lovely to hear that it comes across, but it really does come from this space of love for the practice that we're in – which is this weird notion of nurturing practice-based research within an institution. Whenever we get to engage with people situated within other contexts – in collectives, or decades-long practice experiences – where they practice forms of research, it's incredibly exciting.

But it's also interesting that you note, for instance, how we put out these official open calls. They're not as formal as many other open calls, because we don't ask for CVS or letters of recommendation – but they still are on an official website; they require time, space and a level of engagement that is nevertheless institutional. Then from the first moment we meet with them, all of a sudden we're people – the fellows are meeting Delany, Katía, Marina. The shift occurs right at the moment that you kind of engage; it feels very natural and effortless, but it is a shift of tone when you actually meet the workers behind the institution and the open call.

**DB** That's also why conversations like this are also so important – especially for a ten year anniversary, to create moments of reflection and acknowledge everyone that has worked on the fellowship over the years. I've been working for about five years now with the fellows, part of which has overlapped with Marina and Katía. But there are also fellows who predated Federica and I in coordinating the programme. At a certain point, they became names on a list – but it was really important for us to bring that sensitivity back, which Marina, Katía and Federica describe. The most helpful thing the fellowship can do is to allow researchers time – to connect and to be open to all kinds of modes of research practice. To learn from all the fellows across ten years of incredible work, including the mistakes that were made, will help us to understand how



we can be even better hosts. The nature of cyclical open calls doesn't always allow you to do this in-depth reflection – that's why we also decided to take a year off from it.

**FN** Yes, to get time to harvest and digest. It's been so interesting to look back and talk to cohorts whom we didn't have a chance to meet at the time. Particularly for us, what happens in that encounter when independent collective research practices actually meet the institution – how does that change or shape their research practices?

**KT** It's interesting that you also reflect upon what it means to host, and how to foster forms of mutual learning. I mean, the world has changed a lot right since 2016 [when we began]. What does it mean to have a fellowship program in the context of the current political context, both in and beyond the Netherlands, in and beyond Europe, against the background of the current government and political tendencies at large... A lot of funding and fellowship opportunities are really under pressure. We had more than two hundred applications for our first iteration, but I think that only continued to grow – which really shows the need for these opportunities. But that's a whole other story.

**MOV** There was a demand to declare why we should invest in a fellowship program, or how such fellowships would help shape the agenda of an institution. For instance, when we started out, Nieuwe Instituut itself was relatively young: it came out of a merging of three other institutions, and it was still finding its soul. That's possibly why the first fellows were clearly directed towards an output; they were trying to position the Instituut in a certain direction. What we were proposing was to leave it open, which is risky. When you're at a point when you have to explain who you are as an institution, then having external voices coming in with different ideas creates noise. We were interested in making that risk the core of the institution; a place where things were cooking, and where new ideas, new forms of institutional practice, new forms of research, new ideas around architecture, design and digital culture could happen. That should be the soul of the institution.

At the beginning – like everything else that happened at Nieuwe Instituut – it was called “a pilot project”. I think most of our research projects started as pilot projects – this was the institution's way to try things out without the promise to continue them for longer. But it ended up being quite successful. When the leadership saw that we received so many applications, and that the call was actually bringing positive focus back, a pilot project turned into an initiative that has endured for ten years. Now obviously it has to be redefined. It was very beautiful to realise that maybe there are ways to shape institutional identity without holding it very tightly together. Having this diversity of ideas and practices could be the identity of a rich and healthy institution.

**KOOZ** I read a conversation in which you were very critical of the idea of talent. I wanted to understand how you decided to engage with certain practices – especially as you don't look at CVs or recommendations – as well as the freedom and openness it enabled.

**FN** To answer the first question very practically: we are not the sole stakeholders to decide that. We receive applications which are shared across the research team. Each application is read by at least three researchers, and a pre-selection meeting is held across a full day. These are the most exciting days of the year, because it really sets the tone for what is to come.

It's a moment for us to engage with the urgencies out there, to keep our ears and minds open to what is moving people to apply – which is, of course, entangled within the context of global dynamics. After a short list is made, we have an external jury. So it's really a multi-vocal and multi-perspectival process.

**MOV** In the Netherlands, there is a government policy around talent development. In a way, I understand and it is powerful, because it incentivises people to grow professionally. A lot of grants go in that direction. At the same time, talent is somehow defined by certain ideas of success, or through connections that are forged – which can make it a very privileged metric. Not everyone has access to that type of support. So we asked ourselves what is talent, after all – and how is talent actually constructed? Is it something with which you are suddenly illuminated? Or is talent something that is developed because you have the support and the care around you, allowing you to develop your skills. We believe that everyone has the skills. At the beginning, it's true that the fellows had an academic career, with a very high level of proficiency. Some of them have joined the core team; others have worked on flagship projects for the Instituut and so on. Yet, we also wanted to remain open to other skills, knowledges and other ideas of success.

So then how do you judge a proposal? Are we aware of our own bias? We started analysing and identifying trends in the submitted proposals. As Federica was saying, this allowed us to learn so much from what people were thinking, reading and imagining all over the world, that was incredible. Then we wondered about the requests for the open call: should we ask for graphics, or a video? Maybe a video would really help people who are better at speaking than writing? It's so complicated to be fair! I can say we tried to deconstruct our own forms of bias. Let's be honest, even if we try our hardest, there are biases in the end.

**DB** This deconstruction also relates to the ‘pillars of the institution’ and for Nieuwe Instituut, that's architecture, design and digital culture – but the fellowship completely deconstructed even those pillars. It's not that we can only work with people who identify themselves as architects; even the terminology of architecture, design and digital culture, don't evoke the same sort of practice across different contexts. Design in Northern Europe is understood and practiced differently than it is in for example Latin America. These notions, terminologies and vocabularies that describe these pillars have been deconstructed by the fellows, in many ways.

We're also not claiming that we found the perfect model for what a fellowship is or should be. You can problematise the format of an open call and the selection process endlessly for example. So many people work on their application for weeks and weeks, only to not be selected in the end. But how do we, as workers that create open calls, genuinely take into account the reality of those applying for such funding and fellowships? How do we go about creating open calls and fellowship infrastructures in the best way possible, especially noting the increasing demand on these financial infrastructures? Again, we're not doing it perfectly, but having conversations like this is so important to figure out how we can do it better, and which other organisations and practitioners we can learn from... We're also speaking to colleagues from other institutions and organizations that host fellows, for example, to learn from the challenges that they have faced.

# “How do we, as workers that create open calls, genuinely take into account the reality of those applying for such funding and fellowships?”

- Delany Boutkan

**FN** For instance, I think there's a big distinction to be made between openness and accessibility; you can have an open call, but it doesn't mean that it's accessible, right? We could go into that another time, as it's a larger topic.

**KOOZ** Reflecting on different geographies that you managed to engage with: what did it mean for a person to actually be in Rotterdam or in South America or West Africa? How did this proximity or distance shape one's interaction with Nieuwe Instituut?

**KT** That's something that we always try to find out together with the fellows. It's always a mutual conversation, where we tried to find out what the methodology of the fellowship could be. For some people, they need to be on site and connect with the institution; in some cases fellows proposed seminar sessions, or contributed to the Thursday night program. Sometimes it involved songwriting for a project that became part of the Dutch pavilion at the Venice Biennale. At some point, Marina and I started the Reading Room program – which was quite beautiful – and in which many fellows came together to share their research. Sometimes it developed into a party and sometimes it was a slow reading session together. These different rhythms that each fellowship contained, but also the types of collaboration that followed, were just so diverse. So it's hard to say – we could give all kinds of examples. What do you remember?

**DB** I clearly remember this moment of the COVID pandemic that fundamentally shifted my perspective of what a fellowship can mean. We tend to ask fellows if they would like to spend some time with us in Rotterdam – not as a requirement, but because we value meeting them physically. The fact that we could not bring anyone to The Netherlands at that time forced us to rethink what it means to support research practices that are based elsewhere. I still reflect on this a lot, and how much it taught us in terms of different forms of interaction; how, as an institution, we don't always have to be involved with someone's research or the events they organise. Of course, when someone's research is in proximity to the building, that communication may happen more naturally – but if someone is on the other side of the world, working on a situated research, that distance can also lead to something very meaningful. The situation sparked such beautiful conversations, ones that continue till this day. For example, what does it mean for a researcher embedded in a specific cultural context or community to be funded or supported by a Dutch cultural institution? These kinds of questions allow for honest discussions about what institutional support really entails. We may not have answers, but I find it beautiful that these different forms of proximity to the institution sparks these important conversations.

**FN** On the subject of “meeting research where it's at”, and understanding that culture – the Dutch have been great at drawing on and extracting culture from other sites, other areas of the world, other peoples. It's also the first step towards discussions of [re]distribution...



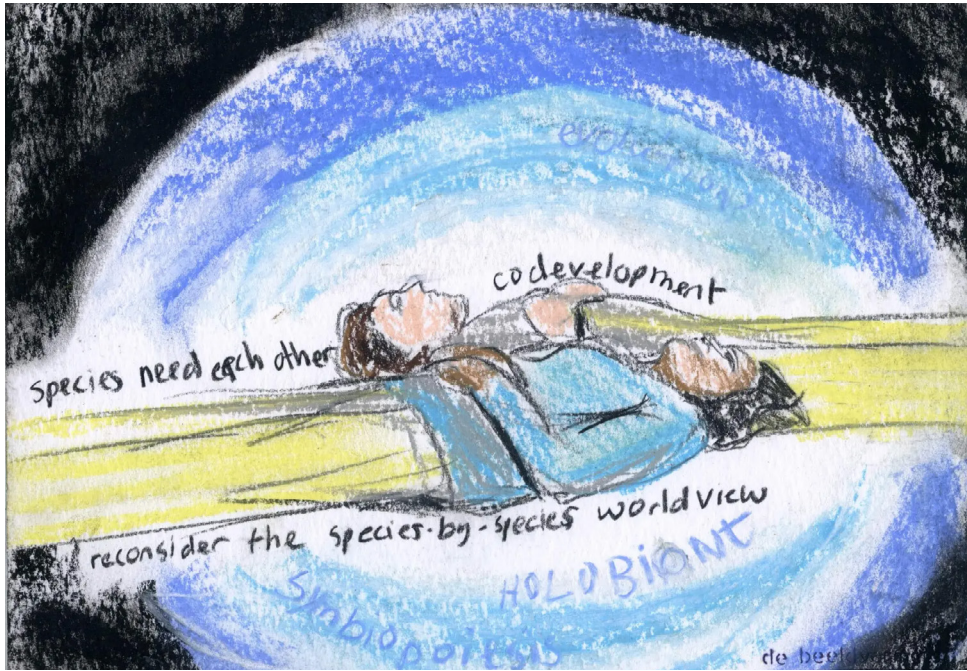
**Top Left and Top Right**  
Screenshot of recording Research Infrastructures\_ On Public and Collective Research Practices with MELT, The School of Mutants and Tropic Fever, Night of the Fellows, Thursday Night Live!, 31 March 2022

**Bottom Left**  
Yout Dem in The Niteshop, december 2021. Yout Dem came about after Maliq Mohamud's fellowship at Nieuwe Instituut.

**Bottom Right**  
Research Nights\_ Night of the Fellows with Russel Hlongwane and Daniel Frota de Abreu, 22 June 2023, Photo\_ Manon Falces.

**MOV** I really like that you are taking the time to reflect on the fellowship. Obviously after a whole decade, there is a smoothness or slickness in how you operate. When you run this fellowship several times, you identify things that work well, and they stay. What we all like is the idea that things could be otherwise. Even in what Katia was describing with the Reading Room, there was a lot of playfulness in what it means to do research in a museum. Why don't we just explore? That doesn't mean that you don't take it seriously, especially the fact that you're working with public funding, you are representing a cultural institution – but at same time, sometimes you just don't know, and you can test things. Often the things that we came across are a bit weird, but it worked well. The need and experimentation for people to gather and engage in different ways was quite unique. Not all institutions actually allow you to play, even under the guise of a temporary pilot project. But when inertia sets in and things are assumed as part of what the institution does, they don't allow you to reflect.

Obviously it's very exhausting to be questioning everything that you do, all the time. It's impossible to be that way every day; it causes a lot of insecurity, and then you cannot make things happen. But I think that a little bit of insecurity – a little bit of testing, of things that might or might not work – is so important for public institutions, because they should not be risk averse. They must be open to changes and risks and so on. That's something I believe. The fact that after ten years, instead of saying this is done, we found a formula that works perfectly well – which is what most institutions do – this fellowship programme wants to stop, reset. Is it actually working too well? Is that good or bad, are we missing something, or falling into certain traps? I love that



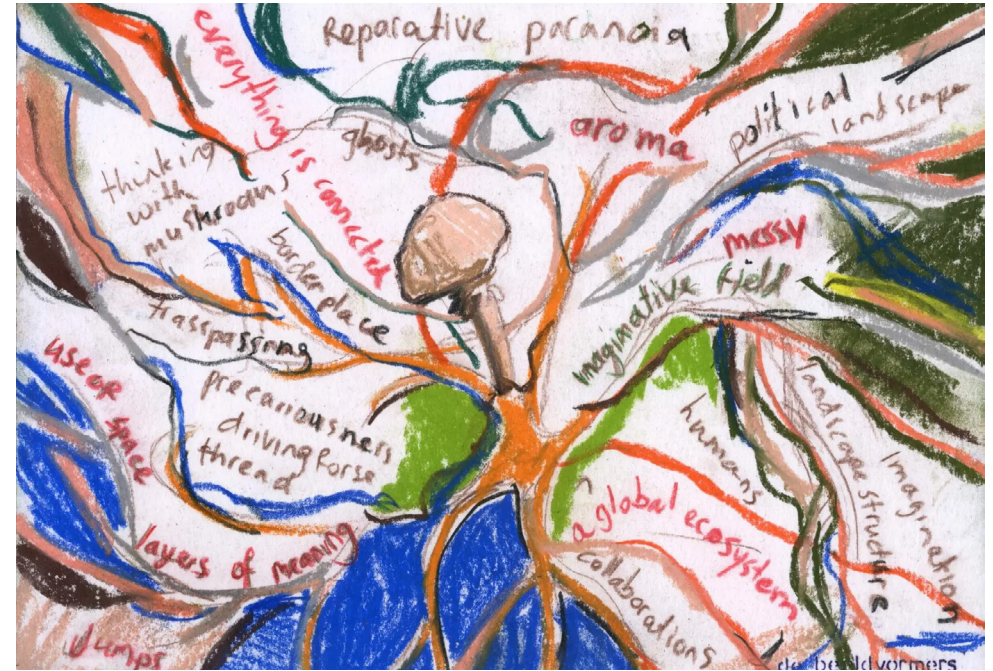
**Left and Right**  
Remote Reading Room:  
Anna Tsing 02/05/2019,  
event documentation,  
Beeldvormers.

you are taking the time; this is exactly how institutions can change and stay relevant. Otherwise they are there, they are powerful, they are important. Are they relevant? Not always.

**DB** Exactly. As you say, Marina, the moment that processes become too smooth within institutions, the alarm bell rings a bit. It can feel like a repetitive train – but where are we actually going? What is so beautiful is that, both during the fellowship and whenever we reflect back on it with the fellows so many questions and points of insecurity arise – for all of us – which are actually the points where you feel like the possibility for [learning] exists. I hesitate to use the word growth, because that sounds like one is capitalising on the moment. But even if having a fellowship without an end result is amazing – a researcher might still be sitting with the complexity of not working towards an end result. Being given that trust can be both liberating and complicated, in a way, and it's interesting to continue exploring how to navigate that together. What I also appreciate about the fellowship is that it seems to operate on a different kind of time scale. Unlike the often rigid timelines institutions follow, which are usually output-driven, the fellowship allows for a more process-oriented approach. And as you know, that kind of openness can create its own forms of insecurity.

**KOOZ** As you said, the world is changing, right? So the world within which Nieuwe Instituut operated 10 years ago is very different to that in which it is operating now. Looking back and maybe ahead too, how can the fellowship be a tool through which you ground the relevancy of Nieuwe Instituut?

**KT** To be honest, the first thing that comes to mind is an attempt to be



a bit modest. To listen to all those voices who find themselves in different conditions and geographies, and learn what it can also mean to do research. To be open, as Marina was saying.

**MOV** At that time when I moved from Columbia University in New York to the Netherlands, it was a big change. I was coming from a very academic institution where standards of research were pretty well defined. I worked at Studio-X, which was a network of research laboratories all over the world. It was a beautiful idea from Mark Wigley, of how to decentralise the university, understanding that the research processes, ideas and knowledge that comes from many places in the world are perhaps even more relevant to imagine the future than what happens on campus at Columbia University. But it was not without conflict, because at the end, there was always the academic standard, the forms in which you quote, how you write, that determine how you actually validate research.

So when I moved to the Netherlands, I thought okay, I'm not in a university. I'm in a museum. Who knows what research in a museum could be? Let's try. I had Katia next to me, who is equally crazy. We were imagining things like, why don't we divide the month into lunar cycles? So when the moon is waxing, we do research, and when waning, we just rest. It was amazing. But to be honest, the reason I'm not working full time for an institution right now is, as Katia said: I want to stay modest. I want to keep a level of feeling humble.

Sometimes when you direct an institution, you get used to power. In my case, I again needed to be one of those researchers who applies for fellowships. I needed to somehow recover that freshness that we had at the beginning at

Nieuwe Instituut. I felt that if I continued, I would be working through inertia. I chose to work more closely with communities, with activism, with forms of engagement that are very situated and less institutionalised. I needed to recover that enthusiasm and a little bit of naivety, of craziness. I know that Federica, Delany and Katia found their own ways of keeping that. I think we are all trying because we don't want to become bureaucrats at an institution where we get comfortable. It sounds good, our signature says that we are the director of something – but that's not what we are here for.

**DB** I agree with your ideas of humility and staying humble. I also relate to the feeling of not knowing what institutions are supposed to be right now, and maybe that's the starting point. Maybe it's for all institutions and everyone engaging with them, in whichever way, to sit with that question and not to jump to conclusions too fast. In relation to the fellowship, for three years of the ten [years of the fellowship] we have a new General and Artistic director at Nieuwe Instituut – Aric Chen – who has prompted the idea of the institution as a testing ground, and what it means for cultural institutions to go beyond being representative or conversational platforms only. How can they test out other ways of existing in the world? Which in turn prompts the question, how does that relate to research practices? Again, that's not an answer, it's just another ongoing question to work through together – because also the moment that institutions don't ask these questions anymore, they risk becoming rigid and stagnant.

**FN** I'm also going with trying to stay humble, and also staying connected – because it's so easy to get lost in the day-to-day. For me, the fellowship was really a way to find connections outside the four walls of the institution, the same organisations, seeing the same people at the same parties. For me, the fellowship kept us both connected and humble; it helped us learn. It helped us understand that there are people doing much more important work in their communities than we do. That's what I hope we keep doing, which is understanding the institution as a porous space. That porosity requires labour, it requires maintenance, and I like that Marina brought up bureaucracy, because our roles within the fellowship sometimes really are bureaucratic roles. But then it's our responsibility as cultural workers to make sure that we keep that bureaucracy connected to something real, so that the institute remains porous.

**MOV** Okay, what you just said about the testing ground, that was the focus of the fellowship programme at the beginning: to create these testing grounds that could become the heart of the institution. In a way, instead of being a pilot project that could be halted immediately, that kind of ambition has now permeated the entire institution. Through Aric saying that this testing is perhaps the most important thing to do, you can see a clear trajectory that tracks the phases we went through in the institution, in ourselves and even in society and the planet at large. We had the open call on the theme “revolution.” Then we had “burnout,”. Then we went through “regeneration,” thinking about new institutional practices. The next phase is to test new grounds, and now the testing grounds is the project that the Institute proposes as itself, a place that has always been reinvented, which is always in flux.

In that sense, the fellowship programme managed to introduce a very particular resonance in the solidity or the structure of the institution, creating something that is now an institutional practice in itself. That's why the

“That's what I hope we keep doing, which is understanding the institution as a porous space. That porosity requires labour, it requires maintenance.”

- Federica Notari

fellowship program has to be reinvented now, because if the attitude of the fellowship program becomes the institution, then the role of the fellowship has to change. And that's the question for Delany and Federica...

**DB** As you mentioned, the initial research fellows were invited because there was no research department. Since then, the research team has grown in size within the institution itself. So that creates a question: what then is the role of the fellowship? This is both why we're having this conversation, and also where the commissioned essays and conversations with previous fellows and institutional colleagues come in. We're really eager to celebrate the ten year anniversary of all the work that has been done, as well as to learn from our previous fellows – not only about their fellowship experience, but their general research practice, and how it might have continued over the years after their fellowship. There's so much value in having a fellowship trajectory without an end result, and in that faith that something at some point in your practice will come out of it – even without us knowing. Ten years down the line, it is important for us to reflect on the moment and see what we've learned, as well as to gather and celebrate all the incredible people with whom we've had the privilege of working over the last decade.

**KOOZ** What's beautiful is that by not controlling every single part, you were able to go with the flow of where each project brought. Let's see where that same attitude might lead in the coming months and years. As a spectator, it's been quite phenomenal to see the development of both the fellowship, and the kinds of discourse that Nieuwe Instituut continues to engage with, through different formats. Thank you for this generous exchange.

**MOV** Thank you so much.

# Near and Far: researching intersections of site, story, and space

Conversation with Luna BuGhanem, Daniel Frota de Abreu,  
Robin Hartanto Honggare.

**MARINA OTERO VERZIER** is Dean's Visiting Assistant Professor at GSAPP, Columbia University, where she leads the Data Mourning clinic, exploring the intersection between digital infrastructures and climate catastrophe. A 2022 Harvard Wheelwright Prize winner, she collaborates with scientific institutions such as the DIPC Supercomputing Center on developing prototypes like Computational Compost. She contributed to Chile's first National Data Centers Plan alongside "Resistencia SocioAmbiental – Quilicura" and other local communities on the front lines of extractivism. Otero authored *En las Profundidades de la Nube* (2024), proposing new paradigms and aesthetics for data storage, integrating architecture, preservation, and digital culture. Previously, she headed the MA Social Design at Design Academy Eindhoven (2020-2023) and directed research at Nieuwe Instituut (2015-2022). Her curatorial work includes *Wet Dreams* (2024), *Compulsive Desires* (2023) among many others; she has co-edited *Automated Landscapes* (2023), *Lithium: States of Exhaustion* (2021), *More-than-Human* (2020) and several other titles.

**KATIA TRUIJEN** is a media researcher, curator and musician. Her work is concerned with bringing people together around practices of listening, archiving, and rehearsing alternative urban, technological and ecological futures. Katia is part of Loom, practice for cultural transformation, and co-founder of interdisciplinary platform /∧ hoekhuis. She curates the context programme for Rewire festival and Ultima festival, and is research tutor at the Studio for Immediate Spaces at the Sandberg Instituut. Between 2014 and 2021, Katia developed research projects and public programmes at Nieuwe Instituut.

**DELANY BOUTKAN** is a researcher, editor, and curator with Nieuwe Instituut's Research team, where she coordinates the annual International Call for Fellows and has led various collaborative research projects and public programs. Her recent work focuses on language as a design material, exploring its practical, theoretical, and pedagogical dimensions within design and architecture. In 2022, Delany initiated *Design Drafts*, a Nieuwe Instituut writing and publishing network dedicated to investigating and drafting alternative languages for writing design. Delany curated the '5th Floor Talks' lecture and debate series at Design Academy Eindhoven. Her writing and editing have been featured in a range of publications, including *Extra Extra Magazine*, *PIN-UP*, *Metropolis M*, *Disegno Journal*, and *Kunstlicht Journal*. She is the co-author of the up-coming publication *Remapping Collaborations* (2025) and currently sits on the editorial advisory board of *MacGuffin Magazine* and the governance board of *Design Platform Rotterdam*.

**FEDERICA NOTARI** is a researcher and programmer at Nieuwe Instituut with a focus on practices of place-making, epistemologies of knowledge, and sonic infrastructures. Since 2021, she has co-coordinated the annual Nieuwe Instituut Call for Fellows and the Tilting Axis Fellowship, chairing jury meetings and contributing to its ongoing development. She has also worked as a researcher on the *Workwear* exhibition (2023) and *New Store for Dutch Design Week* (2023). Recently, she has been engaged in research projects such as *New Currents: Indian Ocean Futures*, particularly exploring labour migration and the sonic materialities of mobility. In November 2023, she initiated *Through Sounds*, a project that investigates the infrastructures of sound. At Leiden University, she led the *MediaLab+*, a multimedia digital research lab, alongside teaching visual research methodology courses. She has also served as a thesis supervisor at the *Rietveld Academie* in the *DesignLab* department. Federica is the founder of events and collectives *Words off the Page* and *Discoteca Amore*.

**FEDERICA ZAMBELETTI** is the founder and managing director of KoozArch. She is an architect, researcher and storyteller whose interests lie at the intersection between art, architecture and regenerative practices. In 2022 Federica founded KoozArch with the ambition of creating a space where to research, explore and discuss architecture beyond the limits of its built form. Prior to dedicating her full attention to KoozArch, Federica collaborated with the architecture studio and non-profit agency for change *UNA/UNLESS* working on numerous cultural projects and the research of "Antarctic Resolution". Federica is an Architectural Association School of Architecture in London alumni.

Following the fellows of Nieuwe Instituut's longstanding programme, we catch up with researchers Luna BuGhanem, Daniel Frota de Abreu and Robin Hartanto, whose experiences – studying community construction within the Lebanese diaspora, Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, and expansionary land politics in the Netherlands – share common threads of collaboration, purpose and patience.

**FEDERICA ZAMBELETTI / KOOZ** **Let's start from the very essence of the fellowship, which is structured around the practice of research. How do you approach the idea of research and what it means to do research today?**

**LUNA BUGHANEM** My research practice was not clear to me from the get-go; it evolved only after pursuing multiple interests and questions. It's heavily based on data collection, mainly in the form of documented oral histories, and is premised on many in-person visits and conversations. Generally, I am closely related to and involved in the contexts that I research, which informs my perspective and approach.

For the project at Nieuwe Instituut – about diasporic home-making – I started a conversation with a distant relative, whose father was a stonemason by trade and built him a house in Mount Lebanon while he was away in Venezuela from the 80s until the early 2000s. He, in turn, connected me to other relatives and acquaintances; people he knew who had left Lebanon at some point and funded the construction of a house through remittances. I bring this up to illustrate how this research started from a personal connection and in a geography with which I'm very familiar – which can be both advantageous and challenging.

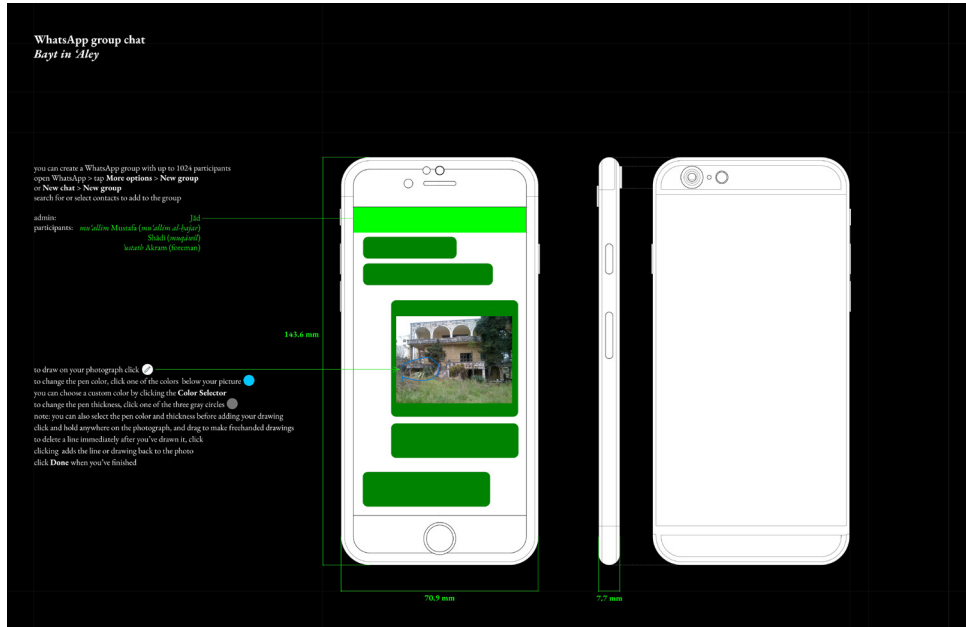
When you're so familiar with a place you want to study, you have to deliberately estrange it and create distance from it in order to discern and identify valuable information. That process was particularly challenging in the beginning because a big part of the research involved framing WhatsApp as a tool of co-making; the platform is so pervasive – everyone in Lebanon uses it, especially given the country's far-reaching diaspora. WhatsApp plays such a big role in daily life that in 2019, the October 17 protests were in part triggered by a proposed 'WhatsApp tax.' As an architect, I found that people expected me to be interested in their houses' aesthetic choices and material finishes – but I wanted to discuss their WhatsApp images and money transfer amounts. Everyone I interviewed would ask, 'Why is that interesting to you?'

Then in the process, I take individual, ethnographic stories, in this case of multiple families' remittance houses, and infer a pattern, to understand how

they're emblematic of a larger phenomenon – which is how I can describe this as a “diasporic home-making practice.”

The last thing I'll add about this research project is that the larger forces and mediums that affect diasporic homemaking don't just affect what I'm researching; they also affect me and shape the research methodology itself. For example, if diasporic subjects couldn't travel to Lebanon because of political instability, I was similarly unable to; just like they were communicating via WhatsApp, I was conducting my research via WhatsApp. This parallel researcher-research experience, where the work process is tied to the same contingencies of diasporic homemaking, strengthens my understanding and findings.

“Min B'itd la-B'itd (from Far to Far): On Homemaking under Diasporic Conditions”, project by Luna BuGhanem, 2023.



**KOOZ** You mentioned this idea of ‘data collection’ in person, gathering narratives and experience. What is the value of that as an approach to research today?

**LBG** Well, in-person data collection captures nuances that might otherwise be missed through remote or secondary research methods. Face-to-face interactions allow for spontaneous and emotional responses that often contain the most insightful data – understanding comes not just from what people say, but how they say it, where they choose to meet you, and what they prioritise showing you in their physical spaces. If you take jetlag and baggage limits and time difference frustrations seriously, these small and invisible logistical realities shape how design actually happens across distances and challenge a lot of our conventional understanding of architectural practice.

**KOOZ** Daniel and Robin, can you share your experiences and approaches to the importance of undertaking research?

**DANIEL FROTA DE ABREU** In my case, the research for this fellowship started with an ongoing exchange. I had been in touch with a group of researchers at Leiden University from the Museum Studies and Archaeology department – specifically, with Professor Mariana Françaço, at the University of Leiden – after I came across her research about the displacement of Brazilian Natural History artefacts in Dutch archives and collections. The project evolved and started while I was at an art residency at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, just before the fellowship.

I came across Professor Françaço's research project about the first natural history catalog of Brazilian plants and animals that was published after Dutch period of colonisation in the Northeast of Brazil; her team of researchers, ethnobotanists and archaeologists, were already doing this research, so I kind of jumped in and was able to follow that. I was fascinated and driven by the content, by the team, and by how they accessed items in different collections.

My practice as a visual artist and designer always involves some form of exchange with parts of academia. Jumping into large structures like universities or institutions can be intimidating – one might feel almost apologetic, in the sense of trying to approach and reach academic materials – but then you start to understand the agency of what you can bring into the discussion. This often involves enabling researchers within such structures to connect to things outside of their fields of interest; they can relate in terms of aesthetics or visual representation. So for me, what it means to do research nowadays is to be able to bring about exchanges, bridging across fields of knowledge, and dealing with forms of visual representation. In terms of architecture or visual arts and design, it helps to pierce the bubble within institutionalised structures of research, which can be quite fixed.

“To do research nowadays is to bring about exchanges, bridging across fields of knowledge, and dealing with forms of visual representation.”

- Daniel Frota De Abreu

Film still from “As far as the world reaches”, directed by Daniel Frota de Abreu (2024).



**ROBIN HARTANTO** My research involves working with archival materials. This means spending time with documents in a very cold environment, inside buildings: archival institutions in the Netherlands, in Indonesia and everywhere. I think that's part of me and my practice, as a trained architect, an architectural historian and an academic researcher. The way I see the practice of research is actually as work – work in a really material sense, in that it's the obligatory thing that I have to do in order to participate, to make a life out of this environment called university. This largely involves solitary work, writing for a very niche public audience, even engaging with a very small number of experts, in order to progress one's career.

When I read the call for fellowship proposals at Nieuwe Instituut, I was attracted by the prospect of a very different kind of research; one that pushes you to collaborate, to engage with a broader public, to practice generosity and so on. In that sense, I was reminded of what I really liked about research before academia, so that's what I tried to do. Instead of extending my dissertation or previous research into this fellowship, I try to embrace the spirit of collaboration, of thinking together, making conversations with the broader public, and as Daniel says, exchanges with different people, perspectives and subjects.

**KOOZ** It's a really interesting spectrum of exchange, from Luna's first-person conversations to this notion of making public. On the other hand, you share some practices around archives, and you all engage with the politics of space. How do you read the politics of space, between what can be shared in first person encounters versus through archival material? What kind of tools do you need to be able to understand, read and dissect that which is personal?

**RH** In terms of historical archival research, a lot of it requires a certain kind of patience. Of course, interviews also require so much patience and skill, but in archival research, it really comes down to how you use the time with the materials that you have, to understand the details or context in which your document was produced, for instance. How important were they for agents or actors at that time, and how did they end up in the place where you encounter them today? Many sensibilities require you to take time before drawing conclusions. There is a lot of criticism with this kind of research, in how it engages (or not) with the contemporary, in comparison to oral history, which allows you to work with first person narratives. But, I feel like the way you try to see those research archives becomes important for you to reflect on the present.

For instance, part of my project is about colonial plantations; what I did in the fellowship was to make films out of colonial footage and documents that I found throughout the research. In presenting them to a contemporary audience, there are so many ways to engage, in which you can try to see what's different between then and now. For the audience, it might be a path for them to see how close we are; how that past is actually not too far away: it acts upon many, many things that we are experiencing right now. We're still very much living in part of that colonial register or legacy to some extent.

Film stills from Tropic Fever, film directed by Robin Hartanto Honggare (2022).



Film stills from Tropic Fever, film directed by Robin Hartanto Honggare (2022).

**LBG** I want to echo what Robin said, about patience and giving the research process time. On a practical level, a lot of it is about listening, transcribing, parsing through that information – noticing the way people relay their stories. I became super interested in reading and interpreting transcriptions and audio recordings as evidence. What does the specific word choice mean? Where are the inflections and what do they emphasise? Do people pause before mentioning certain topics, or become more animated when discussing particular aspects of their experience? This is similar to the act of questioning in archival practice that Robin described: how did this document end up here, or why is it written and structured that way? Who made decisions about what was preserved and what was discarded, and what power dynamics influenced those choices?

But it's not just producing and probing data – it's also my interpretation of it. There's a constant back and forth: expanding that data set, seeing what emerges from it, and how my perspective might reshape understanding. In an abstract sense, it's like working with a puzzle, one where every time the pieces are shifted and reconstituted, they reveal a different picture.

**DFdA** I would also respond with a more abstract or poetic approach. For me, it relates to fishing; at least in the way I do research, there's always a constant back and forth between following an abstract sense of your interests and whatever led you to that subject, and the act of throwing into the sea to look at what comes back. Sometimes what comes back is a shoe. Quite often, you have to deal with frustration, also in terms of not being able to take the time, let's say, to find what you were expecting to find. Personally, there is always

a phase of frustration; you have all these ideas that you think you would find there, but you don't — you start finding other stuff. That's when the process starts happening, because then you start letting go of the ideas that you have, or things that you thought you would find, and stop trying to make things fit.

The outcome, in terms of dealing with this material and crystallising into something, might be anything from text to film. Until then it's this process of having to stop looking, to allow some time for your own obsessions or preconceived ideas to dissolve — then you'll be able to reconnect to the material as it actually is. Maybe that has to do with reformulating your questions, find other directions. For me, it's a deeply intuitive and very hard process; it has to do with different gears and different speeds.

**KOOZ Daniel and Robin, the research projects you developed at Nieuwe Instituut really engage with this Dutch colonial history. The institute is deeply rooted in Rotterdam and the culture of that nation. How did that inform the way you approached archival material and questions of access?**

**RH** I'll lay some more groundwork: I'm working on a history — in the broadest sense — of colonial architecture. I mean colonial not as a period of time, but rather in the act of colonising — taking land and trying to make profit out of it. I would borrow Daniel's metaphor on fishing: it's very different if you do that kind of research in Indonesia versus doing it in the Netherlands. In terms of colonial architecture, you have the buildings here in Indonesia, so you can actually study how the buildings work, what are the programs, what are the details, the stylistic options and so on. But as I refer to colonial in this active sense, there are so many archives, documents, maps and footage that I couldn't find in Indonesia. That material allows me to really get a clearer image on what colonialism was about: how land was organised in order to produce certain commodities; how, for instance, the architecture of plantations, labour, people to produce certain specific crops.

Those are really like the things that I feel grateful for: the research, the grant, the fellowship allows me to encounter, to see and engage with those materials — and to add to them as well. The nice thing about the approach that I pursue — especially through the spirit of collaboration at Nieuwe Instituut — is that it allows me to think about working with different people. Even though I applied as an individual, I decided — after conversations with the research team — to work together with people I didn't know from before. In the end, I asked two people — Mahardika Yudha and Perdana Roswaldy — to work with me to conceive the film that I wanted to make; that way of working is what the fellowship really gave me.

**KOOZ Daniel, you're also exploring colonialism both in terms of its historic past, but also in the present, looking at contemporary CO2 infrastructure. Can you share your perspectives on this?**

**DFdA** As I mentioned, my research came from this film project I'd been making; one of the locations of the film was the port of Rotterdam, or rather Maasvlakte, this specific area of the port that has been a geo-engineering project since the 15th century; it has been like slowly and continuously expanding into the North Sea. I was approaching this landscape through this lens of the project; the exchanges I had with research teams and collections was also through this lens, when I arrived at the Port of Rotterdam, while I was looking into its history. The title of the film is 'As Far as the World Reaches'

— which was the military motto of the Dutch governor in the colony in Brazil during the 17th century, and which expresses the idea of expansion in terms of colonial projects.



Memória Forense, archival material, Port of Rotterdam. Credits: Daniel Frota de Abreu.

I had already been noting how this model could talk not only about colonial expansion, but also ecological exhaustion, in the sense of pushing the world to its limit. One of the things that led me to the port was the fact that it was the home of the Royal Navy for many centuries, and the Dutch Royal Navy has been using that same motto from the 17th century to this day. So I was thinking about this in terms of the Maasvlakte landmass, which is still continuously extending into the sea. At that point, I came across an infrastructure project on that site, building a pipeline network to bury the carbon dioxide produced by the industrial area of the port under the North Sea. Great craters remain from previous extractions of natural gas; having extracted it, this project would use the same infrastructure to reverse the process, burying vast quantities of CO2 indefinitely. I was trying to formulate the parallels between colonial memory and the geological timeframe of this new project — this in 2022-23 while the pipeline was still in a funding phase, while construction began last year; it's still a very fresh project.

Coming from film research, I could relate to this relationship between capturing and storing. I was also interested in the idea of burying as a strategy for dealing with problems and what that would mean for a future ecology or geology; what this geology is during the Anthropocene, and what would be unveiled in the future, as a consequence. It has very broad ramifications, in terms of legislation, liability periods and so on. My project reflects on the

notion of projecting something almost indefinitely while at same time having to operate in terms of legislation. What would be the period of operation for this project – are we talking about millions of years in terms of geology? That problem of scale fascinated me, but whenever I was getting deep into the carbon capture-and-storage (CCS) project, I was also trying to find correlations in terms of colonial history.

My time at Nieuwe Instituut came at an early stage on this curve; I was working on the film and also parachuting in and out of Rotterdam. What I found very important was the structure; the fellowship gave us this free space of conversation, without really expecting that you would resolve things. I used that time to sharpen my own questions, formulating that intersection between these two historical moments of the port.

**KOOZ** Going on to the digestion of all this: Daniel and Robin, you processed your engagement with archival materials through video work, whilst Luna's project attempts to expand the architectural toolkit. How did each of you approach the question of format through which to explore or share your research?

**RH** I should say that before this project, I've never really worked with film – so it was a new thing for me. It came about after working and collaborating with the various people that I encountered. I did go to the film museum; I also looked into the archives of Institute for Sound and Vision, and found a huge amount of footage and photography from Leiden University Libraries. There's certainly an immediacy that you feel when you see the footage of people working on plantations, as a moving image, in comparison to when you see a picture or try to understand it through text. It's the kind of immediacy that brings up emotions – different kinds of emotion, it could be anger, sadness, frustration. I thought, if we are going to deal with this subject, we need to use this emotion as a means to communicate; to portray, to try to understand the subjectivity of the people in the footage.

Another mission of the project is to make sure that people in Indonesia know and have access to that footage. That's why I insisted that this film should be screened in different parts of Indonesia, so that people at least have exposure to those materials and are aware of it, if they want to understand more about the plantation world. Of course access is a privilege, but the fair way is through the field, and we hope that people could at least get a sense of what exists.



**KOOZ** What was the reaction in different parts of Indonesia?

**RH** There's a very interesting difference between audiences from Europe and those from Indonesia. I remember some very sharp criticism when we screened this in Leipzig – the first screening. Some people criticised us for using reenactments, for recreating those violences. I guess it's a really good criticism; we have to be careful in how we enact these kinds of images, right? But the way I want to really answer that is that if a film about colonialism didn't disturb you, then you have to question what that film is really about.

To come back to the Indonesian audience, it's a very different kind of reception. They're really very appreciative of the way that we depict something that we all know by heart: that colonialism was there, it really governs our past. But perhaps most of us don't really know what really happened on the ground. The film allows one to imagine or even to get a more concrete sense of what happened – and to reflect on how that past really affects our present.

**DFdA** I'll try to be very concise for my part, as I do think that there are so many layered concerns – especially if you are dealing with the language of documentary – in terms of the voice of the narrator; at least that one of my interests, and maybe yours too. Something Luna mentioned resonated with me, about the tension between testimonies and evidence. In terms of data or an archive, the material that I've been dealing with is rather institutionalised; for instance, the archive of Natural History in Brazil. However, these materials were at times very personal accounts, by specific people who traveled inside the landscape of Brazil. I'm thinking of a certain catalogue, which was a product of expeditions – slave-hunting expeditions – where a few painters and scientists followed along, gathering plant species and making drawings. A major question was, what is the voice of the film? Who is the narrator? I wanted a localised voice, contemporaneous to when these archives were made – by people who had their own personal views, which they strongly projected even as they were fabricating images of that distant place.

I found my entry point when I came across a watercolour painting of a Brazilian parrot, made on one of those expeditions, which happened to be the Dutch governor's pet. There is a personal account where he explains how he was fascinated by this animal that could reproduce the human voice and could have long exchanges with him. In this anecdote, he describes a conversation with the parrot about a few chickens, or something very banal. That struck me somehow, in the way they were imagining, fabulating at the same time as making this archive. So the film uses a parrot, not as a narrator but as a character that starts to talk, to interpret the paintings and material archives that I encountered. I was interested in how the documentary language also involves a lot of construction and invention; the film has a tension between images of authoritative volumes, those big books listing botanical species, and at same time, a voice that questions the authority of its own character, its own documentary status. That's how I navigate those questions in the film.

**KOOZ** Luna, whilst Robin and Daniel perhaps open up to a broader audience, your approach seems to be somewhat oriented towards the architecture community. I'm interested in how you approached the process of 'digestion' in terms of your research.

**LBG** My time at Nieuwe Instituut was spent talking about the work, soundboarding with staff, with other researchers, and also with the creative community in the Netherlands, which was a great opportunity. That reinforced

my initial instinct that this project needed to work with multiple media to be 'digested.'

Because what I'm researching is contemporary – though there are similar echoes of it through history, including archival material tracking remittances sent to Lebanon back in the 1880s – I cannot yet fully grasp and communicate it comprehensively and in one medium alone. Audio, screenshots, screen recordings, pictures, news articles – they all need to be brought into a helpful constellation. I used our final presentation at Nieuwe Instituut as a testing ground to help the audience enter this layered space, tying together so many elements – from global-scale movements down to the size of someone's window.

For the homeowners, this constellation of fragmented communications, remote decision-making, and mediated experiences is normal – it's the everyday reality of diasporic life. But for architects this fragmented way of conceiving and creating space challenges conventional practice and has unsettled many fundamental architectural concepts for me as a result. This is why the audience for the project as the architect was the most impactful.

As an example, my final hybrid-video presentation did not show any full images of a 'homeland' house. It was only shown through the mediation of devices that a diasporic homeowner would use – so it was made up of screen recordings of WhatsApp conversations; pictures where you can zoom in to the point where pixels will fail to show detail and texture; snippets of text messages... This format deliberately goes against things that are often taken as standard in architectural practice: the idea of designing something from the beginning, having full capital funds to realise it, and the measure of success being the extent to which your final house matches what you wanted to start with. This work has pushed me to reassess those measures of success. And I hope that is also the takeaway for the audience.

"Min B'id la-B'id (from Far to Far): On Homemaking under Diasporic Conditions", project by Luna BuGhanem, 2023.



**KOOZ** The reality is that when one engages in architectural labour, it's much more akin to what you are describing, right? It may just be that digital technologies like Slack and WhatsApp have somehow altered the rigidity of architectural work, or how it is structured.

**It's really quite interesting to look back at digital exchanges as sites of design, in and of themselves.**

**LBG** I started the project with multiple aspects that I really wanted to deep-dive into, and WhatsApp was what I got deep into during my time at Nieuwe Instituut. Our physical realm is so intertwined with the digital realm. In architecture, traditionally, we start with a site analysis, we have a site visit. That's one of the first things we do. But in the context of diasporic homemaking, 'site' is accessed via a screen, in fragments, and the rest is imagined. When you don't have full access to a place, you relinquish ideals of precision and completeness; this reality has pushed me to reconsider designing incrementally, embracing uncertainty, designing for adaptability – not just the adaptability of a physical structure, but an attitude of adaptability in the design and construction process itself.

**KOOZ** I'm thinking about some of the digital tools we take for granted, like Google Maps. We mediate through Google Earth or messaging platforms are ever-more corporate in their intentions, and it does feel as if we have to really pay attention to what is being represented, how and why certain things are being depicted. For instance, the way that digital maps are adjusting the image of Gaza. Obviously, it's a very different territory than it was just a couple of years ago; how fast those images are updated, what they reveal and what they don't is a political question. Are there still topics and themes that you're engaged with, several years after your fellowships?

**DFdA** You prompted some thoughts around who makes those representations and where they circulate. To give an example from the port, this project of CCS, which has been in discussion as a possible mitigation technology for reducing the CO2 and then in terms of climate change. While diving into that specific landscape of the Port of Rotterdam, I found out that actually this project was a 'compensation plan' that allowed the construction of two massive coal-fired power plants in 2016. That compensation never happened; they attempted several times to implement this very experimental project. It has dragged on for so long that now it can be rebranded as a completely new climate change mitigation project, that is nevertheless linked to those coal-fired power plants. It's very sensitive nowadays in terms of how those projects are presented, who owns the image of those climate engineering projects.

Now I'm based in Brazil, and I'm still following the CCS project from afar, still collecting materials. For me, this is part of a larger interest of mine about preservation practices, not only in terms of ecology, but also art. So part of the film also dealt with the extraction of Brazilian wood and how a particular tree was used for pigment in Dutch paintings. Again, it's about connecting materials from those paintings, talking with art conservation people in different museums and also looking into the fire that destroyed the Brazilian National Museum in 2018. That's the current territory of the research. The challenge is always to be able to draw this constellation, as Luna described it; how, by looking at the Port of Rotterdam, you can recognise things inside the museum here in Rio, which was burned. You can go back to another place and trust that these threads will lead somewhere, or that you'll find the right metaphor. That's more or less how this project has evolved.

**RH** There are two strands of work that I'm currently pursuing, both of which are influenced by my time at Nieuwe Instituut. The first is a monograph on the architectures of colonial plantations. This is an extension of my dissertation,

so it's something that I'm doing in the context of academia. It tries to understand what the plantation system really means, how it operated and how architecture participated in that construction. A lot of this deals with the technicality of buildings and the efficiencies of the plantation grounds. In so far as it is influenced by the fellowship and by the film project that I made, I'm reminded that a lot of this space, that we call plantation, is highly influenced by different kinds of affect: fantasies, anxieties... What I'm trying to balance is allowing those feelings to be present in the writing.

The second project – which I'm actually working on with Nieuwe Instituut – is a project on the Sonneveld House. I experienced the house when I visited the institute for the first time; in the reading room on the second floor, I saw tobacco packages from Sumatra, from Virginia, so I was wondering what's going on with this house. It turned out that the owner was a former director of Van Nelle, a Rotterdam company that sells commodities such as tobacco, coffee, and tea. And many of the commodities that they produced actually came from Indonesia; they also redistributed the products that they package back to Indonesia, in addition to the domestic market. And so now, I'm working with Nieuwe Instituut to use that opportunity to understand how design actually participated in the construction and in the production of commodities that was very much part of Rotterdam's past. We're planning an exhibition and probably a publication in the next year or two.

**KOOZ We'll be looking forward to that. It's fascinating how your research threads intertwine, isn't it? Have you thought about your next steps?**

**LBG** As the fellowship was just six months ago for me, it's still very much on my mind. I will continue to collect more stories and listen to diasporic people's advice for home-making. I'm also increasingly interested in how the research exceeds these houses and in shedding light on the social networks and forms of kinship that make this construction possible. So, zooming out from the scale of a device and from device to a room to observe the social support system that makes this building of homes from afar possible. These networks are all coordinated through WhatsApp chats and groups that connect members regardless of their location. These digital interactions are like an alternative design methodology premised on corresponding and relating, and these virtual spaces are equally sites where diaspora members reconstitute their community, eventually generating real-world material benefits, either in the form of economic remittances or in the physical structure.

It's important for me for the research to go beyond just being presented to audiences as an exercise of ethnographic gazing. Maybe that does bring us a bit full circle to your first question about research: I consider asking questions about what we could learn from the work and testing it representationally across different media itself a form of research. And now that I have a better understanding of the conditions, tools, and media through which this type of homemaking happens, I'm interested in testing what an incomplete incremental drawing looks like and what a fragmented contingent model looks like. That's where the project is at: I'm synthesising it into different mediums but also using it as a launching point toward other generativedesign questions.

**KOOZ The beauty of this conversation – which we very much believe in, at KoozArch –**

**is this idea of generating new questions and connections. Maybe this becomes another moment of exchange, and who knows where that might lead in the future? Thank you all for taking the time to talk.**

**LUNA BUGHANEM** is an artist, researcher, and architectural designer based between New York City and Beirut. In her practice, she investigates, documents, and represents the intertwining of travel and the built environment across scales, including objects, materials, tools, and networks. Her research develops "diasporic homemaking," the process through which diaspora members build houses in their homeland while and from abroad or back and forth between.

**DANIEL FROTA DE ABREU** is a multidisciplinary artist working at the intersection of visual arts, design, and moving image. With a background in typography, his practice approaches legibility through multiple perspectives, taking the critical reading of objects, images and texts as its foundation. Combining archival research, printing techniques, sculpture and filmmaking, his work investigates how history is materially fabricated, transformed and preserved. Daniel runs Interno Bruto, a publishing and design studio where he develops editorial projects in dialogue with clients, fellow artists, curators and cultural organizations.

**ROBIN HARTANTO HONGGARE** has a background in architecture, curation and filmmaking. Building on his focus on the architectures of cultivation and histories of colonial modernities in Southeast Asia, his current research explores commodity buildings and their entanglement with environmental techniques and imaginaries in the Netherlands Indies. Robin is currently a Doctoral Candidate in Architecture at Columbia GSAPP.

**FEDERICA ZAMBELETTI** is the founder and managing director of KoozArch. She is an architect, researcher and storyteller whose interests lie at the intersection between art, architecture and regenerative practices. In 2022 Federica founded KoozArch with the ambition of creating a space where to research, explore and discuss architecture beyond the limits of its built form. Prior to dedicating her full attention to KoozArch, Federica collaborated with the architecture studio and non-profit agency for change UNA/UNLESS working on numerous cultural projects and the research of "Antarctic Resolution". Federica is an Architectural Association School of Architecture in London alumni.

# Define and Empower: The School of Mutants on collectivism, companionship, and hope

Essay by Lou Mo, with input from the Mutants



Tracing a lineage of radical pedagogical experimentation in Africa, the School of Mutants reflect on several years of polyphonic practice and interdisciplinary inquiry.

## I. A School On the Go

In 2018, Hamedine Kane and Stéphane Verlet Bottéro were both artists-in-residence in Dakar. Together, they would discover the site of the University of African Future on the outskirts of the capital, in Diamniadio. It was like finding a mirage, these unfinished but grandiose buildings, with their dark and empty window spaces staring out like hollow eyes, speaking of faltering political promises intertwined with metamorphosing dreams of

LaBecque, The School Of Mutants. M. Croizier.

Pan-Africanism. This unrealised project, then already in ruins, became the beginning of an ongoing collective inquiry on pedagogy and higher education in Senegal.

In nearby Sébikotane, they would visit the ruins of École Normale William Ponty, a colonial school destined to train administrators for France from all over Francophone West Africa. The Ponty school is a very different kind of ruin, imbued with oedipal spirits, as native sons themselves became fathers of their own nations— although sometimes they did not come back to tie up all the loose ends.

The University of Mutants – founded in the late 1970s – lay at the doors of Dakar on Gorée island. There, Léopold Sédar Senghor tried to turn the page on Transatlantic trade, into a future of collaboration, solidarity, and change, through scholarly and cultural exchange. This institution has also run its course, its empty building now reoccupied and given a new life by its current inhabitants. The few leftover dossiers bear witness to this post-independence experimentation.

Like Joseph Ki-Zerbo says, muter ou périr.

Today, the University of African Future – initiated as a Panafrican promise and one of the seven wonders of Dakar by former Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade in the early 2000s – has disappeared entirely, and Diamniadio given over to new dreams of a smart city and a petrol institution. Ponty and the University of Mutants still stand as reminders of ideas on imaginaries, pedagogical possibilities, and endeavours towards a different future.

There are so many questions. How to mutate? What to learn? What future is possible? Who are our allies? What should we do? There is urgency to this inquiry, and we, the mutants, are the carriers of a message in pieces. Along the way, with each discussion, each trial, activated by exhibitions and public events, as we try to learn to occupy different spaces, find new methodologies, we pick up a piece here and there. This message is also a diffused message,

The School of Mutants, Still from We Are the Ambassadors of the Blurred Mirages of Lands that Never Fully Materialized.



diffracted through the past and the future, gleaned from the deeds, speeches, and writings of those who could have been our companions.

As The School of Mutants emerged and continues to exist as a collective, we have also chosen the path of collective work, of being one and multiple at the same time. This is another possibly unexpected decision, but it has a profound impact on each of the mutants, our message, and our work. In this moment of abyss through a prolonged and aggravating crisis, when values deemed universal (DEI and the value of human life in Palestine to name but a couple) are suddenly retracted and rolling on the reverse, the urgency of our exploration and the importance of finding companions on the way seems ever more pressing.

## II. A Fellowship Mapped in Time and Space

From 2021 to 2022, in the midst of the chaos brought by the Covid-19 pandemic – itself a mutant – the collective undertook a fellowship residency with Nieuwe Instituut. It was an uncanny experience combining both headspace and time spent together – albeit often across great distances – to develop a discursive space as there was no pending deadline to make a new installation appear. We had time to go down the rabbit hole with some research projects and initiate other discussions – yet the entire experience was remote, each in their own bubble. The collective formed a relationship with the Instituut and the other fellows, and these friendships continue.

It was also a time of repose and understanding difference. In our collective, we come from different areas of the world: different trajectories, different heritages and different art practices. The mutants vary a great deal in age, language, hometown, education, gender, sexual orientation, life experiences, skin colour, and much more. In our daily lives, we are artists, curators, researchers, filmmakers, activists, teachers, but also nomads, parents, writers, readers, thinkers, nature lovers, immigrants, gig workers, explorers and beyond. All these differences mix to create complementarity that imbues us with great energy, synergy and momentum to mutate into something more than ourselves: a collective.

At that time, the collective was still a toddler, gradually finding its feet, still to grow into new phases. With a few exhibitions and events behind us, some took on new interests and projects that led them to depart on different paths, and others joined along the way. It was also dynamic, acquiring and saying goodbye to members.

The collective practice developed a special spatial and temporal quality, because we had to learn how to work as a multiple when each of us have already developed very different and sometimes affirmed identities and practices. It was fun to have this different interval to ponder important questions in company. What does research mean for us? What does it mean to work with others respectfully when our goals are so different? Are we the objects or subjects of this inquiry? What are the findings we want to share? Where do we take it from there? The journey was also about finding stories and pursuing inquiries, with each other and in the companionship of many who were there before us. We learned from the cohort who has accepted us with generosity and trust.

“What does it mean to work with others respectfully when our goals are so different? Are we the objects or subjects of this inquiry?”

## III. Study Time, Work Time and Play Time

We enjoy using shortschedules and light means to produce very different results each time, like rapid fire. The collective is a platform, and the significance of a platform is centred on usage – members or groups of members can use it to research or create a particular work project, without necessarily requiring everyone being tied up in a full-on, full-time horizontal structure, where all decisions are based on consensus and lengthy discussions. The agility and organic response brings both flexibility and challenges. We may not always all agree, but that is also part of artistic collaborations. You learn from what is outside of your scope. What we do share is our hybrid heritage and nomadic becomings. Maybe that's what mutation is about.

Our work has also evolved in mutation as we work together, bringing ideas to life through this rhizomatic methodology. In the beginning, our inquiries departed from schools and pedagogy, the lands that their institutional embodiments stand on, the futures and promises, kept or unkept. This prompted us to explore and inhabit other related venues, near and far. For example, the work we presented at the 14th Dakar Biennale was situated within the Théodore Monod - IFAN Museum, an institution with a complex colonial and post-colonial history and one which is highly involved in the discussion around restitutions and the future of collections. We brought into the museum everyday objects and scriptures that circulate on Dakar's markets. These assemblages are an amplification of a vast ensemble of precolonial practices, materiality, and semiotics that mutated, adapted, and eventually resisted the imperial ordering of sign, but found refuge in material cultures hidden away from institutionalised knowledge spaces.

In Berlin, we re-enacted a scene from Abderrahmane Sissako's 2006 film Bamako, which is itself a *mise en scène* of a trial in the courtyard of Sissako's childhood home, in the capital of Mali. The International Monetary Fund is put on trial by the African civil society. In a colourful and playful scene recreation guarded by empty, giant, and mutated black court robes, every visitor becomes a player in the scene. This work, *All Fragments of the Word Will Come Back Here to Mend Each Other*, is a double inquiry, both about the role of institutions and the experiment of third-worldism. Even if an institution is to be judged, what does this verdict do to reconstitute the damage done? It was exciting to insert our presence and initiate a reflection about the importance of epistemic justice and mutating futures, into such a symbolic and loaded western museum like the Akademie der Künste. It is a matter of balance between being in and out; more specifically, to bring something from the outside into the western institutional system without forgetting to keep building and showing outside of this realm.

At the autostrada biennial in Kosovo, we started working with the idea that play time is study time through a mobile installation that can be activated outside of the exhibition space, which was itself atypical in Kosovo. In the

last couple of years, we do not feel that we have exhausted the explorations on having fun and being more mobile, hence the introduction of the library-like structures for Playtime in Merano, Glasgow, and more. The installation always takes on a new life, in a different context and with a different audience. The exploration of pedagogical solutions towards a better future remains an important topic for our collective, though it has also gradually morphed and made room for other ideas and formal trials to what our collective practice may become.

“It is a matter of balance between being in and out; more specifically, to bring something from the outside into the western institutional system without forgetting to keep building and showing outside of this realm.”



The School of Mutants,  
Playtime, Autostrada  
Biennale, Prizren, 2023.  
Photo Autostrada Biennale.

Our practice has become less serious and more expansive, and we learn along our way. It is interesting to note that the original set of books we used to use in our exhibitions and activities is not the set of books we have now: some things get lost, others are added by visitors, and we ourselves keep discovering. Sometimes, inclusion is as simple as giving space to others to use, stay, criticise or modify your work. This generosity and loss of control is very important. We hope that visitors have as much fun discovering and spending time with our works as we do making them, in full enjoyment of the company of our fellow mutants. Our practice emerges from a need to think beyond commodifiable art objects, so we fight against commodifiable art practices into our own collective practice too. That is why we strongly encourage different forms of re-use, for our works to be modified and

adapted for other local usages.

#### IV. Seeds of Resistance, Seeds of Hope, and Strategies for a Collective Future

“It matters what stories we tell, to tell other stories of the future,” curator and educator Oulimata Gueye wrote. This was a part of the curatorial statement from the University of African Futures exhibition, which she curated in Nantes in 2021, featuring her personal research and collaboration within the collective. The School of Mutants is a collective voice taking inspiration from many places across geographical and temporal spans; it is in the company of the like-minded from the past and present that we hope to speak to the future, sowing seeds of resistance and hope. We look at Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Caribbeans, but not only these; we are also concerned about current struggles and problems such as contemporary colonialism.

After a few years of practice, it is a good time to think about what messages we want to spread going forward. We think there is greater awareness and need to call out the gatekeepers and normative forces in the art world; more responsibility to introduce more inclusive or radical works. But the world is not perfect. Every system has dominant players, and so far we play within the system. We also want to continue amplifying our understanding of the world through more of its nooks and crannies, spanning broader fields. In an age of uncertainty, companionship is even more important. The time to think and to act together is now.

We’ve always been very keen on long installation titles and quotes, which are seeds of sorts, so here are a few we’d share with you:

“Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.”

— Frantz Fanon

“I would simply add that it would be pointless to recognise and denounce [the injustices and arbitrariness of the colonial system] if action is not taken to put an end to it.”

— Ruben Um Nyobè

“Stumbling across the truth isn’t the same as making things up.”

— Octavia Butler

“Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.”

— Gloria Anzaldúa

“Europe is not my center. Why be a sunflower and turn towards the sun? I myself am the sun.”

— Ousmane Sembène

“In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower.”  
— Audre Lorde

“Act in your place, think with the world.”  
— Édouard Glissant



**Left**  
L'Université des Mutants

**Right**  
The uncompleted campus library of the University of African Future. Copyright: Hamedine Kane & Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro.



**LOU MO** is a Chinese Canadian artist and curator. Her research is focused on modern and contemporary Afro-Asian connections and Third World artists' creative practices. She is also interested in issues of diaspora, identity, and perception in relation to post-colonial history and the centre-periphery model. As a member of the School of Mutants collective, her works have been exhibited in venues such as the 12th Taipei Biennial, Centre Pompidou Metz, the 12th Berlin Biennial and Glasgow International.

**THE SCHOOL OF MUTANTS** is a collaborative platform for art and research initiated in Dakar, Senegal, in 2018 by Hamedine Kane and Stéphane Verlet Bottéro. Its starting point is an inquiry into the role of universities, public school projects, and academic utopia in post-independence processes of nation-building in Senegal and West Africa; it is informed by wider transnational networks such as the Non-Aligned Movement, Afro-Asianism, and Third-Worldism. A nomadic project that aims to mobilise spaces for the production, transmission, and pluralisation of knowledge in a nonhierarchical manner, The School of Mutants engages with sociocultural, ecological, and aesthetic mutations of the real.

## Against Collective Exhaustion: WORKNOT! learns to love the messenger

Essay by Arvand Pourabbasi & Golnar Abbasi / WORKNOT!



In this reflective essay, architects Golnar Abbasi and Arvand Pourabbasi – founders of WORKNOT! and collaborators selected to extend their work for the Fellowship at Nieuwe Instituut – found that the strictures of social distancing during the COVID lockdown leached into their mode of practice, prompting ingenious and ongoing tactics to securitise against exhaustion, building comfort and community.

### I. Precarity

Precarity is a manifestation of unequal power relations, which has been increasing and expanding globally under contemporary sovereignty of capital; precarisation of lives in jeopardy of violence, extraction and exploitation.

**Left**  
Selection of things accumulated at dispatch including gifts and works that got (re)produced for the purpose of this circulation: dispatch contact sheet, notebooks made out of scrap paper by dispatch, box of tea, zine on Fast Eddie Williams: Bike Messengers Life NYC made by Tomi Hilsee, a paper copy of Rotterdam food map initiated by Amy Suo Wu, tiles made by Pendar Nabipour, receipt zine by Florian Cramer, bowls received from Clara Balaguer, and among more letters, seeds, poems, and etc. Photo by authors, 2020.

Neoliberalism as an ideology and a practice seeps into every aspect of life: to live with debt, overwork, budget cuts and layoffs, entrepreneurial obligations, and many more extractive experiences that go beyond labour. Living under the conditions of evictability caused by gentrification, climate collapse, visa regime and war makes life predictable, reducible and even disposable. From human and non-human bodies to territories and a planetary scale, our world is conditioned by exhausting processes consuming precarious bodies and other planetary resources for centuries of extractivist and colonial (infra) structures and institutions. Institutions form infrastructures that condition not only the way that resources and access are fortified, distributed, or extended, but also shape conceptual, discursive and sociocultural frameworks of understanding our own life/work, and modes of relating to others. Today, working with or alongside institutions highlights the urgency of thinking about the politics of exhaustion and comfort in the face of such perpetual precarisation. What could this work of rejecting precarity politics look like?

“If precarisation has become a governmental instrument of normalisation surpassing specific groups and classes, then social and political battles themselves should not assume differential separations and hierarchies. Rather, those who wage such battles should look specifically for what they have in common in the midst of normalisation: a desire to make use of the productivity of precarious living and working conditions to change these modes of governing, a means of working together to refuse and elude them.”<sup>1</sup>

The ideas and practices of ‘comfort’ are crucial in imagining a different world; conceptualising comfort in a way that goes beyond constructed and capitalist ideas more than just the process of rejuvenation for the purpose of maintaining a certain level of productivity. Instead, the act of imagining other conceptions of comfort in terms of different sociopolitical orders and ways of performing in the world that are based on solidarity, allyship, and commitment to each others’ struggles in varying proximities, within everydayness and across the global geopolitical landscape.

## II. Curatorship

In the field of art, design and architecture, foregrounding of public display and its consumability in institutions, creates an economy of display and hierarchies of visibility. These economies of display govern the fields, and in turn, make certain practices that uphold their spaces and mechanisms, invisible and precarious. Think of freelance builders setting up exhibitions, migrant construction workers without access to insurance, ones who clean buildings and institutions, precarious artists who accept underpaid deals in exchange for exposure, (junior) designers routinely working unpaid overtime and many more.

Experiences of precarity and occupying positions outside of fortified enclosures of comfort and visibility, can inform the politics of the work when one is given a seat at the table. It matters where we come from and how we arrive at the table. Experiences of violence can condition one’s politics when moving through strata of precarity and privilege. Curatorship is one of these positions where direct access to negotiating what goes on the public display and getting to use the institutional resources is provided. Where the labour of negotiating access, visibility and precarity is at stake.

At the threshold of a delivery address, delivering a participant’s family story about the Persian carpet patterns. Photo by Tomi Hilsee, 2020.

Curatorial work is one example of the type of work within the creative and design field, that can direct the flow of resources and their allocations; a type of work that is heavy on administrative level with spreadsheets as tools that determine the mechanism of distribution of tasks, resources, and outcomes. The spreadsheets are the architecture of distributing means, capital, access, comfort and precarity. In this sense the work of curating can be a work of subverting the extractive modes of collaboration, counter-neoliberal administration and initiating logistics that can enable comfort against precarity.

“Curatorial work is one example of the type of work within the creative and design field, that can direct the flow of resources and their allocations.”



The intention here, however, is not to romanticise or glamorise this commitment, or applaud such work. It is to discuss its necessity and importance in the politics of such professional positions. The commitment to the labour of negotiating these dynamics is not always visible work. It is not monumental or extravagant, yet it is essential if one is to elude collective exhaustion.

## III. Bike Messenger Rounds

As architect-artists, in 2020 we curated a show and a programme<sup>2</sup> thinking of these very themes of exhaustion and comfort, and brought together works that took sociopolitical stances by fictioning ideas and practices of comfort; a project we called Fictioning Comfort.<sup>3</sup> The first covid lockdowns hit right in the middle of when we were creating this project. Instead of cancelling

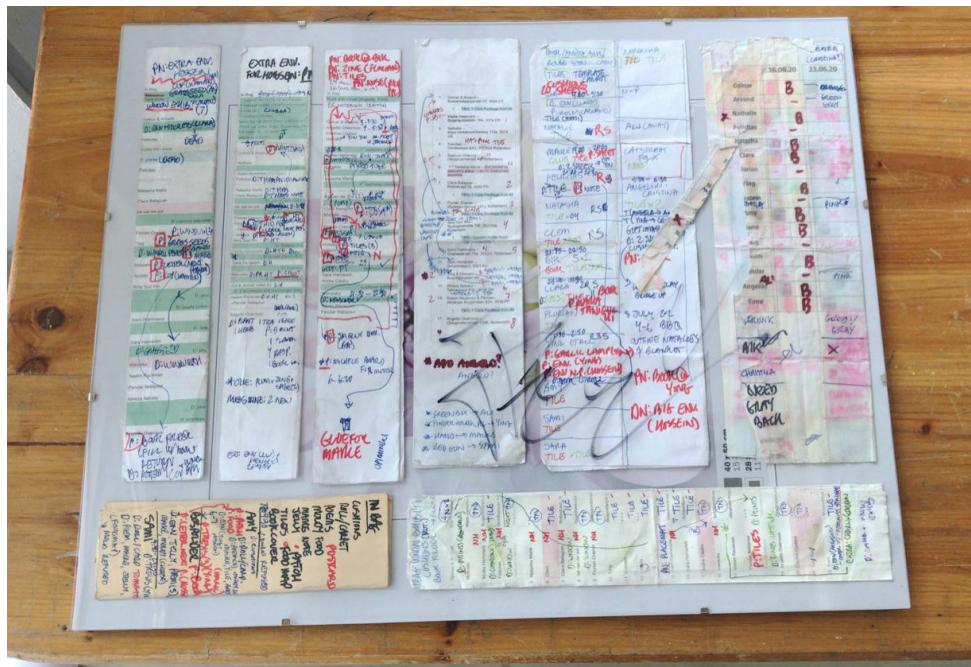
2 We were kindly invited by Nathalie Hartjes and Wouter van der Hallen of Showroom MAMA in Rotterdam.

3 The show happened in a parallel of an online project and a physical one.

1 Isabell Lorey, “Becoming common: Precarization as political constituting.” *E-flux Journal* 17 (2010) Pp. 1-10.

or postponing (which was common institutional practice at that time, and hit freelance workers severely while contracted staff were fine) in the negotiation with the exhibition space, we decided to keep our commitments to the people we had invited to show their work. Now we had to figure out how to curate the show under lockdown. Lockdown conditions went beyond no in-person meetings or studio visits. It forced us to reorient our curatorial thinking around exhaustion and comfort. How were we to do this work in a moment of deep crisis? How to make sense of these work commitments when all priorities have been rearranged? Doing this project became about reimagining how we would relate to people and their labour with a deeper sense of commitment than before.

A selection of bike messenger's manifests from all the rounds framed to exhibit at Showroom MAMA. Photo by authors, 2020.



And we experimented with ways of producing a show that attempts to avoid, as much as possible, the exhaustion of bodies, spaces, and resources. Being productive while appreciating slowness, doubt, and accounting for the individual and collective precariousness we all experienced. Our homes became sites for production, rest, and rethinking exhaustion and comfort in such a deep crisis. In our rooms, gradually sinking into the fiction of 'being at home' in the world. What follows is some reflections on one of our curatorial interventions in this project, which here is meant as a tool to think about strategising and negotiating the administration and logistics of curatorship.

Nowruz had just occurred, a few weeks into the Netherlands' first COVID lockdown. To celebrate together while remaining socially distanced, we wrote letters to friends and delivered them on bikes, and had a drink at their

4 Read more about this in the project text on the exhibition website.

door or stoop, at a distance. This idea of connecting to people despite the crisis leached into our practice with the curating work. We wondered how we could connect and relate to one another in an affective way, when sitting in the same room was not possible.

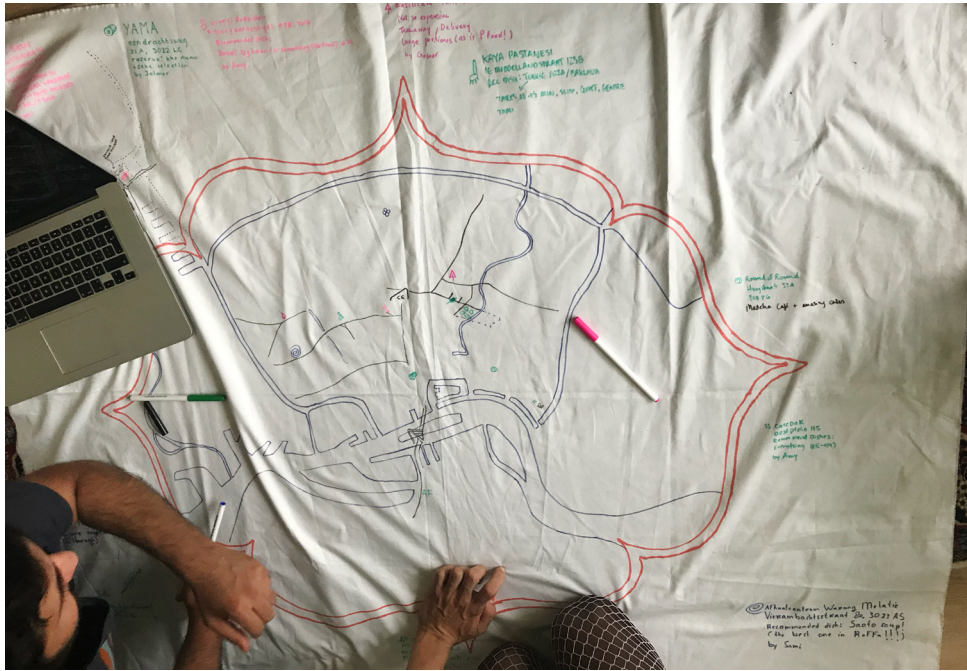
We decided to use the same bike delivery idea in the project among the people involved; artists, artists' collaborators, production people, gallery staff, friends; and people kept being added through suggestions, and so the network kept growing beyond our curatorial relations. We turned our living room into a production space and a dispatch unit, and made sure every delivery round there was at least one package circulating, going from "dispatch" to everyone. Others in the rounds could contribute in any capacity they wanted to. For eight weeks leading to the exhibition openings, "gifts" were distributed and exchanged within the network twice a week. There were zines, cushions, ceramic tiles, letters, a collection of mold jars, a collective Rotterdam food map, books, joints, wallpaper pieces, teas, little ceramic bowls, etc. It was an activation of a politics of kinship by providing the labour of initiation and logistics. It was a slow and stretchy infrastructure to extend and expand the space of the project beyond what constituted a formal exhibition as a public display.

Together with the bike messenger for these rounds – Tomi Hilsee, who had worked professionally in that capacity in the U.S. and the Netherlands – we thought about the history and community of bike messengers and the mechanism of dispatch offices. Which exemplifies (invisible) admin and logistic work that makes larger formal procedures possible, yet forming their own subterranean network. One that instead of committing to the efficiency-based pace of capitalist time, is committed to producing delays, kinships, and disobedience through alleycat races, collective prolonged standby, for instance.<sup>4</sup> And in the context of our project, that was one that is focused on relations built between people through gifts, rather than seamless flows of things for promotion.

As a gift economy, it was an exercise in distributing and "networking" that was deliberately slow and affective, and did not remove itself from the experiences of precarity that we were all living in various degrees, as well as the political questions at hand; instead, leaned into them. Perhaps more than a formal project or a strict professional framework, it became a way to keep doing things, together, in contact from a distance.

The urban infrastructure was activated and claimed by the slow pace of bike messenger's wheels within a rushed capitalist mindset of swiftness to the "new normal" under covid and forcefully constructing new habits of productivity. This route-based and decentralised placemaking practice which inhabited the threshold of many homes exemplifies a situated spatial curatorial strategy. One which worked not for the promotion of an institutional practice of exploiting resources, building and bodies, but gave room for collectivity. Urban fabric with its complex neoliberal dynamic of the public versus the private could serve to make smaller scale commons among whom they had things in common.

The question of visibility came back here at the moment of the exhibition "opening". How could these things that were moving around between our houses and bike messenger's bags and "dispatch", be documented and



Fill-in Rotterdam food map, designed by Amy Suo Wu and circulated around by bike messenger asking for participants to add their favourite restaurant in town. Photo by authors, 2020.

displayed? But also, why must they be documented and shown, and perhaps even, for whom? The collection of bike messenger's redacted manifests and their logbook was made publicly visible in the exhibition display, offline and online. This unarchivable and undocumentable process is against the economy of display that constitutes the professional field's principle of visibility as a way of valuating labour and its allocated resources.

#### IV. Strategy

This curatorial intervention in the form of a bike messenger delivery network working over a period of time preceding a public exhibition came out of an urgency to maintain complicities and commitment to each others' conditions, using institutional resources that were available. Rather than a promotional communication strategy it was an administrative and logistical effort of solidarity to reorganise the distribution of resources that one gets access to in the role of a curator, in a moment of deep crisis.

This strategising and distributing resources is learnt from experiences of precarious life/work without a lot of prior access to resources or people. Having learnt that in order to show work or make conversations, we would just have to do it ourselves. Just making the space, hosting other people, initiating and self-organising the event, making the books. This is something we had learned from working in informal economies such as in self-publishing, where the discourse around how to acquire resources, subvert institutional access gates, leak resources out, etc is prominent.

5 Springer, Simon. "Fuck neoliberalism." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 15, no. 2 (2016) Pp. 285-292.

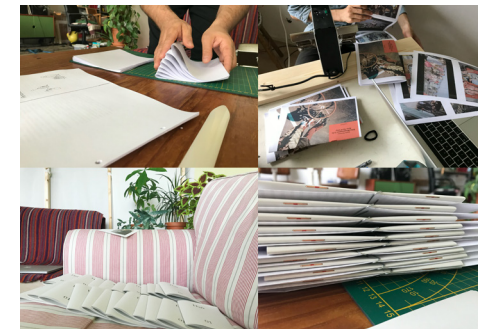
This project was an exercise to realise that it is possible to operationalise access and mobilise resources for anti-violence practices within our field. Making space partly means working through existing spaces; to extend and expand resources, organisationally rearrange, re-articulate the way things are made public. It takes the commitment to strategising against the grain of cultural capitalism and its identity-based attention economy, to open space up for urgent and current anti-violence conversations.

Since then, many iterations of similar bike messenger delivery networks have taken place in various other contexts (some more meaningful than others), and responded to other crises that we found ourselves oriented towards; occupation, revolution, war, etc. And there we have asked ourselves how to engage with this violence and crisis from where we are, from here.

Considering the multiplicity of the unfolding crises at the moment of writing this, and while aware of co-opting progressive discourse within institutional contexts that can put the value of their contribution into question, we ask ourselves: what are the forms of situated and spatial work that could be done to contribute to this condition of exhaustive precarity? How to work through these exhausted contemporary conditions, from within our fields, when imagining collective freedom and comfort can feel ever more inaccessible? How do we do things outside of neoliberalism's reach?<sup>5</sup> How to delay, to stretch a bit beyond, expand a bit further, just to make some more space both here and over there? How to go beyond the hold that this despair of neoliberalism and fascism have on our imaginations, to enact the commitment we have to each other? What are the strategies to repair and sustain our complicities?

**Left**  
Dispatch, in-living-room production of zines and publications to send out in the packages. Photos by authors, 2020.

**Right**  
Bike messenger's coffee table before heading out to a delivery round. Photo by Tomi Hilsee, 2020.



**WORKNOT!** is focused on critical spatial practice and theory. It works across architecture, art, publishing, and curation. Its work is research-oriented design based on critical thinking, and radical spatial pedagogy. Its work has been shown and published at Venice Biennale, Nieuwe Instituut, Sharjah Triennale of Architecture, e-flux Architecture, among other places. WORKNOT! is founded by Arvand Pourabbasi and Golnar Abbasi.

**ARVAND POURABBASI** is a spatial practitioner, researcher, and educator. His work focuses on decolonial readings of domesticity, public realm, and spatial pedagogy. He is a co-founder of Rotterdam-based collective WORKNOT! and educator at Design Academy Eindhoven and Willem de Kooning Academie, Rotterdam.



**GOLNAR ABBASI** is an architect-artist, researcher, curator, and publisher. Her work focuses on politics of domesticity, anti-colonial space, practices of resistance, and historical narrative. She is a Ph.D. candidate at Faculty of Architecture and Urban Environment TU Delft and alumni of Jan van Eyck Academie. She is a co-founder of Rotterdam-based collective WORKNOT! and an educator at Piet Zwart Institute and Willem de Kooning Academie, Rotterdam.

# Speculating with Spirits: Simone C Niquille and Russel Hlongwane

Conversation with Simone C Niquille, Russel Hlongwane.

What does research practice mean when it is unbound by the fusty, ring-fenced confines of academia? Reframing imaginative interpretations and the quest for animistic authenticity in a technologically moderated world, the designer and researcher Simone C Niquille and cultural producer Russel Hlongwane – both former alumni of Nieuwe Instituut's Research Fellowship – lay out their blurry methodologies.

**FEDERICA ZAMBELETTI / KOOZ** Let's start with a broad question around this idea of the practice of research; how do you approach research, and what kinds of methodologies do you think are relevant today?

**SIMONE C NIQUILLE** Well – as always – it's a mash-up of things that I do; it's not as structured as I think the term "research methodology" implies, right? For me, it's much more like a visual observation, cross referencing something, and realising, hey, perhaps there's a bigger question here. It involves going with a gut feeling, and on that path, doing a bunch of things: one of them, for example, is interviews. I always really like to hold interviews and conversations. For example, if I read a research paper on computer vision and a training dataset that's been put together, I would reach out to the computer scientists who authored it, to ask them questions that go beyond the academic text. That, for me, is always inspirational – because you get the human side, the things that perhaps they've found frustrating or surprising. There's the emotional side of the research question that I have as well; they tend to be about technologies, but I'm interested in the technology as a metaphor for human conditions.

Computer vision, in essence, is an elongated history of the way we represent each other; how we capture and reduce the world, to make it understandable. But still, it can feel quite abstract, so going to the people involved and having conversations is, I think, important. Then with the imagery, it might come from finding a strange video on YouTube where I'm not quite sure what the source is, but visually, it piques my attention. These things really happen in a non structured way; this sort of happenstance, digging into stuff, going into a tunnel and just trusting your gut; finding and pairing things with readings – things that we do anyways. It's really about cross referencing and visual connections; it's not something you can search for textually, nor can it be indexed; video is starting to be indexed, but not the visual part...

**RUSSEL HLONGWANE** I oscillate between a mode of artistic research and a more speculative mode. In practical terms the speculative

is at some point was a useful way – or maybe it depends on the question that one is asking – and one that seems specifically tied to the the perspective, the position and the context of being Black in South Africa, and the discontents with history or geography there. One gets the sense that the accounts of history – and the placements of Blackness in those accounts – are unreliable at both levels, from history with a big H that has been constructed outside of Blackness, flowing into Blackness, and the history that gets constructed within Blackness and flows outwards as well. I think one is trying to think about utilising that meta-narrative, using it in a very cynical or even intentionally callous way, to showcase and demonstrate its fickle nature. So in the projects that you would have seen, maybe there's something around ancient sites – the age-old sites of Mapungubwe – where these excavations have taken place and artefacts have been unearthed:

Production still of Dzata, 2022 - ongoing. Courtesy of Knoetze, Hlongwane and Wilson.



there's so much mystery around this. How does one take the mystery to propose what else might have been excavated, what was not found, what still remains buried – and what remains buried in many other sites than we haven't encountered in this region?

It's about using this point of consensus – like a site with this apparent mystery around it, yet which reveals tangible artifacts – to propose that if you can agree that something happened here, who's to say that other things didn't happen? Then we can constantly push that question further. In no way is anyone kind of providing a factual account, because history in itself cannot fully account for the facts that might have happened, you know? So this way of speculating upon history, speculating upon the present is always drawn out of some sort of consensus, whether it be social history or academic.

I also mentioned that the artistic research mode, which in my own practice, allows one to move beyond the confinement and the restrictions that academia often places on critical yet small gestures – such as citation and references. If one is investigating questions where the reference is not readily available and which has not been 'authenticated', where does one go? Then you have to refer to a conversation. But of course, that conversation does not carry the same weight as a piece of literature that has been cited a hundred times. So how does artistic research allow for a bit more flexibility, liberated beyond the mode of academic research?

**SCN** I love what you're saying about speculation; the tension it holds in contrast to 'history' is really important. One way artistic research can be interpreted is through this idea that it's about the future, like futurology. But I think speculation is so much more important in terms of things that seem set in stone as history or as fact; it doesn't really do it justice to constrain it to the things to come. It might also be about the things that happened – but it's about reimagining those. They will point to a different kind of future, once we've reimagined these pasts that we've taken for granted. But I find that incredibly important.

I was happy that you mentioned references; that sparked something for me. The work of the scholar Katherine Mckittrick and her writing – specifically the book *Dear Sciences* – gives so much weight to references and footnotes. She makes the point that there's a huge tradition, specifically in Black scholarship, Black art, Black culture, of not just being thankful but also acknowledging that there's a route to the things that you're making, that obviously they don't just sort of come out of thin air. On the level of graphic design, it might just be that your text is a certain size on an A4 or standard page, so that the footnotes are actually taking up more space, than that which we give our voices or the 'main' text, inserting reference as a way to make the main text seem plausible or perhaps important. I really love this idea of making and with that, being really aware that there are things that I'm building on top of, breaking this idea of a reference being such a specific thing, as it is in academia. This idea of needing to put the last name and the date – what if I don't have a last name? There are so many ways that you can easily break this convention of referencing. How are we going to think about these structures – ones that have been put in place for a certain reason, right? Referencing allows you to build on each other's research, but what if that doesn't fit into these sort of neat categories – apparently that then becomes artistic research? I would love for this work to also be counted as academic research, but as far as I've

encountered, there are strict boundaries; for instance, something like a peer review journal has specific formalities around what you can publish. This is all to say that research often feels like a heavy word; like History with a capital H, so there is Research with a capital R. It doesn't have to be, but I guess then we wouldn't have this conversation.

**RH** Thanks for those points; I'm in complete agreement.

**KOOZ** It's so interesting to consider the relevance of such methods today – of using speculative and artistic research as a means to question 'fixed' histories, to open up different perspectives and see where they might project us in the future. You both mentioned the importance of conversation or dialogue. Russell, the conversations that you host in your podcast often explore the potential of multidisciplinary exchange, can you expand on that?

**RH** I will try to use a practical example here. There's a group of entities that are kind of found in the folklore of Zulu people, amongst others. It is through these entities that I grew a fascination and an interest in techno-politics, techno-poetics, science fiction and so on. So one figure – umuncwi – is this entity that is composed of spirit, matter and electric charge. My grandmother, for example, has encountered this figure, and there are a few others. These figures are crafts of transcendentalists from this region. Now, let's suppose that there's a certain understanding of physics, of the elements and the laws of nature that these people, that this community of transcendentalists also understands in order for them to produce this entity – which, in my view, conjures the image of either the post human or the cyborg, right? It is through the figure of umuncwi that I enter science fiction. If there's a supposition that these people can understand very subtle and technical knowledge about physics, nature, then how might a theoretical physicist enter that conversation; how might they speak and respond to some of the propositions brought forth by this figure? How can we bring in a computer scientist to join that conversation, what can be translated through the gaps and the mistranslations?

Obviously, all of these people are speaking from different places of expertise, therefore they're using a different set of vocabulary and language. I always find it interesting to pick up on those threads that cannot be translated all the way across – it's in those gaps that we're able to transcend the binaries and the power structures within various bodies of knowledge. What this allows for me to do, in terms of scholarship in South Africa, is to reject the idea that Western scholarship is superior to the indigenous one. At the same time, it's also to say that Western scholarship has taken humanity to a certain level; however, it's inaccurate and unreasonable to think that Western scholarship can account for the entire existence of not only humanity but also plants and animals, right? This transdisciplinary mode, working across various communities of practice, allows us to build much more wholesome knowledge projects – epistemic projects that work beyond the established binaries and hierarchies. That's one value that I see. Then, if I take this process and go elsewhere, to someone who is interested in ancient civilisations, how can I take the mistranslations from South Africa, to see what tensions it might raise for someone thinking in that disciplinary approach? Through the attentive and sustained practice of these kinds of investigations, I believe this process will produce some interesting and novel, if not 'credible' knowledge, certainly some interesting thought experiments that can take the process of producing knowledge elsewhere.

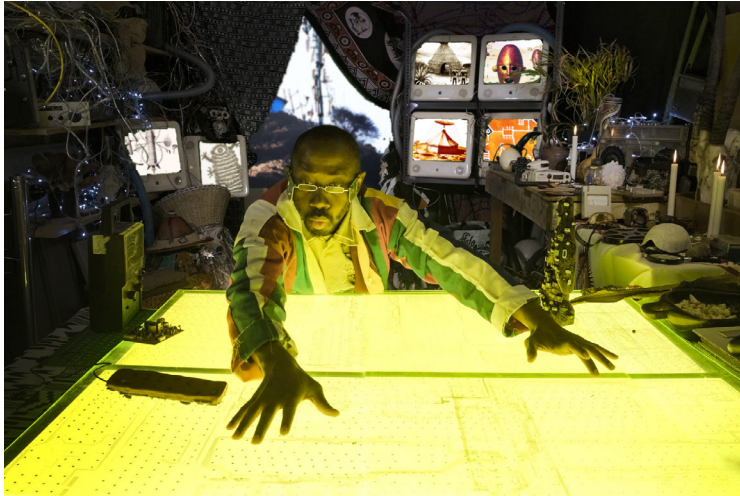
Production still of Dzata, 2022 - ongoing. Courtesy of Knoetze, Hlongwane and Wilson.

**Next page Right**

Simone C Niquille / technoflesh Studio, duckrabbit.tv "The Mystery Of The Pictures" (still), 2023. Installation view at Akademie der Künste Berlin during transmediale, 2023. Photo © Silke Briel.

**Left**

Simone C Niquille / technoflesh Studio, HOMESCHOOL, 2019. Installation view at Navesierra during MMMAD festival, 2025. Photo © Maru Serrano.



“I always find it interesting to pick up on those threads that cannot be translated all the way across — it’s in those gaps that we’re able to transcend the binaries and the power structures within various bodies of knowledge.”

- Russel Hlongwane

**KOOZ** Simone, conversations are also at the heart of your intuitive approach to research. Is that always a one-to-one exchange? Are there moments of exchanges with those that are not in focus, but rather who inform the research that you are undertaking?

**SCN** There are different kinds of conversations. There are those where I'm curious to learn more — like the example I mentioned around research methodologies — where I reach out to someone to understand more than what is presented in a traditional format, like a research paper or a video, to learn about a process. Those tend to be one-on-one. In teaching, it's also important to use the classroom as a place for conversation, and that is an entirely different experience — not something that arises in terms of research methodologies, but these are important moments where you go through material with a group of students or a group of practitioners in different settings. For example, I have a research lab at the Design Academy in Eindhoven, as part of the Information Design master's course, and there's more of a regularity to it. We meet every three weeks in workshops or group work sessions; there, it's about questioning material together, specifically software.

In terms of vocabulary, as Russell mentioned, I find that to be incredibly limiting, almost like a stopper for conversation. In the research conversations,

where it's more one-on-one, I tend to be the one receiving information, but then in having a conversation with another person in another discipline, it's still me carrying that knowledge into questions.

I also realised that sometimes I have to use different words, even just in terms of how I describe myself, to get access? Like, if I'm going to write an email and describe myself as a designer slash researcher, sometimes the reply can be a no, because it doesn't make sense to the person reading it. If I say I'm a visual cultures researcher, there's a play with words there that already happens, at the access to a conversation. It also happens within a conversation, where I realise that perhaps one person is using a word that is really technical for them, whereas in another context, it means something entirely different. There it's helpful to be a translator, almost — to come back to the Studio to make a glossary, in order to understand these processes and translate them.

**KOOZ** I love this idea of translations — it does resonate with the work that we do as researchers. And in this sense, you have both hinted at the kinds of research that you undertake, which evidently touches upon the intersections of identity and technology. How much and to what extent does your research agenda stem from your personal or professional experiences, and how have these developed as you have grown both as individuals and as practitioners?

**RH** In South Africa, a law was passed in the mid twentieth century, namely the Witchcraft Suppression Act. Essentially, this was the apartheid government demonising and criminalising the many rituals that were associated with and crucial to the world-making of Black folk. Through this act, there was a severance between society and a set of behaviours and rituals that have sustained for centuries. For me and my interest in technology, or technological thinking, all the politics entailed in this place is the most fertile, because it allows us to ponder and encounter the paranormal realm in ways that have been accessible [for centuries, which is] the rule of science fiction, in many ways.

I think this Witchcraft Act is tied to race, for example, in the many ways that Black studies have encountered and confronted the question of technology and race and the relationship between those things. From the perspective that I'm sitting at, this witchcraft is a place that one can dive into and try to excavate the material that has been lost. When one arrives at the rituals and practices that were banned or made illegal, how can one draw upon that and bring it into the world of science fiction or even "Afrofuturism"? How, then,

does one use this future-facing discourse to respond to history?

**SCN** I'm going to start at another different end, to answer this question. For me, it's always been about the camera and photography; perhaps through education, it's become something else. It has taken me quite a while to come back to some of the curiosities I've had about the image.

It was always very clear to me that an image is framed, that there's an elephant outside of the frame. Image is a construction, even if there is a factuality to it, but there is a clear 'decision-tree' that is involved with the one file, the one object with which you're being presented – and this is something that I was really incredibly drawn to from, from a really young age, actually. Going through art school, the one thing I would always detest was the idea of 'personal work'. No, I don't want to make work about me. I want to make work and I don't want to be the subject. It took me a really long time to understand what the possibilities of that might be. Maybe to some extent, it's difficult to entirely separate yourself from whatever you're going to make, but there's a huge spectrum in terms of what that means – from the self portrait to being part of a work in crumbs and bits and pieces. That spectrum has taken me a while to explore, and looking back is easier than looking forward, sometimes – at least on my own body of work.

“It was always very clear to me that an image is framed, that there's an elephant outside of the frame. Image is a construction, even if there is a factuality to it.”

- Simone C. Niquille

But it's really clear how my own queerness has also driven an idea and an obsession with the image, right? The idea that you're being read by society; that certain attributes about you are going to define you in a certain way if you enter a room. Short hair, long hair, stupid stuff like that will allow people to read you by gender, by profession, by class, in very specific ways, whether it's conscious or unconscious. And that's not even necessarily a bad thing. This is not about a binary, as in you shouldn't do this or that. It's more to do with realising something that I am conscious of because of where I grew up, and the way I move through that place. It's about realising that there are certain technologies that are specifically in this point in time, really enforcing this to a maximum. Really, the power structure that is societal and that has been in place. I'm specifically speaking about a central Europe – a very white place to grow up – which felt very incredibly coded, in terms of how you would present yourself. If you're going to dinner, you'd put on a different kind of dress, versus one you'd wear to school. Again, these are just visual attributes; we could go on about different kinds of ways that you can define or categorise a person. This goes south very quickly, and it is what we see today as well. But over time, this idea of personal work and queerness has converged, to the point where I finally understand why I'm doing a lot of this work. It's against this idea of reading someone and reducing complexity, in saying yes, I can understand you, but understanding is about something else. It is not just about trying to pinpoint a person, but also a reality, a place, a history. I think this goes for

many ways of being and of understanding a situation, at the time in which we find ourselves.

**RH** Thanks for this. There's also something about how one tries to account for and render the ways that Black folk from this part of the globe have contributed to the fields of science, the fields of technology. However, one one would need to abandon the classical definition of science and technology, in order to engage with what the continent has produced and contributed to these fields. You would need to think through a much broader framework, and perhaps the way to think about technological practices from this location is through spirituality. For example, to work with the traditional healers, who understand the subtle qualities of plants and animals, how they work in the spiritual world. There's a whole other way in which Blackness requires the areas of technology and science to abandon the classical frameworks and asks to be read using a different set of lenses. This is maybe one way that I think about identity and the research questions that we take on, specifically around technology.

**KOOZ** If one starts looking at a little bit of your time at Nieuwe Instituut, the research that you undertook involved two film works which draw on Zulu heritage, as a means of exploring the potential of Zulu imagination in relation to the fields of Architecture and technology. You just mentioned the idea of reframing knowledge systems; how did your research open up potential alternatives for your practice?

**RH** Well, it was the other way around. I was trying to advance one of those two films beyond what I had already produced. What the work at Nieuwe Instituut produced was a really fertile and secure framework, a mode of thinking about how language serves as a repository to make a case. I was looking at a culture where history is not written – at least, the length of its history has not been documented in text form. It has been documented and carried through language. How does one work with the aesthetics and the composition of language – of terms, proverbs and phrases – to account for spatial imagination and technology? The question that I arrived with was, how have Zulu people contributed to spatial production; what has been the spatial imagination generated and valorised by these people? If one doesn't have history books to draw from, could I look at the terms that exist between rural areas and urban areas – how do these terms travel from one location to the other and vice versa? Which of these terms get carried over and which get left behind? Can I then use these terms and arrive at their etymology in order to understand something?

One term, for example, is ukunana. Ukunana is the act of asking a neighbour for a ration of food. If I don't have any potatoes, I can go to my neighbour and ask for potatoes. The term is devoid of any kind notion of debt and credit; it is to ask for food without shame. This term has evaporated in the urban context, yet it still remains in the rural areas. It tells us something about the social relations that have evolved, in response to and informed by space; how people have lived together, amongst one another. Another term is umsamo. Umsamo is an altar and is said to be the place that grounds a home in the spiritual realm. This is the place where one engages with the ancestors, for example. The question is, if the idea of umsamo originates in rural areas, what becomes a proxy for umsamo in urban areas? How does someone in a rural context elaborate upon umsamo, versus someone in the urban environments? What can we understand about the connection and



Ifu Elimnyama (The Dark Cloud), Rusel Hlongwane, installation view at VIDEONALE.18. Copyright: Videonale; David Ertl.

triangulation between space, spirituality and the living entity?

I spent the time at Nieuwe Instituut trying to accumulate as many terms as possible, as a way to enter the world of spatial practices and technology. Out of this, there is a growing index – a vocabulary or glossary of terms that I’m building in order to think about these questions of architecture and spatial planning, as well as technology. I used the outcomes of that research and the methodology established there to get onto an MPhil or Master’s program at the African Centre for Cities, which is on Southern urbanisms. I mention this because I don’t have an undergraduate degree; I’ve never been to university or college, after high school. In South Africa, we have what is called ‘Recognition for Prior Learning’, which is to say they count your experience in the field as a proxy for an undergraduate degree. So this fellowship really allowed me to develop the kind of thinking that I could demonstrate and be accepted into the academy. That was a long way to answer your question!

**KOOZ** It’s fascinating. I’m curious to hear how your studies have enabled you to bring these research questions forward, and how things have evolved.

**RH** First and foremost, there is no concept of ownership amongst Zulu folk, in terms of a house or a home. The idea is that one never owns; one is a custodian. The colonial project – with the introduction of title deeds, as something that is tied to a market system of real estate – falls apart. This is still part of the tensions that we see playing out, in questions around urban planning and Blackness in South Africa; in ideas of statehood, regulation, and so on.

If I go back to the rural areas, I started to ask: if one is not an owner but a custodian, one is a custodian of what? We do learn that they say that you don’t own the house; your house will be given to you by someone who comes after you. There’s a way that one pays it backwards, if not forwards, right? Then they say, when one occupies a site, the first dwelling that you have to build is for your maternal grandmother. That’s followed by a house that is given to your paternal grandmother; then you build a house for your parents and so on and so forth. If you imagine rural areas – multiple huts and multiple home states – there’s a sequence, there’s a science behind how all of this comes together. At the front gate is often the kraal, which is where the cattle are kept – whether a house has cattle or not. This kraal has to be made, as this is a place where the ancestors rest. If you go further, they also talk about certain trees that one would plant to introduce as a part of making and building the house; the combination of animal life, plant life, spiritual life and human life, all of these things have to come together, to be held in place by this gravitational force that is the kraal.

One fascinating aspect I also got to understand is that the orientation of the household is equally important. Homesteads face eastwards, as a place of life, of life-giving. When you are placed to rest in death, the head faces westwards. So there’s this orientation that is often assumed to be primitive, but which has not been attended to accurately with the kind of sensitivity that it requires. This is what my masters’ studies are slowly trying to unravel and pick out.

Simone C Niquille / technoflesh Studio, Beauty & The Beep (still), 2024.

**KOOZ** At Nieuwe Instituut, you were looking at the presence of certain words; either they were shifting from the rural context into the urban or vice versa. I was wondering if those



## ideas, words or their absence continue to inform what you're looking into now?

**RH** I think I've moved from words to rituals. Or maybe not – I've accumulated a method of working with words, and now I'm applying the same framework to think about rituals, to think about animal life and plant life, also. It's really taking a small slice of what I developed at Nieuwe Instituut, and expanding it into other aspects of Black life in South Africa, you know. Part of my studies also involves thinking through the migration of Black folk from rural to urban areas as a forced migration. There was not the time to think about how we might translate and take elements that held life in rural areas into urban areas. In my generation, we are thinking about how and what to negotiate and carry over whilst holding the integrity of these practices and these terms, their social relations.

**KOOZ** It's really fascinating. Simone, you're exploring a very different kind of space in terms of the one that bodies inhabit in relation to technology. That's something that you started working on well before your fellowship at Nieuwe Instituut; how did your fellowship inform your explorations – especially doing so during the 2016 elections, when Hillary Clinton ran for the presidency.

**SCN** It's difficult not to be inspired by Russell's answer, because it really ties into the work I've been doing, particularly in the last four years, so I'll try to get back to that. To answer your question about Nieuwe Instituut, this was almost ten years ago, I'll try to condense my answer. I had been spending time on my master's studies between 2011–2013. I graduated with a critical work on facial recognition as convenient yet privacy-corroding technology; I'm mentioning this because it was such a particular and important time where on the one hand I had to explain what facial recognition was, constantly – through, for example, a new feature of Facebook, which offered to tag your friends and link to their profile. At the same time, during that spring and summer, the Edward Snowden papers were leaked, which transformed consciousness of what it means to contribute to social media platforms or technology at large; the idea of a surveillance complex really entered a public consciousness – like, hey, this is what we're building and contributing to on a large scale, without even knowing it. That realisation also really changed this idea of facial recognition from something that might be convenient to something that has this very dark under-layer, which might actually have spawned its creation, right?

Going back in history, in terms of why you would even want to identify someone, you quickly arrive at pseudoscience. For example, a person called Johann Kaspar Lavater, who was a 18th century Swiss priest who was very interested in figuring out who you were by your looks, like physiognomy – the idea that you can read a face and deduce information like intelligence or criminality. We can clearly see how some of these ideas have informed face recognition to this day. In 2013, it was really important for me to talk about this tension between surveillance and convenience; at what point do you subscribe to the same technology that at some point in time, you would consider to be absolutely the worst, most intrusive thing ever. Ten years later – and to my own shock – I'm using face recognition to unlock my phone, whereas if you had asked me in 2013 or even 2016, I would have said this would never happen.

So there's a human side to this, a slow seeping of these technologies that enter daily life, and your own threshold changes with it, to a certain extent.

It might just be practical: I don't like using WhatsApp, but a lot of my kids' friends' parents use it. So if you're trying to make a playdate, you need to use that platform. There are all sorts of complexities and reasons to negotiate with these identifying technologies. My time at Nieuwe Instituut in 2016 was a follow up from that research on face recognition; I was deeply interested in the profession of lookalikes, people who earn money because you look like someone else. Specifically in the United States, this might be someone that looks like a popstar, that you could book for your birthday to do a concert or just make an appearance. It really sort of functions through the principle of simulation, literally banking or profiting off this idea of representation. There is a field of celebrity lookalikes, but also this strange grey area where perhaps a politician is also a celebrity. This was the case of Hillary Clinton, who came to be known to the public as the First Lady, as the partner of former President Bill Clinton when he took office in 1993. Of course, her own career saw her taking political positions over time, resulting ultimately in her own bid for the US presidency in 2016 against Donald Trump – which was also a bizarre pairing. Among other things, I used my time at Nieuwe Instituut to make a documentary film following Teresa Barnwell, a Hillary Clinton lookalike, in the run up to the US elections – not to speak about face recognition in a technical way, but rather from a human perspective. To understand what it means to be read, to be recognised as a person that you're not, and what the consequences are on your life and your being. This was so much more complex. Teresa has enjoyed her career very much, but in October of 2016 it wasn't an enjoyment at all. It was a huge burden, where she would get pulled into tabloid media stories; it said that she was hired by the government, that she works for the Pentagon, and that she was an official lookalike of Hillary Clinton – there was a media frenzy, trying to unpick what might be real or not. The idea of fake news was really happening then, things were unraveling in real time. There were crazy stories and photo shoots with the real Julian Assange, but as the fake Hillary Clinton. It was a weird meeting of reconstructed image reality; what does it mean to create a factual image or to create something that's newsworthy, when that's not the same thing.

In the film, you see her speaking about her life and work, essentially. There's also a moment where I ask her if she wanted to be 3D-scanned. I had her 3D scanned by a place in Los Angeles, where she lived, and I would also use the 3D avatar in the video. Part of that process was the question about what rights you might have to your own image? Whereas in photography, there is such a thing as the right to your own image, in the world of 3D assets that doesn't exist. If I'm going to scan myself, it's mine, but in the case of Teresa/Hillary, I have a contract with the 3D scanning company and the file is mine, because I'm the one who commissioned the scan – which is bizarre. I mean, this file should be hers. Moreover, a scan is so much more potent than an image, right? I can manipulate this scan to a larger extent than I could a two dimensional photograph. This was one of the questions that was part of the film, which then carried into other works. This conversation could go on for a while, since we're talking about a 10 year span, and all the stuff that spawned out of that time, but the film *The Fragility of Life* and the work with Teresa really encapsulates my time as a fellow..

**KOOZ** Do you think it has seeped into your current research on synthetic training data for domestic computer vision? First of all, I'd love you to clarify exactly what that means, and then to understand the research that you're doing today within the context of university and pedagogy, of working with students.

**SCN** I think there was a bit of a bridging project, which was called Safety Measures; it was shown at the Dutch pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2018. For me, it was partly a shock to be part of an architecture biennial – and partly amazing, because it allowed this work (which mostly resides in video) to develop into spatial forms. It was a work on ergonomic design software, which came out of the research I was doing on 3D avatars. So this question of scanning a Hillary Clinton lookalike and the ownership of this data transformed into research on how digital bodies come to be. What was its technological history; who was the first person who felt the need to create a digital representation of a human body on the computer screen. Why and how did that come about? That was actually in 1989, at University of Pennsylvania; a professor called Norman Badler – at least, this is the event that's recorded, speaking to Russell's point. I'm sure that a lot of this technology emerged in many places simultaneously, but the first 'avatar' or digital human that I could find is called Jack. Norman Badler was interested in creating a digital figure for animation; digital puppetry is what it was called then, but he needed some data to inform the literal 3D coordinates, and this would involve inserting coordinates to create meshes or geometric forms on the screen. One resource that he found to be incredibly useful was a body measurement data set by the US Army that was collected in the 1980s – the army was interested in this because they had to create standardised uniforms and gas masks for a large cut of the population. This sort of thing is always referenced for things like the design of cockpits for fighter jets; all these places that were spatial, that were either housing the body or enveloping it in some way, whether it's clothing or machinery, where you need to know the volume of the human body in an average sense. They measured soldiers and created this sort of average body; Badler then used that to create this digital avatar called Jack.

Jack has now become an ergonomic design software; it's currently owned by Siemens, you can still buy it and it's still called Jack. One thing I was deeply interested in is what the software looks like? At some point, there is an interface where you have a drop-down menu and you can make your own Jack. But what are the data sets that inform this body? Of course, it's incredibly racist, as well as incredibly misleading in the way that the interface is representing the data behind it. For example, one category would be Chinese, but what does that mean? Are we talking about a nationality or a geographic area? It's incredibly reductive of a complexity that is never addressed. I was really interested in these data sets and how they're produced, in order to create these representations on screen that seem somehow reassuring? As a designer, I would place my design for an automotive or a factory floor into the software; based on a profile, I should see if a certain kind of person could then reach a button. But it was very unclear – to me, at least – how this profile is made. Yes, it's technically an average US citizen, but what does that mean; who was measured to create the average US citizen?

Through a bunch of loopholes, this led me to work I do now, which follows an interest in training data to create models of understanding and to test the limits of their knowledge. What this means for computer vision and domestic space – which is always such a mouthful – is essentially as follows. This kind of vision is already in use today, for instance the sensors and cameras that will enter a room in a vacuum cleaner that moves around your house. This vacuum cleaner needs to identify the objects that the camera encounters;

it needs to 'understand' the environment that it's in and make a decision on how to behave within that environment. Domestic space is incredibly interesting, because there is not enough visual data online to usefully scrape. For facial recognition, you need images of faces – so Facebook, of course, was fantastic; as most people post photos of themselves, that auto generates a training data set. Whereas for a home, where do you go to gather that data? Synthetic data became one way to answer that lack, where we sort of looked at industries like architecture and product design, which use CAD or Rhino-based software in their design process. Couldn't that three dimensional virtual data be used to assemble spaces that then we call homes? If we photograph those virtually, then those digital photographs or renderers could become the image-training data sets.

In a really long, meandering way – but to hook on to what Russell was saying – as a designer, I'm often asked why I am making work about it rather than countering it, right? Like, why are you saying that the way that we're teaching computer vision what a home is, is so hyper standardised? Why is a chair such a very specific kind of chair with four legs and a back, rather than an object for sitting, which could be many different things – it could be a log, or it could be a carpet. The interesting thing is that the critique, apparently, or asking the question isn't always enough. Sometimes it seems as if you also have to produce an answer. Personally, I feel that no, I don't have to produce the answer. The answer is there. The point is that there are many different manifestations of home, of being, of living in the world, but what technology is doing is reducing it to one or another certain kind of being. I don't believe that I am required, as a designer, to produce a reaction to that. I really see my role as the person digging through these technologies as a designer, using the software and technologies that I'm interrogating and through those processes and workflow, to hook onto something else. For example, this interface in the ergonomic software, where I realised that using the drop-down menu is weird. That's the sort of question that drives my research and design. It isn't so much creating these other worlds – because I truly believe those exist, but I also don't think that we need to go and capture them; that's not the answer. We don't need to make a training data set that encapsulates the entire world. It's more about wondering why we are even making this technology and for whom – by whom? That's often when it falls apart, because it's not supposed to be for the community. It's for profit. It's for a general market; it's for sale.

**RH** It's so rich. Wow, wow.

**KOOZ** **Honestly, looking at the kind of evolution of your research and how it has really kind of taken you in different directions, but somehow always sticking to a certain kind of core of inquiry – it's really impressive. And it's been a treat to listen to you both. Indeed it has been really rich in terms of understanding research can help us grapple with our own questions, and through which we can really find an understanding of where we are, where we come from, and how we can shape different narratives around our own identities.**

**RH** Thank you to Simone; it was really beautiful to share space with you and get into your brain so thanks for sharing so generously.

**SCN** Yes, absolutely. I'm so glad we made this happen; thank you so much Russell and also Federica, for guiding us through the conversation.

**KOOZ** **Thank you both, truly.**

# Being with the Many: O grupo inteiro and lumbung.space on collectivity and practices of trust

Conversation with Vitor Cesar, Krista Jantowski, Ligia Nobre and Reinaart Vanhoe.

This conversation brings together members of lumbung.space and O grupo inteiro to explore the evolving dynamics of collective work. With one initiative emerging from documenta 15 and the other deeply embedded in Brazil's socio-political landscape, their dialogue unpacks the challenges and possibilities of building – and unbuilding – institutions, reclaiming agency, and sustaining long-term collaborations beyond conventional frameworks.

**FEDERICA ZAMBELETTI / KOOZ** Before diving into institutional practices, it might be helpful to understand who you are and how you approach your work. Could you share a bit about your background – where you're based, your journey in your practice, and any longstanding relationships that have shaped your work?

**REINAART VANHOE** I'm here representing lumbung.space, the internet platform we've been working to bring to life before, during, and after documenta 15, in 2022. It's not just a tool – it's an architectural infrastructure, a work in itself. And I'm only one of the many voices involved, so whatever I say is just a fragment among many perspectives. We operate within an understanding of multiple angles, but they need to be voiced as part of the conversation.

**KRISTA JANTOWSKI** Similar to Reinaart, I am just one of many voices within lumbung.kios (N.B. kios is Indonesian for kiosk, while lumbung means rice barn – lumbung was one of the key words for developing documenta fifteen referring to 'shared resources') I joined after – or maybe during – documenta 15, right in the midst of it. My background comes from running a shop for seven years, and through that, I had ongoing conversations with reinaart about what is a shop is, what is a bookshop, what transactions mean, and how we can remain playful in administrative practices. If we allow playfulness at the front end, why shouldn't we bring that same approach to the back end?

This led to different ways of rethinking the often invisible or mundane work that keeps structures running. My entry into kios came from that perspective. Within the collective, members have vastly different institutional connections, which makes each relationship to the institution unique. My own practice and engagement with institutions differ from others in kios, shaping the ways I interact within this shared framework.

**LIGIA NOBRE** Together with Vitor, Carol Tonetti and Cláudio Bueno, we form O Grupo Inteiro. We started in 2014 as a shared practice, bringing together different backgrounds. I come from architecture and curatorial practice, while Vitor comes from art and design, like both Carol and Cláudio.

**SIMONE C NIQUILLE** is a Swiss designer and researcher based in Amsterdam NL. Through technoflesh Studio she produces films and writing that investigate computation as the new optics. Her work is concerned with vision technologies, the images they make and the worlds they create - from computer vision, 3d animation, computational photography to synthetic training datasets. Her work advocates for non-binary technology and against machine learning as a tool to validate and instrumentalise assumptions and reduce reality.

**RUSSEL HLONGWANE** is a cultural producer based in Durban, South Africa. His work is located at the intersection of heritage/modernity and culture/tradition as they apply to Black life. His said practice includes artistic research, film, creative producing, design theory, curatorship, writing and performance – often against the backdrop of installation form. As a consultant, he works with cultural institutions and government departments concerned with providing meaningful support to creative ecologies. He has served on boards of many organisations in the sector, currently on the Prince Claus International Advisory Committee (2023-2025). He is currently (2024) pursuing a MPhil in Southern Urbanism at the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town.

**FEDERICA ZAMBELETTI** is the founder and managing director of KoozArch. She is an architect, researcher and storyteller whose interests lie at the intersection between art, architecture and regenerative practices. In 2022 Federica founded KoozArch with the ambition of creating a space where to research, explore and discuss architecture beyond the limits of its built form. Prior to dedicating her full attention to KoozArch, Federica collaborated with the architecture studio and non-profit agency for change UNA/UNLESS working on numerous cultural projects and the research of "Antarctic Resolution". Federica is an Architectural Association School of Architecture in London alumni.

Personally, I shifted toward working with non-profit institutions early on. In the 2000s, I founded the first residency program in São Paulo, focusing on aesthetic and political issues both locally and internationally. Over the years, I've worked on different projects across various cities. When we came together in 2014, we realised that this platform could grow into a space for sharing, thinking and collaborating across different projects.

We've continued working individually on distinct issues, but O grupo inteiro functions as a shared platform for research and institutional collaborations. While based in São Paulo, our work takes shape in various contexts. Over the past ten years, our efforts have centred around project-based research, with cycles occurring every two years. One such initiative originated from a grant proposal tied to a project Vitor was developing with another artist, Enrico Rocha. We joined forces to work on it, specifically in Northeast Brazil, and that experience opened up critical discussions that we're eager to explore further.

**VITOR CESAR** I studied architecture, but my work has shifted more toward art and graphic design. Right now, we're collaborating within O Grupo Inteiro, but I also have an independent graphic design practice, primarily working with artists, curators, and art institutions. It's about experimenting – trying to push boundaries within design and artistic collaboration.

**KOOZ Building on what you've just discussed – the different realities and networks coming together – how do you see the potential of organising and making through these collectivised networks? Given that each of you brings an individual perspective within the group, how does this structure shape collaboration?**

**LN** Vitor and I had been sharing thoughts beforehand, and for us, collectivity is key – it opens conversations and strengthens individual practices. But beyond that, it creates possibilities for organising around shared concerns, navigating common structures, and engaging with the complexities of collective work.

It's not simply about fitting into predefined frameworks but about amplifying voices while respecting their distinctive aspects. Naturally, conflicts arise and interests differ, even at the micro scale. Yet by opening up to multiple perspectives, we find ways to reinforce and deepen our work. I think that's the essence of it.

**VC** Institutional practice is particularly complex right now in Brazil, especially within the art world. Things are shifting rapidly – institutions are becoming increasingly tied to market forces and financial concerns, which is quite different from how they operated ten or fifteen years ago. The challenge here is that institutions are still in formation; they are not fully established, which creates a contradictory dynamic. On one hand, we need to build them, but at the same time, we have to critique them – even though they are not yet fully realised. It's an ambiguous position; we find ourselves questioning how to engage with something that is still in flux, still unstable.

When we're invited to take part in exhibitions or projects, we try to push beyond conventional approaches. Instead of simply presenting work, we initiate discussions about the structures behind these projects – how they function, how finances are managed, and how institutional frameworks affect

artistic practice. Our goal is not just to participate but to understand what is happening within institutions and explore ways to collaborate meaningfully.

One example is a project we did with Casa do Povo in São Paulo. They invited us to develop their library, and rather than treating it as a straightforward task, we approached it as a process of collective learning. We worked with their partners, finding ways to build the library while engaging people in the making process itself. The woodworkers involved were not just executing a design but learning as they built – turning the act of construction into a pedagogical experience.

**RV** If I understand correctly, you're saying that the library isn't just something placed within an institution – it's a practice in itself. The act of building the library becomes part of the learning, exchange, and shared access, rather than just a resource to be activated once it's finished. So, in this approach, the people constructing the library could also contribute in different ways – bringing in books, creating books, or even weaving their communities into the space. The making of the library is just as significant as its final form.

**LN** We always try to engage with the process itself – to problematise it – while working within precarious conditions. As Vitor mentioned, ambiguity is part of what we navigate. Destruction is easy, so the question becomes: how do we weave in ways that reinforce existing structures while remaining fully aware of their contradictions?

That example, for instance, was about listening – engaging with the communities, the craftsmanship, the books, the knowledge, and the collectives already embedded within the institution. We immersed ourselves in their modes of operation, their practices, their questions, seeking ways to interweave approaches that not only expose issues but also build something in the process.

It's fragile. Right now, we are hostage to the market – not just in Brazil, but globally. I see it in Europe as well. The landscape is shifting toward extremes,

Biblioteca, o grupo inteiro.  
© Haroldo Saboia.



particularly the far right, and the systems we operate within today feel vastly different from even a decade ago. This means we are navigating an entirely new ecology – one that is transforming at an unsettling pace.

**KOOZ How does lumbung operate both as a collective entity and as two distinct realities – the lumbung.space platform and the kiosk? What is the power of collectivising as a whole while also maintaining these two separate yet interconnected realms within the project?**

**KJ** I was reflecting on the Research Fellowship Programme and its potential – how it provided a framework for organising and reconnecting. Institutions can offer occasions for networks to gather again, and I think that was one of the simple yet important aspects of the fellowship. It created an opportunity for us to respond, react, and re-enter conversations with one another.

While we all have practices tied to lumbung.kios or lumbung.space, the challenge is in bringing these knowledges together; understanding where we stand collectively, and recognising what the exchange can offer. It's about sustaining dialogue – staying in touch and remaining aware of how individual practices evolve.

At the same time, I see what you're saying, and I'm curious about how this dynamic plays out in your work. Institutions often operate with a certain logic – one that exists but is not explicitly articulated. In these negotiations between collective practice and institutional concerns, there's a tension not just in how to engage but in how to make the institution itself visible.

It's not always about meeting the institution head-on; sometimes, it's about finding language, creating opportunities to respond, and making space for dialogue. Often in these collaborations, unspoken structures shape interactions to the point where it's difficult to grasp how an institution moves – let alone find ways to respond or move alongside it.

**RV** Many of us have operated in contexts outside of traditional art institutions – without those infrastructures – yet we have continued to create work despite their absences. I come from the perspective of someone who has never been involved in directing an institution, although I have worked within them as an employee or collaborator. That position makes a difference – it's easier to critique institutions from the outside, but when you're inside, you see the complexities and constraints they face. One challenge is that institutions are often too occupied or structurally hindered to carve out space for what they cannot do. I believe this is a crucial aspect of institutional transformation – finding ways to create room for new practices that go beyond their current capacities. Institutions should not be seen as adversaries but as potential allies, in abstract and literal ways. The question then becomes: how do we take steps forward, build alliances, and reshape institutional frameworks?

“It's not always about meeting the institution head-on; sometimes, it's about finding language, creating opportunities to respond, and making space for dialogue.”

- Reinaart Vanhoo



**About lumbung.space**

on Apr 28, 2022

**lumbung.space =**

1. a hangout space, digital living room
2. a publishing tool (for video, music, books, social media)
3. a library, learning center
4. pantry (storage) as a shared resource between the lumbung inter-lokal
5. takes care of the user's privacy and is aware of their political vulnerability
6. slow growing and to be unstable is part of the deal
7. is an initiative for a community-governed digital platform



lumbung.space, 2024.  
© lumbung.space.

With lumbung.space, we faced this tension firsthand during documenta 15. The institution saw digital infrastructure as merely a tool, rather than recognising it as an architectural system that could be fully embedded in its structure. Often, institutions allow artists to contribute to programming but not to the architecture itself – they enable reactive participation but rarely support proactive engagement.

The library is a good example of an alternative approach. A library is not just a project; it is an integral part of a building, embedded in the long-term programming rather than treated as an isolated initiative. In this sense, the work is done despite the institution's limitations. However, when collaboration happens, it allows for more meaningful steps, expanded exchanges, and the potential to reshape practices at different scales.

Another important aspect, which may or may not be directly connected, is resource-sharing. This should not be framed as artists versus institutions but as a process where both sides create pathways for redistributing resources. Institutions and artists alike should pass on access – not just within their own circles but to what I call the “first public,” the people in local and distant communities who engage with the work in its immediate surroundings.

**KOOZ You bring up a compelling point, reinaart – the idea of thinking about architecture beyond the building and institutions beyond their physical form, instead engaging with them at the level of infrastructure. How do you navigate the tension between local impact and working as part of a global collective network, connecting different realities? How do you reconcile these two distinct scales and approaches in your practice?**

**RV** For us – speaking from my perspective – lumbung.space and kios are still evolving. We haven't fully arrived at the global infrastructure we aim for. The challenge lies in defining what a digital infrastructure is and how to use it critically. It's easy to rely on existing tools like Google, but questioning them comes at a cost. Take African Stream, an African media channel – they used Google's nonprofit infrastructure but were erased entirely when their content became too critical of certain global powers. They lost everything.

It's simple to use familiar platforms, but building our own infrastructure within lumbung.space requires something different – our own tools, maintained with care, knowledge, and sustained commitment on a daily and weekly basis. That's why it's lumbung.space, not lumbung.art – it's about creating space that can meaningfully connect different localities, allowing them to inform each other on how to shape the platform in a more material, embedded way.

We're still navigating this struggle. lumbung.kios, too, is a work in progress – a place for practicing, testing, and refining approaches. I don't see that as a failure; rather, I think of it as a potential space – something in preparation, ready to be activated when urgency calls for it.

Right now, we are not at the stage where different spaces and localities can fully integrate and form a network. This isn't just about artistic infrastructure – it's tied to broader institutional conditions and the capitalist systems we work within, which obstruct progress. Acknowledging this reality rather than resisting it outright might actually be a healthier stance for now.

**KJ** In terms of operating kios, there's a fundamental distinction – we're a collection of local practices, deeply interconnected yet shaped by individual conditions. We rely on one another in very practical ways. For example, right now, we have a small kios in Utrecht with our partner at Casco (Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons). Previously, a large part of our stock was stored in someone's studio in Rotterdam, and access depended on when they were present.

So, imagining kios as something with a truly global dimension feels like a kind of fiction. We are simply people working locally, talking amongst ourselves, exchanging knowledge through direct connections. The global aspect emerges as an abstract notion – through the platforms where we meet, the systems we rely upon. It becomes clear when deciding how to communicate: in the end, we meet on Zoom because rival applications like Jitsi don't always function smoothly. Realisation like that makes us aware of how much we are bound to global structures, even as our work remains grounded in local realities.

Rather than seeing global and local as opposing forces, we operate in an integrated way. We are local practitioners conversing with one another, navigating overlaps and differences, making decisions based on shared needs rather than a rigid binary framework.

**RV** To add to that – unlike O grupo inteiro, lumbung is more of an abstraction of real practices rather than a clearly defined entity. It exists across distributed exercises, whether lumbung.land, lumbung.radio, or lumbung.press. The approach is about platforming – creating a dispersed network rather than focusing on a single, concrete project.

lumbung.kios is mostly made up of real practitioners. Take Elaine W Ho, for

example – she has her own method of distributing books from Hong Kong, moving them through personal networks rather than relying on FedEx or DHL. A reference point – not ours, but relevant – is the Feral Trade shop in London: a project that started in 2003 as a grocery business and long-range economic experiment, where all transactions occur through social networks, hand to hand. The question for us becomes: how do we achieve something similar, but as a fully distributed platform?

There's no fixed solution, no formal subsidy or funding structure tied to a singular project with a set number of participants. We move slowly, experimenting, using occasions like Nieuwe Instituut Research Fellowship as a space to shape, test, and refine the work.

**KOOZ** O grupo inteiro takes a hyper-local approach to institutional practice, working within specific sites to shape decolonial structures. Can you share more about the project itself and how its themes – while rooted in particular contexts – might translate globally? How do its ideas remain adaptable to different histories and conditions?

**VC** The Northeast region of Brazil is marked by drought – its landscape differs entirely from the south, vegetation-filled image often associated with the country. Moreover, the perception within Brazil frames the region as inherently poor. In reality, that idea was shaped by state policies rather than by the land itself. Infrastructure and large-scale capital bypassed the region, reinforcing the narrative of scarcity. One key institution – the National Department for Drought Construction – embodies this contradiction. How can one be against drought? It's a natural condition, not something to fight. The department has carried out various

O grupo inteiro.  
© Vitor Cesar.



projects over time, but has faced many reports of corruption. Our research, which began with the Research Fellowship Programme, sought to reconsider these institutional frameworks and explore new alliances to reframe this narrative.

The fellowship was instrumental – it allowed us to visit these places with more people, meet local communities, and expand our network organically. We built connections through trust, where one introduction led to another. Following that, we participated in another fellowship, and now, we're working on a small publication that brings together perspectives: someone deeply embedded in the local environment, observing nature firsthand, alongside an engineer thinking structurally about the region.

Drought doesn't announce its arrival. Unlike storms, which start and stop visibly, drought unfolds over months or years, often imperceptibly at first. In many ways, our work mirrors that process – a poetic image of slow formation and renewal. We operate within cycles: the first fellowship helped establish relationships, a period of informal engagement followed, and the second fellowship reactivated these connections. The alliances we're forming are rooted in time – we're building something long-term, even without certainty about where it will lead.

Looking ahead, our next step is to work with the people we've met. They bring diverse perspectives; for example, Neto Camorim – on whom, more later – often makes me rethink institutions. He revisits a historically significant site of resistance in Brazil each year and is now purchasing a small plot of land where he hopes to create a space for others to gather. He's not from the art world, yet his idea looks almost like a residency. His initiative raises fundamental questions about institutions, access, and how we engage with communities.

**LN** The project is both a practice and a process, shaped by the very institution it critiques – a colonial entity from the 1930s that still exists today. As Vitor mentioned, we've appropriated its name and redefined it in ways that bring it closer to the territory, shifting its meaning and function.

When Vitor and Enrico began developing the project, and O grupo inteiro joined in, we started thinking of it as a meta-institution – one that actively engages with these systemic issues rather than merely replicating them. The pandemic was a critical moment for this, politically and socially. It forced us to confront internal challenges, including navigating failure and questioning what would be "enough." Unlike a conventional institution, we never set out to build something fixed – it unfolded as a process, much like the biome itself.

As Vitor described, the region's droughts and moments of rain continuously reshape the landscape. Our work follows a similar rhythm – it doesn't mimic the environment but flows with it, adapting and evolving. Bringing in funding sources, whether from Brazil or institutions like Nieuwe Instituut, has allowed us to deepen these processes, though uncertainty remains central to our approach.

At its core, the work is about deep listening and micro-scale actions – small, local engagements that carry significant weight over time. Unlike lumbung, our structure isn't built as a visible platform but rather as an invisible network that gains visibility at different moments.

This requires careful pacing. Operating from São Paulo – a more Westernised urban centre – demands that we, as allies, hold space for slower, nonlinear forms of engagement. It's about timing, allowing processes to unfold organically, and strategically materialising them in ways that make sense within their context.

**KOOZ** What alternative knowledge systems do you draw upon to engage with the territory differently? What frameworks – whether indigenous, ecological, social, or otherwise – inform your approach to reimagining the space?

**VC** There's a wealth of local knowledge, but we're careful not to frame it as folkloric or reduce it to a simplistic category. Instead, we focus on how different knowledge systems intersect and inform one another.

Take weather prediction, for example. Meteorologists use scientific models, but local communities – those who have observed the land for generations – often have an intuitive understanding of climate shifts. While we still rely on science, the question is: how can these different perspectives work together? How can everyone learn from one another?

This is central to our approach: engaging with people to better understand

**Left and Right**  
O grupo inteiro.  
© Vitor Cesar.



these varied knowledge resources. Neto Camorim and Ailton Brasil – two history teachers working with teenagers – are good examples. They root their teachings in the land, ensuring students engage with their territory in tangible ways. As a result, a new generation in the city is actively shaping institutional structures – some now hold positions in local government, influencing policy and decision-making.

Neto and Ailton aren't connected to the art world, yet their practice carries elements of performance. Every year, they travel to Canudos – the site of an historic uprising – continuously gathering new insights about its history. They convince others to join them; each year, 40 or 50 people rent a bus and make the journey together.

This initiative is entirely self-organised, funded by the participants, and sustained by their collective commitment. It's a model that makes me reflect on how institutions function and how grassroots efforts can influence state structures. There's something profound in how knowledge is passed along through action, experience, and shared practice.

**KOOZ** Lumbung operates at the intersection of knowledge-sharing and platforming. Beyond the knowledges it gathers, what specific tools have enabled the platform's formation – first

**at documenta 15, and then as a project that continues to evolve? How have these tools contributed to its ongoing development and sustainability?**

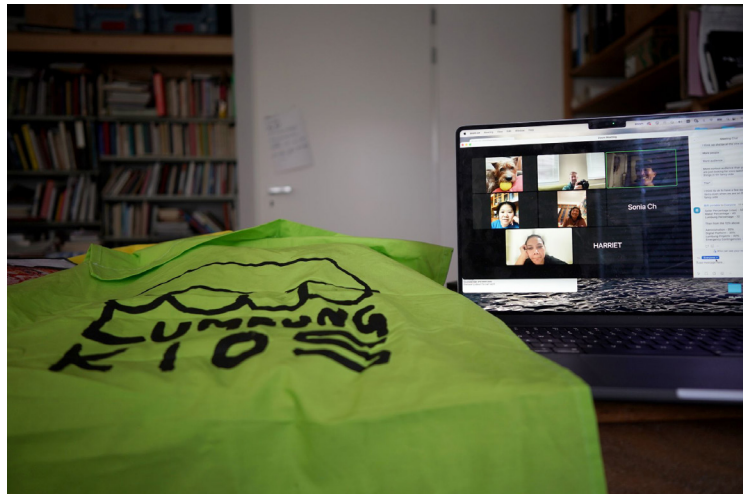
**RV** That's something I still find myself questioning – whether lumbung.space is a tool or a space. Right now, we're about five people, and much of its visible structure still is in relation to documenta fifteen itself. Of course we've moved beyond it but in some translations of usage of tools and added content we are still not that much updated. Now, the focus is on our practices and not on documenta fifteen, so now we're in the process of deciding which tools to keep and which ones to let go. At one point, I thought we might wipe everything and restart – but once a tool exists, it carries responsibilities, expectations, and unforeseen dependencies. That makes it difficult to simply erase and start over.

There's the storage system – a cloud-based service housed externally rather than on our own servers. That raises the question: do we continue renting server space, or do we transition to a decentralised model where individuals maintain servers within their own communities? That would require technical expertise, either through educating ourselves or engaging those already skilled in the process.

Our meeting space – we call it nongkrong – is a kind of digital café; it's an informal gathering point rooted in its Indonesian name. There's books, lumbung.space, where users can upload and curate publications, along with collaborative writing tools that function like Google Docs but within our own infrastructure. Then there's tv.lumbung, which operates on PeerTube, an open-source video tool.

Currently, we have around ten tools, but many are only actively used by one or two collectives. Ideally, we'd reduce and rebuild – perhaps prioritising nongkrong, the bookstore/library, and tv.lumbung. But at the same time, tools like storage remain essential, particularly for lumbung.press and Documenta's non-institutional archive, which still resides within our system.

Adding to the challenge is the fact that the working group operates on a



Lumbung kios, 2024.  
© lumbung.kios.

voluntary basis – only technical maintenance is compensated. We want to shift that structure so those handling upkeep are paid fairly, while others contribute in different ways.

The Research Fellowship Programme gave us space to reassess whether lumbung.space still holds relevance. It forced us to ask: should we continue? In the end, responsibility kept us moving forward. If I speak personally, I envision lumbung.space as a welcoming room – a space to meet, exchange, and activate tools in meaningful ways. Similar to how a library isn't just a storage system for books but a space where knowledge is processed collectively.

We have a meeting tomorrow to reframe and refresh – because 2025 brings a shift. documenta is reverting to its traditional model, returning to “real art” rather than what some might call “bullshit art” – implying our kind of practice. So the question is: how do we reposition ourselves? What can we offer back to those who have shaped and sustained lumbung.space?

**KOOZ Are there specific references that have shaped your way of operating and the development of your initiatives?**

**KJ** I don't have a concrete reference, but I think institutions sometimes create fleeting moments of attunement – small, mundane gestures where something clicks, where a gathering feels unexpectedly productive, where there's a real sense of being welcomed. And, of course, institutions are made up of people, and you can often feel the presence of someone working within them who helps facilitate these moments.

What stands out to me is when institutions step back slightly – when they allow themselves to be hosted by something else, rather than always imposing their own structure. In those instances, there's a different kind of openness, an alignment with what's directly present rather than what's dictated top-down. These instances may not transform an institution outright, but they show glimpses of how engagement can shift – if only for a moment.

**RV** I think it's important – not in a negative sense, but as a reality – to accept that things are always somewhat broken, that loss is inevitable. Those words might sound pessimistic, but really, embracing imperfection allows action to happen. I often think of Jatiwangi Art Factory. Their approach acknowledges defeat within the international garment industry – the destruction of landscapes and livelihoods by corporate forces. They recognise that fighting these giants means losing in a conventional sense, but they still take action. For example, they worked with Taiwanese investors to negotiate land contracts that protect the environment, even amid relentless construction and infrastructural damage. Despite the scale of loss, there are still interventions to be made.

One key lesson from this – and from documenta 15 – is the power of being with the many. The 2022 edition of documenta was the largest yet, inviting networks of artist-collaborators to invite further artist-collaborators. But mainstream press outlets had difficulty digesting the absence of obviously, identifiable ‘hot-shot’ artists and lacked language to write about collaborative practice and its strengths and qualities. So the press reduced the distributed participation to a gimmick, portraying it as simply thousands of artists gathering. But the depth of the engagement, the actual practice

of collaboration, wasn't fully captured. The act of being many isn't about declaring definitions – it's about experimenting, trying things out, pushing beyond boundaries.

If Ligia does something and someone asks me about it, I might not have a definitive answer – but that's the nature of collective work. Trust operates within the space of uncertainty. The answer, if there is one, is to be with the many – to lean into collaboration, even when the outcomes aren't perfectly defined.

**KOOZ** Given O grupo inteiro's direct response to an institution moving in the opposite direction, how does it function as a safe haven within the Brazilian institutional framework? What potential does it hold for catalysing other realities across the country – forming an infrastructure of practices that operate outside or even against traditional institutions?

**LN** Instituting processes – despite their contradictions – remains essential. As you pointed out at the beginning, counter-institutional practices don't exist in isolation; they interact with institutions in layered, complex ways. As lumbung emphasised, institutions are ultimately made up of people, shaped by different moments and engagements.

O grupo inteiro joined the long-term project that Vitor had initiated, and

“Trust operates within the space of uncertainty. The answer, if there is one, is to be with the many — to lean into collaboration, even when the outcomes aren't perfectly defined.”

- Reinaart Vanhoe

within that, we've worked in a fluid, relational way – strengthening ourselves through friendship, shared methods, and process-driven collaboration.

Right now, I find myself questioning what comes next for our group. We've dispersed into different activities, each of us navigating distinct directions. I recently reconnected through new funding to help with a publication that builds on the post-Nieuwe Instituut phase. As Vitor mentioned, minor gestures from earlier moments are now materialising through this work.

Ultimately, it comes down to trust – trusting the relationships we've built, maintaining those connections, and recognising the evolving nature of these alliances. Processes will shift; sometimes they'll become sites of resistance, sometimes spaces of solidarity. At this moment, it feels urgent to avoid fragmentation, to counter the forces of compartmentalisation and individualisation that threaten collective work. We have to stay attentive to deeper relationships – to trust them, maintain them, and care for them. That is what will sustain these practices and allow them to evolve in meaningful ways.

**VC** I really appreciated what Reinaart said about being with many – I couldn't agree more. And I also relate to the idea that while we cannot directly fight against capital, there's room to maneuver within it, creating spaces for action

in between.

As for the idea of a “safe haven,” I'm not sure if that's the right term for what we offer. When institutions invite us to collaborate, we sometimes become a challenge for them – not simply solving problems but allowing problems to emerge, making visible tensions that are usually left unspoken. In that sense, our presence in an institutional project isn't just about fulfilling a conventional role; it's about pushing for openness – questioning budgets, architecture, context, and engagement.

The reason this works is precisely because we are not just a single entity – we are many. When invited as O grupo inteiro, we expand the circle, inviting more people into the conversation. Though our core group consists of four members, we frequently bring in others, extending the dialogue and sharing the space. This creates a dynamic where invitations multiply, rather than remain static.

**RV** Three key ideas come to mind. First, sharing the difficulties of practice – not just our projects but the doubts, the uncertainties, the questions we wrestle with. Is this art? Is this architecture? Are we in the right field? We often present our work in ways that suggest clarity, but in reality, everyone walks away with lingering doubts. And that's the practice itself – continuing, questioning, moving between jobs and projects. The real value lies in talking with others, reassuring one another, and exchanging energy through mutual support.

Secondly, the notion of social practice: I've moved away from thinking of it as a distinct category. Social architecture, social art – ultimately, all art is social. It's not a niche; it's the mainstream. It's about positioning – whether as an artist, architect, designer, or educator – entering the space as a person, engaging through practice rather than definition.

Lastly, the idea of production chains – something relevant to both lumbung, space and lumbung.kios. Institutions need to understand that social practice is not a side project but rather a fundamental way of working. If they truly want the efforts to be mainstream rather than a symbolic gesture, it must be integrated into how resources are allocated, how budgets are structured, and how collaboration unfolds. It's not about rejecting institutions outright but instead about asking: how do we play this out?

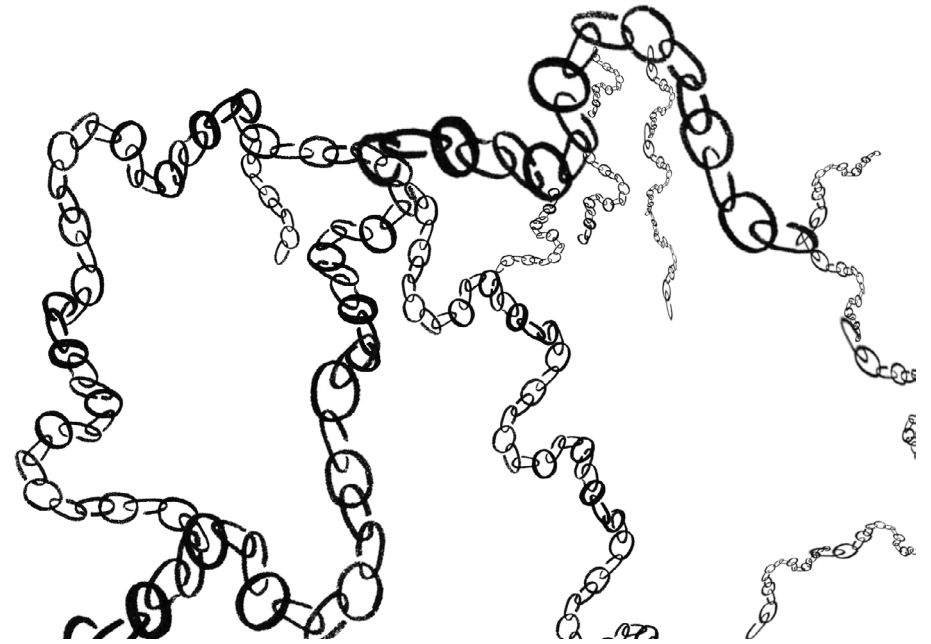
# Shields, Wedges and Supports: hacks on the way towards changing everything

Essay by Ren Loren Britton

**O GRUPO INTEIRO** works in the fields of art, design, education, architecture and technology. Founded in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 2014 by Carol Tonetti, Cláudio Bueno, Ligia Nobre and Vitor Cesar, its proposals emphasise spatial dynamics, conviviality, engagement with the body, and research into social and environmental issues. The group has collaborated with national and international institutions such as MASP, MAM-SP, São Paulo Biennial, Casa do Povo, Sesc (Brazil), Central Saint Martins/UAL (London), Nieuwe Instituut (Netherlands), Pro-Helvetia/FAR\* (Switzerland), and the University of California, Santa Cruz – IAS / Visualizing Abolition (USA).

**LUMBUNG.SPACE & LUMBUNG KIOS** conspire in a collaborative effort towards networked sustainability. They seek to develop digital tools and financial systems that counter extractive frameworks and instead emphasise entangled ways of working while navigating differences in access, distribution and forms of making public. Initially developed during documenta fifteen, lumbung.space is a platform that offers a set of (online) services, expanding on and collectivising a broad range of artistic and design practices. lumbung kios is an international network experimenting with the structure of a shop to raise and redistribute financial income through the sales of goods produced by and for the lumbung members, lumbung artists, and their local ecosystems, using instances of exchange as opportunity or review.

**FEDERICA ZAMBELETTI** is the founder and managing director of KoozArch. She is an architect, researcher and storyteller whose interests lie at the intersection between art, architecture and regenerative practices. In 2022 Federica founded KoozArch with the ambition of creating a space where to research, explore and discuss architecture beyond the limits of its built form. Prior to dedicating her full attention to KoozArch, Federica collaborated with the architecture studio and non-profit agency for change UNA/UNLESS working on numerous cultural projects and the research of “Antarctic Resolution”. Federica is an Architectural Association School of Architecture in London alumni.



Artist and researcher Ren Loren Britton has long been navigating, transforming and unmaking ableist, white-supremacist space, foregrounding anti-racism, Trans\* Feminism and disability justice. A recipient of Nieuwe Instituut’s Research Fellowship, Ren shares hacks, tips and references to use, critique and transform labour practices for disabled people and our accomplices – towards support structures for all of us, everywhere.

“I view accessibility as imagination in practice.”  
– Imani Barbarin

I am an artist-designer with various lived experiences, which neoliberal diversity politics transforms into identity categories and places on me. Working in and with cultural work and institutions shapes the conditions of my artistic practice; as such, I have been developing some hacks that

**Cover Image**  
Hacks On The Way, Ren  
Loren Britton, Infrastructure  
Acknowledgement, "In  
gatherings, loops and  
dangles a permeable  
drawn graphic chain of  
connections moves across  
the image." © Ren Loren  
Britton & CC2r.

support me while we are on the way towards changing everything. Following multiple strands of abolitionist thought, I am trying to work with hacks that do their work towards unmaking the very need for that hack to exist in the first place, because they transform conditions. This is imperfect and contested work; I see all of these practices and tools as starting points.

Following Ewa Majweska (author of *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*, Verso, 2021) I am thinking about how political agency is considered often to be highly heroic, hyper masculine and shaped for 'men's work' – whereas political agency shaped for others might instead be what Majweska terms as 'weak resistance'. She speaks about 'weak resistance' as "the unheroic and common forms of protest and persistence that led to a redefinition of the most general notions of political agency in feminist and minoritarian ways". In these terms, the hacks that both I and we work with – as trans\*feminists working on disability justice – speak to the ways that spaces and relations can be transformed, re-thematising "proper political agency" as formed through the repetition of another way of doing things. In this way, I follow Majweska as well as Nat Raha and Mijke van der Drift in *Trans Femme Futures*, who 'storytell' about everyday actions that revolutionise our lives.

I am skeptical of using identity categories to validate what I say, especially as they become taken up with in neoliberal frameworks, this is something I follow Monica Basbous and Zakaria Nasser in. At the same time, I believe that it matters who speaks from where, and with what marked or unmarked perspective (per the work of Max Liborion). The white supremacist mode of naming difference – in which Black, Indigenous and POC scholars are often named as such, whereas white scholars remain un-marked – violently and consistently re-produces whiteness as the norm. As a neurodivergent, disabled, trans\*gender, white-passing indigenous person – one who grew up poor and is a migrant – various kinds of diversity politics and identification attempt to place me specifically, in terms of the places or states from/to which I can speak.

This dance between naming sites of difference is important, as markers of situated knowledge (Donna Haraway, Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde) matter. In Germany, where I live and work, projects like 'Diskriminierungskritische Perspektiven in die Curricula an der Schnittstelle von Bildung und den Künsten' (Discrimination-critical perspectives in curricula at the interface between education and the arts) attempt to address the historical continuities that inform what curricula is written, therefore informing who feels like they can speak, share, enter into conversation and inform what is eventually rendered as 'important culture, to which we/one ought to pay attention to. This happens through syllabus writing, resource sharing, all the way from what students raise as discussion points in the classroom, and into the freelance art world: all of this to determine what topics and discussions may be raised as 'urgent', 'timely' and 'important'.

Practices informed by abolitionist disability justice – which is to say anti-racist and trans\*feminist justice (as per *Trans\*Femme Futures*) – articulate a politics of solidarity where difference matters. I would venture that the interwoven resistances and connections, matter even more. It matters both

who worlds worlds, and who says what; it also matters what complicities we navigate and manoeuvre within. It is about moving with a set of complications, following Moya Bailey, who puts it this way: we do what we need to do to not "let white supremacy relax". What this looks like in practice can unfold in prismatic directions and for me, this keeps notions of how to identify – why, where and how – open.

**“It matters both who worlds worlds, and who says what; it also matters what complicities we navigate and manoeuvre within.”**

Articulations of difference then shape the context from which I speak. I think of my differences (from the presumed normative baseline of non-disabled cis-white masc as ways of enabling myself to make agentive choices, in terms of how I relate to the historical and ongoing violences in which I too play a part. This is also a project of simultaneously working on becoming attentive to, navigating, caring for, resisting and producing these entanglements otherwise; to refuse the set of conditions issued as default and to choose not perpetuate them, because of the violences they rest upon.

Shifting back to art and institutional contexts, this set of problems informs ways in which I have been tokenised within art spaces; this demonstrates the structural operation of neoliberal diversity politics in the arts. My tokenisation has happened many times, and it will keep happening. Rather than changing infrastructures in the arts such that anti-racism, anti-ableism, decolonial, pro queer and non-extractive practices are centred, vital funding to our institutions are routinely and brutally slashed. This follows capitalist logic: demand growth while finances are cut. Get more, pay less.

What follows is that we who work on "diverse" topics get "slotted in" as per minimum requirements. Justification is made within neoliberal capitalist logics for our work because we – the othered one – fulfill categories of social justice that state logics want to recognise, claiming the benediction that comes with ostensibly "working on" such issues. When they are "working on" disability, does it mean that there is structural transformation away from ableist logics infrastructurally at the institutional level? No. It often means that a disabled artist is brought into a context, tokenised, precariously platformed, semi-supported in their work.

To survive this as disabled artists, if we can, we have several tools – like access riders, community support networks and citation agreements that try to reproduce less harm. At an individual and community scale, these are 'wedges' that attempt to hold certain doors open, to create more space for ourselves – while we wonder if and how this can be sustainable. The institution, meanwhile, gets to claim they are "working on disability", even as they continue to normalise working patterns far beyond the nine-to five (which was never accessible to begin with). Non-disabled communication norms like being available "all the time" are commonplace, as well as 'simple' colloquialisms like describing this same work culture as (content warning here for ableism) "crazy" and "insane" – when what is mostly meant

is “overwhelming”. Something I have learned alongside and keep bringing gratitude for, the work of Lydia X. Z. Brown.

To work on topics related to embodiment means that this work becomes slotted into check-box logic beloved by funding structures. Disability? Check. Trans\*gender? Check. Migrant? Check. Check. Check. Check.

Working in a critical care-centered art and design context means that there is never enough time, money or resources to unmake what has already been there, whereas the primary goal for any neoliberal enterprise is to keep going and grow. What exists already is tough. What exists already is based on ableist white supremacy, even when it is mitigated by actors that resist this... Within all systems I have encountered so far, this framework is default. As an artist-designer then, what to do about this? What tools, methods and practices are there to interrupt paradigms of ableist white supremacy? In my practice, I have been working with a few such tools, which I offer with an invitation for others to borrow and hack them, to negotiate the ambivalence of making worlds possible without burning out, dropping out or getting burned. Devising hacks is the work of changing institutions: they transform situations and infrastructures and at best, they transform both physical and social norms – such that new ways of relation, practice and work can be practiced within the same institutions that threaten to burn us out.

Regularly when I bring up access practices in cultural spaces I hear something about how the cultural norms “are different in this space”, but the bathrooms are still organised via cis-normative norms ie: binary gender and it is perceived as excessive to ask to change it. Then, I hear about the one person before who mentioned something about disabled people and access but nothing changed; they got burnt out and left that space. Our bodies – as dissonant trans\* and disabled entities – produce friction-full encounters in space. Regularly, when I ask for gender neutral bathrooms and low sensory spaces so that I can be more myself, my request is added... to the bottom of the list.

It's 2025 and i'm a trans\*person who is still talking about bathrooms.

It's 2025 and most of the time it is still not safe for trans\*people to go to the bathroom.

The perspective of accessibility with which I work operates beyond notions of accessibility just for disabled people. Everyone has access needs; it is an ableist culture that caters to non-disabled access needs as normative, and subsequently renders other needs not already normalised as “extra”. This is a mechanism of ableist culture.

As I repeat in each of my classes and workshops – when you can fully be yourself in a space, that means the space is accessible to you. If you have to make concessions and turn off parts of yourself to be there, it's likely that whichever space you are in, it is not fully accessible to you. When a space isn't accessible to you, you feel like the space isn't for you; it will not support or even permit you to be. In my work, I think about how these feelings shape those who come to understand that they can, sustain, think, play and exist in any space. The way we treat each other and plan for each other in space

shapes the kind of access we make with people across class, disability, migration status, language and more. These social and infrastructural norms shape who gets to be in various spaces and how those spaces may become agents of resisting structural ableist white supremacy.

“When a space isn't accessible to you, you feel like the space isn't for you; it will not support or even permit you to be.”

Forgetting to eat, working beyond exhaustion, normalising partial access, never taking group notes to normalise asynchronous access: all these are practices that come with ignoring our (and others) bodies. They also perpetuate and privilege those in cultural spaces that are the closest to dominant forms of cis- non-disabled whiteness. As long as this persists, there will be a high level of exhaustion and exclusion in terms of who is able to maintain being in art spaces. I need a break because I need it, and you do too. We all need to slow down and think about how behaviours that we are normalising within arts practice actually invite people – and whom they invite. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, there's one thing we need to change: everything. On the way to changing everything, we have hacks.

### **Hacks on the way towards changing Everything**

By hacks, I mean the sense of hacking away from non-disabled norms towards transitional practices – not hacking our bodies to make them fit into (t)his hellscape.

“You don't need to be fixed, my queens—it's the world that needs the fixing.”  
– Johanna Hedva

“Bodies are not for hacking, Bigotry is.”  
– Remi M. Yergeau

Hacking – as with the language of DIY, DIWO (Do It With Others), renovation and building – offers metaphors and practices for the in-between. Tools offer another way of thinking about what is being pushed forward, and how to protect both ourselves and our communities from falling into the same paradigms of extraction, racism, masking and extending beyond our embodied needs that persist. What would a third-space be (per the terminology of la paperson) between myself as an artist interfacing with institutions and also inviting people into my practice, occasionally hosted by institutions. What transitional practices that could operate within this in-between?

### **Shields**

Sometimes you just need to shield someone from something. That someone might be yourself. You might not know the degree of ableism, anti-

queer sentiment and racism in a situation – until you do. The shield comes under pressure, wielded only after taking on and withstanding what shouldn't be sustained. White possessive methods of “get it, research it, curate it” (see Heavy Processing by TL Cowan and Jas Rault) mean that often, curators or institutional workers might have no idea about the terms of your practice; you are curated into a context, with no shield from the assumptions thrown your way by their under-researched perspectives on your work. What then?

To work with shields, someone must agree to become the shield. Likely, this will be an intermediary between the people paying for the work to be done or shown and the invited artists themselves. To be a shield is to take on more communication and to study the terms of the work of the people invited into a context. It is to be present at more of the meetings, in an attempt to reduce harm; putting one's own thinking towards ways to make the experience better for the guest in the situation. It is also to take up the work of language and writing; to check things before they are forwarded on and to buy lunch; to interview the institutional workers on their position on genocide; to find ways to know when the shield needs to come up and when it can be taken down. It is to think of accessibility plans, presentations, budgets and mediation – including sharing after the event and ahead of time – and to make these plans present in these in conversations with the institutional workers before inviting your guests into the situation. Taking up the shield can only be temporary, and it does invite exhaustion due to the necessity of thinking ahead.

If shielding was taken as an ongoing hack and implemented by many (as it is) other worlds have the possibility of slipping through into institutions and slowly making change. When someone acts as a shield and people are supported in their radical work: the work reaches audiences who need it and those who are doing the work are supported to keep doing it.

### **Wedges: Access Riders**

In this mode of tool-building, Access Riders are reconsidered as wedges – wedges to hold the door open to create more space. Wedges can be temporal and they can split contexts open in two - like I unfolded in my collaboration as MELT with Iz Paehr: Rituals Against Barriers. Access Riders are documents that speak about access needs, often along lines of disability, trans\*queer, migrant, class and language experiences. They are documents that attempt to make collaboration possible and joyful. They open discussions about how to make events, exhibitions and collaborations anti-racist and accessible to disabled & trans\* community from the beginning of a collaboration, not as a 'quick fix' at the end. They reduce labour for those people invited into a context because at best, they name what would be needed to transform situations to work better for the invited guests, and detail what would allow them to be fully present without getting burnt out.

Access riders are regularly sent at the beginning of a collaboration, with various needs laid out for how to create access across differences. They hold space for issues to be named and to be either addressed or plainly un-resolvable and un-ignorable in public; this demonstrates what Sara Hendren



Hacks On The Way, Ren Loren Britton, Shields, “Dancing across the image are various drawn graphic illustrations of hands - they make a permeable shield of hands blocking in various directions.” © Ren Loren Britton & CC2r.

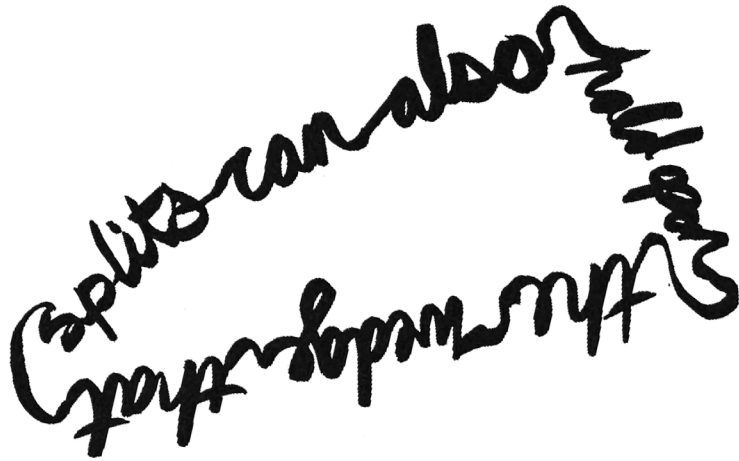
describes, when like when designed artefacts point to problems and raise awareness. This kind of pointing towards and negotiating the problem, is something I have explored in my previous article, ‘On Rehearsing Access’. Access riders can be about inserting various realities into one another and not resolving them, while simultaneously calling attention to discrepancies and then wondering, “well, okay: what to do from here?” Or they can literally be about meeting access needs as they are laid out and making the space actually accessible for those who are there.

They can also be about allowing those things to then transform the context. In my own access rider, I say that “at the time of publishing about any event, this event's access information must also be made accessible – this includes but is not limited to: sign language Interpretation, access copies, information on child care and stipends available that make it possible to join the event, gender neutral bathrooms, wheelchair access and wheelchair accessible bathrooms, distance to the closest public transport, information on low scent and low sensory spaces and information on discounted or free tickets to lessen class-based exclusion.” This model can then be included every time any event information is published for all institutions in the future. The rider, therefore, would produce a wedge which could change things for now, and in an ongoing way.

If the needs and requests articulated in access riders were taken up by institutions and maintained – so that the things that have been requested by community members and invited guests could stay in place – then over time, the norms of a site/institution/place would change because different

priorities and values would come to the fore, shifting who feels like they could be in any space.

Hacks On The Way, Ren Loren Britton, Wedges, "The text 'The Wedge That Splits Can Also Hold Open' is drawn in a graphic hand drawn cursive lettering - it references Ree Morton's work 'The Plant that Heals May Also Poison.'" © Ren Loren Britton & CC2r.



Caplits can also  
that the windows that

### Support Structures: Infrastructure Acknowledgement (Support Structure)

I have been and continue to be transformed by the work of Constant, a Brussels based trans\* & anti-racist feminist institution that cares about copyleft, free/libre + Open Source Softwares and developing critiques of these same practices. In their work, they note that "Constant works with feminist servers, situated publishing, active archives, ex-tititional networks, (re)learning situations, hackable devices, performative protocols, solidary infrastructures and other spongy practices to stake out paths towards speculative, libre, intersectional technologies."

Thinking about support structures, I have been developing infrastructure acknowledgements. Infrastructure acknowledgements are a hack that names who, how and what is supporting the digital infrastructure that enables this online meeting, this collective digital note-taking session, the producing of a coded artefact. It's a practice that thinks with citational politics and one that moves with digital discomfort – not all feminist servers are online all the time, nor can they be. The hidden politics, and indeed hidden curriculum (per Annette Krauss) behind – Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Meta, Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi, Netflix, and Alphabet – tools and technologies follow settler colonial and ableist white supremacist logics without interruption. A current letter from 'No AI for Atrocity Crimes' speaks about the ways that advanced technologies, including but not limited to AI-operated, near-automated attacks and bombings of densely populated civilian areas in Gaza. These actions are supported by the infrastructures of technological 'Big Tech' giants including Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Cisco and Oracle (to name a few). This digital technical infrastructure is the same

reality which is platforming a lot of the critical thoughts typed into computers on Google Docs, spoken about on Microsoft Teams and delivered to our doors by Amazon. What about speaking out and naming infrastructures with other politics at the heart?

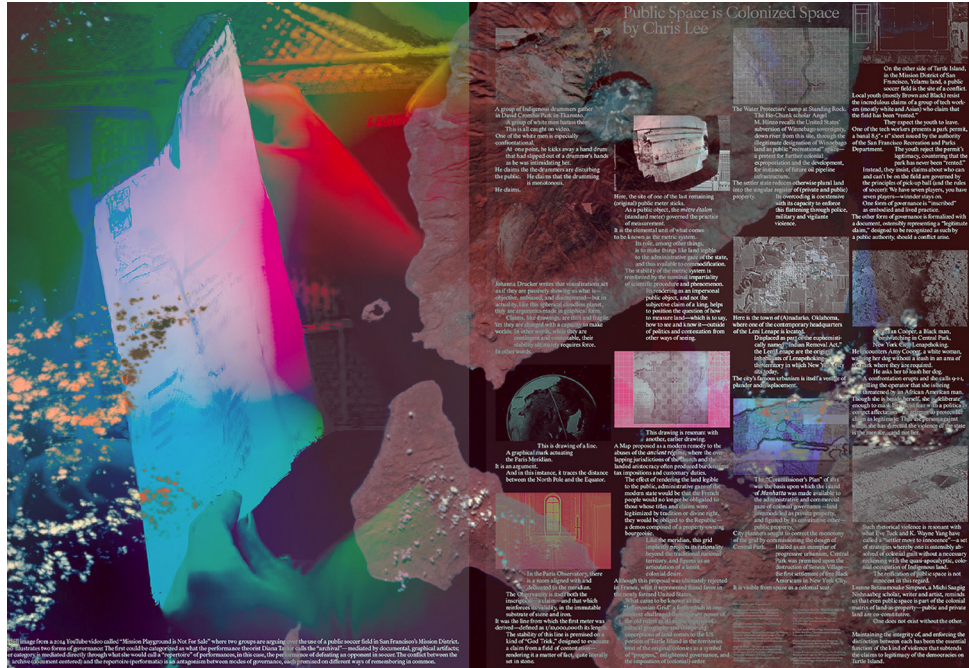
Regularly when presenting, I name Constant as a way of speaking about the material infrastructure and web of relations through which I am implicated, through my personal network and computing infrastructure that informs my network. The pads that I work on with collaborators are hosted on Constant's servers, in their space and not on a big-tech server. Pads are online notepads which are accessible via a URL link with a specific ending and can be simultaneously edited by many people. Constant's Ether Pads offer a host of colours for authors and are stored on a server with Constant's care in Brussels. I know the people who care for our collective notes and thoughts, who follow feminist server principles, proposing a feminist server that is... "run for and by a community that cares enough for her in order to make her exist" and "is autonomous in the sense that she tries to decide for her own dependencies." Naming, articulating and platforming what infrastructure is implicated within relationships is another hack, a support structure for my (and our) work, one that we can lean on and with which to build – with our interests at heart.

If we move in full acknowledgement of the infrastructures that we are engaging in our day-to-day work, an awareness of the interwoven contexts between seemingly innocuous Big Tech that furthers war-machine production would, over time, be further questioned. We can collectively disinvest from technologies that harm, and invest in technologies that further networks of community and collective support we wish for – this is the long term perspective that Infrastructure Acknowledgements moves towards.

**REN LOREN BRITTON** is a trans\*disciplinary artist-designer who reverberates with trans\*feminism, technosciences, radical pedagogy and disability justice. Their practice engages trans\*ness by following trans politics and by crossing contexts with feminisms. They attend to hir- his- her- stories and presents of social and technical infrastructures that make lives accessible and pleasurable. Ren has shared artistic work within multiple institutions including ALI\_CPH Biennale, Constant, Sonic Acts, Yale University, Kunsthalle Osnabrück, Utopia Kiosk and Nieuwe Instituut among others. Recent academic articles have been published in Catalyst, MATTER and within various edited volumes. During Autumn 2025, Ren will be in residence at PACT Zollverein and a Guest Professor of Communication and Information Design at Burg Halle.

# Refusing the Format: Füsün Türetken & Chris Lee on Material, Politics, and Aesthetics

with Füsün Türetken and Chris Lee



“A Settler’s Land  
Acknowledgement: Public  
Space is Colonized Space,”  
poster dyptich for the Korea  
Democracy Museum, 2024.

False-color image of Mount  
Tambora taken by the Space  
Shuttle in May 1992. The  
prominent caldera, formed  
during the massive 1815  
eruption, is clearly visible.  
This eruption caused global  
temperatures to drop, led  
to a cold summer—often  
called “the Year Without a  
Summer”—and triggered  
widespread famine across  
Europe. Photo by NASA.

new way. The institute had just undergone a major transition – from an architectural museum to a new institute exploring knowledge production in a transdisciplinary sense. It was a well-funded, well-led fellowship, not only in supporting us but also in using the fellowship to inform their own research strands.

One particularly interesting aspect was how they were feeding that knowledge back into the institution. Simone Niquille, for instance, was one of the artists later selected for the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. I have very fond memories of that time, especially the conversations with her and the other fellows.

On a personal level the fellowship was crucial for my practice. It gave me space to develop the research and provided the necessary funding to produce the film for my PhD. The filmic component was essential for the dissertation to move forward, and three of the four chapters have since been published in various forms. For example, “Breathing Space: The Amalgamated Toxicity of Ground Zero” in Forensis, The Architecture of Public Truth, the book by Forensic Architecture, based on a research initiative we had created at Goldsmiths University in London, had been published prior to the fellowship. And others followed such as the pivotal piece funded by Nieuwe Instituut titled Alchemic Desire, a short film examining the London Metal Exchange. In both the film and accompanying essay, I compare modern trading practices to alchemical principles, exploring how contemporary finance still draws on ancient, medieval logics.

That’s what Nieuwe Instituut offered me – as a visual artist and academic – and it ultimately enabled me to reflect upon and continue developing the work. Somewhere in that period, Chris came to give a talk. I found it incredibly smart, especially the way he approached documents, from money to other forms of material evidence. I loved how he framed it in the recent abstract of his book, stating we need to “study up” in order to investigate those in power. It was beautiful to see how he did that through matter and materials.

**CHRIS LEE** I applied to the fellowship while I was teaching at the State University of New York at Buffalo. It’s a smaller city near the Canadian border, but it’s the main research university in the SUNY system. I was in a tenure-track position there, which came with research requirements. As a graphic designer, that’s a bit ambiguous – especially when it comes to academic evaluation. Client work doesn’t really count as knowledge production, so I began shifting toward a more research-oriented practice, which I hadn’t pursued seriously since finishing school in the Netherlands.

That’s really why I applied. On a practical level, I had a professional and academic obligation to produce something legible to the academy. But more importantly, I applied because I needed space to breathe. In North America, there’s very little infrastructure – cultural or financial – to support non-commercial, inquiry-based design practice. That’s why I went into teaching in the first place. But even within the so-called neoliberal university, there’s not much room for that kind of work.

So the fellowship at Nieuwe Instituut was a way to carve out that space. And it worked. What I got out of it – initially – was time, space, and funding. I think it was a six-month program, though I can’t remember exactly. It takes a while to gain momentum, to figure out whether what you proposed is actually what

Looking back on their time as Nieuwe Instituut Fellows, Füsün Türetken and Christopher Lee recall a rare kind of support: structured, yet open-ended; generous, yet hands-off. In this conversation, they reflect on the residency as a rehearsal space – where materials become evidence, critique doubles as exploration, and the format itself is up for debate.

**Federica Zambetti / KOOZ** To begin, I’d love to hear how your journeys unfolded. Could you share how your engagement with Nieuwe Instituut Fellowship shaped your relationship to institutional life and your own practice? What did stepping outside the academic framework allow you to rethink or reorient, especially in terms of input, dialogue, and recognition?

**FÜSÜN TÜRETKEN** The fellowship at Nieuwe Instituut was pivotal for me. Such a compact and new environment like Rotterdam sparked connections and conversations that allowed me to settle into the city in a completely

you want to do. But Marina Otero Verzier set things up brilliantly. There was a real sense of support for taking time – to get oriented, to go the wrong way, to hit dead ends, to digest.

And the funding really mattered. I don't mean that jokingly – it genuinely helped make that kind of exploration possible. What was profound about the approach at the institute was that you received a generous amount of support, and there were no imposed expectations. Not in a negative sense – just no pressure to produce a specific report or outcome. That was liberating. It created a generative space for me to think and work differently.

**FT** I just wanted to add that these kinds of encounters are so important because they create hybrid spaces and interstices – places where disciplines, practices, and perspectives meet. In academia, these are often coined as “labs,” though I'm not a fan of that term. What Nieuwe Instituut offered was a truly transdisciplinary residency. As Chris mentioned, whether it's a collective publishing platform or another experimental method, it's essential to have spaces where such practices can unfold.

Especially in the context of neoliberal academia, these spaces become even more vital. For me, it was pivotal to receive funding – to access technical equipment, to get on site, to film, to understand what I was looking at. The residency allowed for an open-ended research question, with no fixed expectations. And that kind of openness really inspires people to act.

Even though there was no pressure, I think everyone took it very seriously. Fellows pushed their research forward with real commitment, and I've seen that many of them ended up publishing or presenting their work in more durable formats. These formats often emerge precisely at the intersection of institutional and independent practices – where artists, researchers, and designers meet. That's when new outcomes become possible.

**KOOZ From our perspective, one of the most compelling aspects of the fellowship was the creation of space for experimentation. As you mentioned, Chris, it wasn't about producing a final product – it was about having the freedom to explore ideas and processes. I'd love to hear your thoughts on whether that openness also created a sense of uncertainty. What is the potential of a space for experimentation when there's no expectation of a concrete outcome, but rather an invitation to engage with ideas, provocations, and speculations? How did that nurture your practice, and how did it differ from the conditions you've encountered elsewhere – whether in academic institutions or client-based work?**

**CL** The uncertainty was, in retrospect, incredibly generative. I think what really set the tone was Marina's opening speech, or orientation. I can't remember exactly how she framed it, but I felt a strong sense of trust. Nieuwe Instituut's selection process is rigorous, so they know they're getting people who care deeply about their work. There's no need to hold anyone's hand, and I think that was their approach: trust the fellows to take it seriously.

So yes, the uncertainty was refreshing. It created a kind of bubble – being in that space, at that time – which began to dissolve once I returned home. For me, the meta-framing of the whole experience was my tenure-track career. I want to be careful not to romanticize it, especially not the idea of passion for its own sake. In my case, I eventually burned out – not immediately, but over time. There was a lot that was rewarding, but it also fit into a tough professional economy.

As I said earlier, I didn't apply purely out of love for research. There was a rationale behind it – a need to produce something legible to the academy. Still, I look back on that time with real fondness. It remains a reference point for how things could be, or maybe how they ought to be.

**FT** When we think about the operational modes you're forced to follow in tenure-track academic positions – the nitty-gritty of CVs and metrics of success – I try to resist them as much as I can. But inevitably, you find yourself caught in that system. Attempts to be independent are thus important.

Two years ago, I was invited to join an independent group working to create a new association aimed at supporting thinkers, academics, and artists from Turkey – bringing them to Berlin through a structured support system. The reason is simple: there's little public funding for the arts in Turkey. It's a kind of mini-America, where the art and intellectual scenes rely heavily on philanthropic support. In contrast, countries such as Germany – and the Netherlands, as we've been discussing – offer robust public funding.

We founded the association called STRÜKTÜR in 2024 – which I am heading as Co-Chair – and launched a two-month artist residency program as well as a format titled reading room that provides a critical art discourse regarding Turkey's art scene. We received a grant from the Goethe-Institut for our project titled The Rehearsal & The Playbook. The project explores new authoritarianism and populism, but what struck me – and what connects to our conversation – is the subtitle: The Rehearsal & The Playbook. It made me think of fellowships and residencies as rehearsal spaces. These interstitial platforms allow experimental methods to be practiced, shared, and iterated. They become repositories, but also rehearsal stages for other modes of thinking and doing.

These spaces are rehearsals. The question for me is: how do we make them sustainable beyond the fellowship itself? Beyond the single moment of a grant, an exhibition, or whatever the format may be.

I also remember what I thought of as a less than ideal presentation I gave at Nieuwe Instituut. I was still struggling to understand my own diverse and vast material. I had applied with it, but hadn't gathered it fully, and suddenly we were asked to present. I didn't know how to present it yet concisely. In the end it didn't matter – it was a rehearsal stage. These moments of uncertainty were part of the process, too.

**KOOZ This brings us to the core of your research. What we found particularly compelling was the emphasis on creating space for experimentation – where the focus isn't on producing a final product, but rather on exploring ideas and processes. Chris, you spoke to this earlier. I'd like to understand how this approach shaped your investigation into currency. What led you to that topic, and what was its relevance in 2016 and 2017 – both within the context of Nieuwe Instituut and in relation to broader spheres of power and politics at play during that time?**

**CL** That story goes back to when I first arrived in the Netherlands to study at the Sandberg Institute. It was around the time of the housing crisis in the United States, which triggered the global financial meltdown. My interest in money started then – partly as a personal joke. I've never really had money, so I became curious about it. As a designer, I started asking naïve questions like, “Why can't I design money?” or “Why can't I create it?” That seemingly stupid question turned out to be incredibly generative.

It began as a personal circumstance, but I think it has broader appeal. Money as a design object – especially in a context like the Netherlands – was something I could explore seriously. Coming from Canada and the U.S., where speculative, critically oriented design work is rare outside of academia (and even then, still quite rare), the support structures in the Netherlands opened up possibilities I hadn't considered before.

As for its relevance at the time – well, I think money is always relevant, unfortunately. But in 2016 and 2017, I was particularly interested in how currency intersects with my field: graphic design. Over the past few decades, graphic design has slowly developed a kind of self-awareness. It's moved beyond being seen as a trade and started positioning itself as a discipline – sometimes aligned with the humanities, sometimes with science and technology.

I think this shift is largely driven by academia. What I mean is, design schools have had to justify their existence within universities, especially since the rise of desktop publishing and digital tools. That's led to a kind of intellectualization of the field – historicizing, canon-building, and challenging those canons. Compared to architecture, graphic design's theoretical development has been slower, but it's happening.

I wanted to participate in that evolution – as an educator, and as someone trained in the Netherlands, where there's a strong critical orientation toward design. So my angle was money. That's where the project started at Nieuwe

"Immutable/Coin," brass coins, 2017.



Instituut. Like Füsün said, early on I had a clumsy way of articulating it. I don't even use that language anymore. But that's where it began.

**FT** Much of my research doesn't begin with a clear plan. I've never been the kind of person who says, "I'm going to do this, then that, and then I'll arrive." That's just not how I work. But I've always had a strong sense of what I'm deeply interested in. So my process is more intuitive – feeling through the materials, knowing there's something crucial I wish to investigate, even if I can't immediately see what links them.

In my case, it was a conversation with someone where I admitted I was deeply disenchanted with my PhD. I knew the material was rich, but I couldn't find the thread that tied it together. Then I came across the concept of panmetalism in Deleuze and Guattari's work, and suddenly everything clicked – it was all about metals. That led me to earlier writings by Deleuze and Guattari, and also to Reza Negarestani's book *Cyclonopedia*, where oil is treated as a sentient entity. I later returned to Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, which helped me think about metals as vibrant agents and actants.

This became a kind of forensic reading of metals – tracing their role in global trade, conflict, and extractive economies. It exemplifies how independent research can be grounded in material investigation while also interrupting dominant narratives. That was crucial for me: thinking through metals allowed me to explore colonial legacies, contemporary warfare, climate engineering, and bureaucratic structures.

I don't see my work as simply documenting something. It's about dissecting and reassembling. That's very important to me. And while I won't dwell on how it's embedded in institutional research spaces, I do believe my research is deeply layered.

I think your work, Chris, also shares this fragmentary and temporal approach. It doesn't follow a clean, linear narrative or a straightforward career path – and I'm not looking for that either. The same goes for my research: I'm not interested in utility or neutrality. I'm trying to challenge those very notions. This is where the design of state documents comes into play. A lot of power is embedded in their design – whether it's documents, currency, or monetary systems. I've been looking into these structures as well, though of course you're more of the expert, Chris.

Take the London Metal Exchange, for example. Once you start researching it, you're drawn into bimetallism, the Nixon shock, and other financial infrastructures that I might have known about vaguely, but not in depth until I began the work. These global logistics systems are often the targets of critique, but when you zoom into specific sites, things shift. A student once asked me, "Have you ever been to the London Metal Exchange?" I hadn't. But going there in person opened up the entire research. Being on site made me understand what it was really about. It's not the same as sitting at home, reading a book, or browsing research material from afar.

So I guess my work is about blurring material research, geopolitical critique, and aesthetic speculation. That's the most constructive and compelling space for me to work in. If you look at the final chapter of my PhD, it turned into this complex, playful, experimental narrative.

I explored this rare earth element found in volcanic mud pots – essentially the primordial soup where organic bacteria need neodymium to catalyze life. I didn't know that until I spoke with a biochemist at Radboud University in Nijmegen. We filmed and interviewed him, and later discovered that neodymium not only catalyzes organic systems – it's also the same metal used in hard magnetic drives for computers and digital devices. It's the very substance that animates our digital figurines. So in my PhD chapter and the excerpt essay that derived from it titled "Superconductive Lifelines of Metallic Monsters" published in the online Journal "Umbau", we're moving from volcanic organic bodies to Frankenstein bodies, to what I call the "new kin" – digital entities, including digital Black supermodels that are created and exploited. There's an arc here: metals as superconductive lifelines for these metallic monsters. It is an intense essay that transcends the linear classic paper or chapter.

I enjoyed mixing the genres in this essay, and I believe I found something meaningful that makes sense in the end. Fact and fiction, historical and contemporary are woven together, based upon intensive archival research.

You asked why we started these projects. For me, it was partly a sense that there was something interesting to work with, and partly coincidence – encountering pivotal concepts through reading, listening and conversation. In the essay I mentioned above, Breathing Space, about 9/11, my take was to not treat it as a mediated event, but as an environmental disaster in one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Unfortunately, people are still dying from the toxic air at Ground Zero, the toxic torts are ongoing..

London Metal Exchange, 2017. Photo by Füsün Türetken.



One of my most supportive PhD supervisors was Fareed Armaly – a brilliant artist, thinker and mentor. He truly understood what future research and knowledge production could be. Coming from a Palestinian-Lebanese-American background, he brought a versatile perspective to the work.

Eyal Weizman gave me space to explore. And then all the creative experiments we'd been allowed to pursue in the PhD – alongside people like Lawrence Abu Hamdan – were put to the test. I think we both completely rewrote what a PhD could be at Goldsmiths. But then you face two external PhD examiners in your Viva, and the question is whether they will go along with it.

**CL** Just before moving to Tokyo, I was living in New York City, and you still see ads encouraging people affected by 9/11 to claim health benefits. The catastrophe is ongoing – there are still so many people suffering. That's one thing I wanted to acknowledge.

The other is about what the fellowship afforded: the ability to visit sites, to be physically present in spaces. Like you said with the London Metal Exchange, that kind of embodied research is transformative. When I was in Rotterdam, I'd travel every couple of weeks to Frankfurt to visit the European Central Bank. I went to Paris, trying to access the old observatory, and ended up stumbling across le mètre étalon in front of the Senate. I spent time in Amsterdam and in the Plantin House in Antwerp. I didn't always know what I was doing there – I was just scanning things with my phone, stitching them together in software, drawing, collecting. I still have all that material, though I've never

Image still Alchemic Desire, 2017. Film by Füsün Türetken.



used it. But spending that time, and those hundreds of euros, helped the story begin to take shape.

I had a hunch that the history of metrication was somehow connected to Frankfurt and Mainz – regions with deep ties to typography, money, and measurement. There's a lineage there, from early printing to financial systems. Slowly, the narrative started to cohere.

What I began to feel was that these places – often celebrated as sites of Enlightenment and Western progress – could also be read as horror exhibits. I started to see them as sites of crime. I'm borrowing here from Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, whose work on Potential History helped me reframe these spaces. Some of them are corny tourist destinations, which makes them even more resistant to critical scrutiny. But precisely because of that, they escape indictment. Being able to sit in those spaces and think allowed for a profound shift in perspective.

It's similar with metals. As I mentioned earlier, I had this clumsy but useful framework for my research: thinking about the metallic ontology of money and typography. What I find characteristic of many projects at Nieuwe Instituut is this approach – starting from something banal or quotidian, something seemingly smooth or neutral, and then realizing it's hiding something. It's problematic. And having the time to sit with that, to reconsider and reframe, is what makes the work possible.

**FT** This mode of working – blurring material research, geopolitical critique, and aesthetic speculation – represents a nonlinear methodology that resists easy classification. I think that's what both of us are doing. It becomes part of a broader effort to reclaim the archive – or, as Saidiya Hartman puts it, to reclaim the silences in the archive.

We reinterpret materials and material evidence by looking at them through a nonhuman, ontological lens. And in doing so – perhaps unintentionally – we propose alternative futures. Whether it's through design, art, or historiography, the medium doesn't matter. What matters is the speculative potential.

I think our practices benefit from these hybrid ecosystems – spaces that combine institutional and independent research. There's rigor, but also resistance. We push against the boundaries of classical disciplinary frameworks. I see that in your work, and I know I do it in mine.

Maybe that's where things converge: being invited into academia precisely to challenge its limits, and then finding ourselves in departments where we're always positioned as critical thinkers, “outsiders”. That's how I've felt in classic monodisciplinary academic settings I've entered.

**CL** I relate 100% to everything you're saying. Going back to the motivation for my book – which emerged after the fellowship – I had a conversation with senior faculty in my department during my midterm tenure review. They asked, “What's your trajectory?” I said, “I'm working on a book.” And they responded, “What kind of book? Who's the publisher?” I said, “I don't know yet.” They insisted it had to be a prestigious academic press.

I told them, “I'm not a trained academic. I don't write that way.” And they said, “If you say you're writing a book, your reviewers will come from conventional



“A Settler's Land Acknowledgement: Public Space is Colonized Space,” poster dyptich for the Korea Democracy Museum, 2024.

scholarly disciplines. They won't understand if you, as a graphic designer, produce an experimental book – where the object itself is a direct articulation of a critical position, through its production, content, and form.” They'll just ask, “Who's the publisher? What are the citation metrics?”

At that point, I thought, I'm sunk. I'm not going to make it. But I came out of that conversation defiantly. I thought they don't understand that what they consider knowledge production is entirely contingent on formal qualities – on banal printing technologies, on invisible and increasingly devalued design labor.

And I'm not even arguing this from a Marxist labor theory-of-value point of view. I'm arguing it materially: if your book doesn't have a spine, a cover, spellcheck, or paper that lasts more than ten years, your knowledge production is compromised. So in my book, I tried to make those operations visible – the production decisions, the scaffolding that supports conventional knowledge formats.

The book was written in Adobe InDesign – not as a manuscript handed off to a publisher. I was editing passages of text to fit images, adjusting layout as part of the writing process. The design wasn't an afterthought – it was integral to the argument.

**FT** I'm still teaching at KABK – the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague – even though I received a professorship seven years ago in Germany which is my main occupation. For now, I have not given up the position in The Hague because I'm invested in the Master Non Linear Narrative program led by

Niels Schrader. I think your work and mine — and many others that emerged from Nieuwe Instituut — aren't just critiques. They're rehearsals of other ways of knowing.

What's fascinating is how matter itself becomes language. When you talk about using design tools as a script — where the act of publishing becomes a refusal of standardized, Western, white academic formats — I relate to that deeply. The idea that a footnote must sit in a certain place, that the spine must follow a certain logic — it's all so rigid. There's a fantastic book where the footnotes take over the main body of the text, they become actors, via those footnotes jump from page five to page eighty-five. It's playful, imaginative, and a literal refusal of linearity.

I'm drawn to modes where form becomes argument — whether in design or elsewhere. These encounters between different research ecologies can still sustain politically charged methodologies. That's important to me. Design becomes critique, but also imagination. And I'm not talking about innovation — I'm not interested in that keyword. I'm talking about originality, as well as being true to yourself.

To give you an example: I had a PhD scholarship from University College London, and I gave it up to return to Goldsmiths the intellectual ecology at Goldsmiths — the people around the table — was far more compelling than what I would have had at UCL. I knew exactly how that classic PhD would have ended up, and I wasn't interested.

So yes, I understand where you're coming from. We're trying to trick the system, to challenge its formats. And I don't know what Federica thinks, but I've been reflecting on something she wrote in an early email about how these fellowships and independent research practices might shape the future. That question has stayed with me.

**KOOZ We've talked a lot about methodology, approaches, and the ways these spaces can be hijacked or reconfigured. We've also begun discussing formats, particularly the book and publication. Chris, you work extensively through publishing, and Fusun, you do as well — but also through other modes of knowledge dissemination.**

I'm curious: what mediums do you think are most relevant today? Is the book still a format that can be hijacked and used to carry these forms of knowledge production? What possibilities do digital platforms offer? What about lectures or other performative modes?

And how do you operate — both once a project has taken shape, and even during its formation? What are the mediums through which you translate your ideas, especially in relation to this idea of language?

**CL** I see your question as one about impact. There are different ways to consider impact — whether it's the economics of publishing online versus in print, or producing a play, a podcast, or something else. Each medium carries its own logic of reach and resonance.

As a provocation, I'd say this is where print still matters to me. Not in a nostalgic sense, but because I've started to notice how online publications can disappear — archives vanish. Print might have lower immediate impact, but its temporal reach can be longer. That matters, especially when thinking about political struggle. Do victories have acute impact now, or do

contributions resonate over time? That's one way I approach it.

In terms of practice and research, my book *Designing History* tries to articulate three modes of design history. In my book, I style these as “Design1” “design2” and “design3” (where “1” etc. are set as subscript, and “Design1” is the only one capitalized). “Design1” is the history we teach in schools. It affirms the contemporary state of the discipline. Design Two is a proposal for a history centered on documents: money, passports, birth certificates — not as affirmations, but as indictments of design-as-accomplice to state bureaucracy, colonial systems, and capitalist infrastructures.

So what could a space like Nieuwe Instituut do? What could these “bubbles” offer? I propose a Design Three — a mode oriented toward study, creative experimentation, and struggle. Where Design Two sustains the memories and claims of state and capital, Design Three seeks to undo them. It might involve obliteration, destruction, sabotage.

For example, Willem Sandberg — the namesake of the Sandberg Institute — participated in planning the bombing of the Amsterdam registry during WWII to compromise identity records. He was a graphic designer. But we don't teach that in design history, because it won't help students get jobs. That's the problem.

So my provocation is: are we — and are these institutions — willing to go into dangerous territory? To challenge the very foundations of what we consider legitimate knowledge production? I'll be honest: I'm not ready to commit criminal acts. But I put it out there in the book. Maybe we need to abandon bourgeois disciplinary categories altogether. Graphic design might not be a useful framework for what Design Three calls for.

“Are we — and are these institutions — willing to go into dangerous territory? To challenge the very foundations of what we consider legitimate knowledge production?”

- Chris Lee

**KOOZ Just reflecting on the book as a medium — since both of you work extensively with publications — I'm curious about its power. Chris, your recent book emerged partly from your time at Nieuwe Instituut, and Fusun, you've been working with books and printed matter for over a decade. What is the potential of the page today? Does the book still offer a space for slowing down, for deeper attention? Where do you see its relevance now, especially in relation to other mediums like digital platforms or performative formats?**

**FT** I think it really depends on context. At the academy, I often see myself as a kind of trickster within the institution — exploiting whatever possibilities I have to either slow things down or accelerate them, depending on whether I'm in conversation or trying to infuse students with critical thinking, which feels increasingly urgent today. I've also come to realize that I'm an activist at heart, even if I didn't set out to be one. I tend to find myself in spaces where activism and reclaiming space and our voice is necessary. Thus, before reflecting on the format of the book itself I'd wish to express that it



is publishing itself which we have to reclaim, as feminists and/or queer academics, writers etc. Whatever form of publishing that might concern.

When it comes to books, I find beauty in the slowness of publication and editing. Especially in a time dominated by social media – where everything is reduced to a five- or ten-second read – I’ve come to value deep research and storytelling. Whether it’s oral, audio, or shared over coffee in a conversation, I cherish stories that unfold slowly. That’s what a book offers me: a kind of in-person slowness. I’m not interested in the accelerated serotonin hits of Instagram. In fact, I find the constant phone-checking deeply unnerving.

So yes, I’m making a kind of pamphlet for the book. Its slowness is a timestamp – a snapshot of a moment in time. Sure, when you look back after ten years, you might think, “I should’ve included that,” but that’s also the beauty of it. Unless you publish a second edition, it stays as it is. I love that about books. Once they’re edited, they sit there. They hold space.

I also believe in the power of books politically. The fact that books are still banned or burned in some countries makes me want to defend them even more. Whether or not they’re sustainable – materially or economically – I still speak for books. That said, I also enjoy reading on screens. A book can be a PDF. I want publishing, book trading, and book fairs to survive.

And maybe this isn’t a popular opinion, but I’m a huge fan of the art book. I love the type, the spine, the graphic design – the haptic experience of holding a book. I love having one with me, in the train or at the seaside. There’s something irreplaceable about that.

But I’m also an audiophile. Many people are. And we have to acknowledge that not everyone can afford or carry a book, or even read one. That’s why I’m invested in formats like Radio Round Table, which I started, in which we try to transmit knowledge beyond the academy. Still, even that requires internet

access.

So maybe I’m not the right person to ask – I’m biased toward books and audio. But I also see exhibitions as spaces for storytelling. Maybe we shouldn’t fixate too much on the book as a format. As we’ve seen in works like Anselm Franke’s essay exhibitions, the exhibition itself could be considered a book.

In the end, I’m torn. One part of me says: refuse the format, think critically. The other says: I love a good book. So maybe these formats can coexist.

“I believe in the power of books politically. The fact that books are still banned or burned in some countries makes me want to defend them even more.”

- Füsün Türetken

**CL** I’m glad you said that because I feel similarly ambivalent. Part of it is that making books is my job – and honestly, I’d rather be on a beach hearing a story than working on a manuscript. But when I think about the book in relation to academia, I’m struck by its role in the economy of knowledge production. The peer review process, editorial gatekeeping – it’s all part of a mechanism that legitimizes knowledge. And while that might be obvious to some, it wasn’t always clear to me.

What interests me now is suspending the value we assign to the book, or to the archive – the fixed document that, as you said, can’t be edited or revised. There’s an aura around books, a kind of “truthiness,” to borrow Stephen Colbert’s term. Books can carry this epistemological weight that feels unquestioned.

So I’m drawn to other forms of knowledge – other mechanisms of production and transmission. That’s where rehearsal becomes compelling. I think of Azoulay’s work, where she talks about rehearsing the world of her family in Algeria, a world where Jewish and Muslim communities coexisted, and where jewelry-making became a mode of cultural continuity. That kind of embodied, iterative knowledge feels vital. The book is a lot – but it’s not everything.

**FT** And as you said, I find it deeply problematic that one can only be considered a “true academic” through peer-reviewed articles and institutional validation. I do refuse that notion. It systematically excludes entire communities – nations, ethnic groups, individuals – who are rooted in oral traditions or who simply don’t have access to these academic structures. Even within Europe, someone outside the academy is often written out of the conversation.

It’s a self-sustaining cycle, much like certain development agencies that spend their budgets on problematic interventions just to secure the next one. The academic publishing system operates similarly: legitimizing itself through its own mechanisms. I’m not interested in reproducing that system of power, and I think the book – especially the peer-reviewed journal article – can become complicit in that.

This is what I meant earlier about being original. I'm not interested in perpetuating a format that reinforces exclusion. We need to think critically about who gets to produce knowledge, and how. The book is one format – but it's not neutral, and it's certainly not the only one.



“Unmapping Eurasia,” identity concept for a curatorial initiative by Binna Choi, and You Mi, 2018.

**CHRIS LEE** is a graphic designer and educator based in Tokyo, JP. He is a graduate of OCADU and the Sandberg Instituut. He has held academic appointments at the University at Buffalo SUNY, the Pratt Institute, and the Design Academy Eindhoven. He has worked for The Walrus Magazine, Metahaven and Bruce Mau Design. He was also the designer and an editorial board member of the journal *Scapegoat: Architecture/Landscape/Political Economy*. He recently re-issued an expanded edition of his book on the document: *Designing History: Documents and the Design Imperative to Immutability (Set Margins)*, 2025). He is currently a PhD Researcher at Tama Art University.

**FÜSUN TÜRETKEN** is Professor of Intersectional Futures at the University of the Arts Bremen and a Graduation Supervisor teaching Media Theory and Visual Culture in the Master Non-Linear Narrative program at the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague. In 2008, she was the director of the German Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale, together with raumtaktik. For four years, she worked as a researcher, editor, and curator for the project *Shrinking Cities* in Berlin. Since 2010, Füsün has taught at various universities and academies in Germany and abroad, following a transdisciplinary teaching approach. Füsün is Chair of STRÜKTÜR, a Berlin-based association committed to developing support structures for artists from the geography of Turkey. Füsün has been a recipient of the DAAD fellowship, the HNI Fellowship in 2016 and will start her fellowship at Kulturakademie Tarabya in Istanbul in 2026.

## Xigagueta: A Vessel for Contemporary Art, Writing and Thinking

by Eva Posas

An alternative subtitle for this piece is *Diidxa' rului' ca neza* – translated from the author's mother tongue, this means 'the word that shows the way'. Language – sometimes a single word – can open a universe of understanding in which we may find our own place. *Xigagueta* – at once a symbolic object, an experimental arts platform and a vessel for conviviality, as enacted by Oaxacan curator Eva Posas following her fellowship at Nieuwe Instituut.

In our Nations without State, commonly referred to as “indigenous” people<sup>1</sup>, our languages are violently “disappeared”, forcibly prevented from being taught or learned. The loss of our mother tongues also means the loss of our knowledge of the world. Even more urgently, loss of language equals loss of our land and our home, legally speaking. Now more than ever, we need to cultivate forms of spreading our languages, and with them, our capacity to reimagine the world through our own imaginaries and to record it both in and beyond our words, expressed in any form. In an attempt to coalesce and counter such epistemic violence on our own terms, *Xigagueta* was born.

“The loss of our mother tongues also means the loss of our knowledge of the world.”

### A Phantom background

Since 2018, I have researched and developed the concept of ‘Phantom Languages’ as a way of naming the language that inhabits embodied knowledge, (in)corporeal encounters, and communication beyond the written and spoken word. I propose that in this other realm of language, the fire of non-hegemonic languages – such as *Diidxazá*, the language of the *Binnizá*<sup>2</sup> people to which I belong – remain latent yet lambent as a vital flame. Phantom Languages are another way of reconnecting one's word-soul.<sup>3</sup> They nourish a cognitive territory that persists when land is stolen and our culture taken away. They are the reverberations between the body and the environment, the threshold between verbal and nonverbal language. That language which vibrates in the encounter of bodies, objects, and territory, claims its right to life.

If non-hegemonic languages are mediated by colonial languages, I believe that Phantom Languages inhabit what writer NourbeSe Philip calls “the inner space” of language<sup>4</sup>. It is an intimate interior that inevitably reflects itself in the outer world as a phantom, not of what is lost, but of

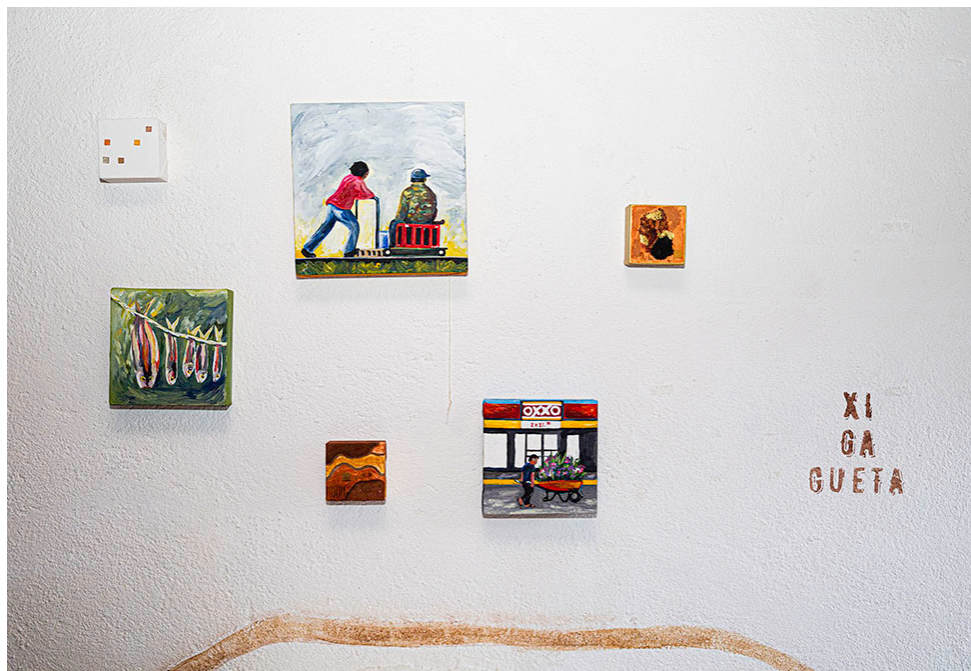
<sup>1</sup> It's important to insist on the problematic nature of the word “indigenous”. It implies a category that comes from the Western world, to establish a mark of Otherness. Although it conglomerates similar characteristics on Nations without State, it also dissolves their own diversity. However, some people consider that the term should be embraced as a political category to find commonalities of fight and struggle.

what remains alive beyond grammar. In that sense, Phantom Languages hide beyond words and are felt through the symbolic and the corporeal, as resonances in specific places, moments, and things. They borrow the form of objects: candles can be instruments of power, music played in a band can be camouflage, garments can be maps, stones can be messages. Objects are fully charged with language beyond our definition; they decode a hidden agreement between members of a community. This is how language moves, hides and seeps from body to place, place to object, and object to body again.

One such object is the xigagueta, considered a Binnizá vessel made from the shell of a calabash gourd, painted and adorned with flowers. The same flora is embroidered on the huipiles<sup>5</sup> of Binnizá women. From the Diidxazá word xiga, meaning “gourd,” and gueta, meaning “tortilla,” this “tortilla gourd” traditionally hangs on the walls of the Binnizá homes and is activated only at specific times during ritual celebrations. At such collective moments, the xigagueta serves as a travelling amulet, accompanying a festive pilgrimage. In this way, the xigaguetas mark places in the village and trace invisible landscapes, pointing to the connections between the people involved. Later, the xigaguetas return to the walls of the houses, in a posture of dormancy, awaiting the next activation. The xigagueta is thus a communal and poetic tool. They exalt the culminating moments of family and community celebrations. They distribute offerings, appreciation, and esteem among the people participating in the gathering.

Taking the Xigagueta-object as a central Binnizá epistemology, the

Gui' chi 'Ze' lu', small format paintings by Dell Alvarado for Xigagueta, 2025. Photo by Juana Pola.



2  
Written like this, Binnizá refers to the Binnizá people who live in the area of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, who also speak the isthmus variant of Diidxazá. Binnizá are part of the Zapotec People, a Nation spread across Oaxaca State with three more subgroups of Zapotec: the Valleys, the Sierra North and South. Each of these groups have their own language variants as well.

3  
According to Suely Rotnik, in the Guaraní language the word Ne'é means “soul-word” which involves the soul of the body and any alterations on it project directly on the language in which the body expresses itself.

4  
Phantom Languages live in the “Dis Place” – the inner space repelling and resisting the aggressive penetrations from the outer space”. When NourbeSe writes about this, she refers directly to the bodies of racialised black women in the Caribbean. “Dis Place – The Space Between” in Philip, M. NourbeSe, Blank: Essays & Interviews. Toronto, Bookthug Press, 2017.

5  
Bidaani' in Diidxaza, huipil is the word to refer to the women's blouses from their precolonial garments.

6  
Covarrubias, Miguel, Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec. AA Knopf, 1946.

7  
Sierra Aida, 'La creación de un símbolo en La Tehuana.' in Artes de México, no. 49, 2000, pp. 84-85.

Xigagueta-programme reenacts this connection to activate the relationships among and reflection of people from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, in the southwest of Mexico. We perform something like an embodied library, a speaking architecture of flesh and bone, of sips of nectar and the halos of flowers. Thus, we keep creating diverse, endemic imaginaries that move the ghosts within language; socialising an invisible yet persistent fire.

## An Isthmus of Isthmuses

Also known as xicalpextle, the xigagueta – widely used in the Isthmus – actually has its origins in Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas. The xigagueta arrived from that town to the Isthmus as a means of transporting provisions to this trading region and later transcended as a symbolic complement to the characteristic Binnizá Isthmus attire. Due to their geographical location, Juchitán and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec have historically been points of flow, and trade between neighbouring regions as far away as Central America, forming a focus of attention, a kind of centre in the South. In that sense, the xigagueta represents exchange, human flux and identities in movement facilitated by the landscape of that geography.

Through Miguel Covarrubias and other Mexican modernists like Diego Rivera, we have an image of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec depicted as an exuberant land: a fascinating, forgotten, unexplored “bottle-neck of jungle and brush”<sup>6</sup>, “beauty, tropical allure, the Mexican tropics – a space filled with sensuality and absolute freedom”<sup>7</sup>. These exoticising images and descriptions derived from a State instruction to mystify the region, their “indigenous” people to – at the same time – make a clear racial divide. This is how the State enhanced a Mestizo national identity based on the “glorious, tropical, sensual and working culture” that lived there, among other racial profiling from other nations without state while imposing a “regional charm” that could promote interoceanic transport infrastructures. On one side, the State highlighted their greatness; on the other side, imposed Spanish-language policies alongside social discrimination and systemic violence that pushed assimilation of the original inhabitants.

Amidst these acts, I must say, there are many isthmuses within the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, kept alive by its diverse people. It is a vibrant constellation of towns and villages, which might be Binnizá or one of the other Nations without a State in the region: the Ikoots, Chinanteco, Zoque, Chontal, Ayuuk, among others...

## Becoming Xigagueta

What exactly is the Xigagueta programme? Xigagueta is a collective research initiative, a public programme, [and] a radical platform conceived as a way to entwine processes of writing and artistic production from and within the Binnizá and Ikoots cognitive territory. Departing from Binnizá and Ikoots life notions – from our understanding of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec territory and the worldviews gathered in our languages – Xigagueta traces forms of cultural sublevation, to amplify its contemporary resonances. Xigagueta involves oral practices of poetry and narrative, arts and crafts creation and making public the collective work. Xigagueta encourages writing, creating,

critical thinking and translating in Diidxazá, Ombeayiüts and ideally other non-hegemonic languages.

From 2024 until January 2025, Xigagueta initiated a sustained assembly, an interpersonal dialogue among artists, craftsmen, writers, and thinkers to come together and develop something that resembles a library of our Binnizá and Ikoots thinking. For the first edition, Xigagueta worked with elementary school teacher and textile activist Ana Palacios, visual artist and illustrator Diego Matus, visual artist Dell Alvarado, elementary school teacher and writer Fernando Magariño, and filmmaker and writer Paulina Amador. Writer Victor Fuentes was also present, for counsel and close companionship, as an observant ear.

In the first instance, Xigagueta convened regular encounters to think and create together from our languages, Diidxazá or Ombeayiüts. Later, we published an outcome – considering publishing as the act of making public – through a public programme. This public event was fundamental to open up the study circle and share our explorations orally and physically. Each dialogue, each proposal and decision was led by the participants and we had to listen carefully on what concerns us, what intrigues us; what worries us and what inspires us; what being Binnizá means, despite the place we are or the social implications we face.

### Inside the gourd

The first edition of Xigagueta took place in Unión Hidalgo, a municipality at the end of the Sierra Madre Sur – crossed by the rivers Espíritu Santo, Chicapa, beside the estuary Estero Guié and the coastal lagoon, Laguna Superior. There, we walked through fields trying to find the source of one of the rivers that feed the estuary. In the area of Unión Hidalgo, the wind farms of Spanish and French transnational corporations were first situated, gradually taking over the Isthmus land. One day we walked for six hours with “Polvo”, a farmer who has worked on several ranches in the area, so he knows about the plants, animals, and other stories linked to these fields, with their wind turbines always in the background.

Unión Hidalgo is also where Galería Gubidxa is located. When Victor Fuentes retired from teaching, he turned his own home into Galería Gubidxa, which serves the purposes of a cultural centre. He started it to foster art as a way to build awareness around the environment, to fight the pollution of the river and crucially, to serve as a platform for Binnizá culture. Under the shadow of a pochote tree, Gubidxa was the home that gave shelter to performative readings, cooking classes, workshops, exhibition and conversations sparked by the Xigagueta programme.

Without wishing to insist on western labels – without relapsing – Xigagueta seeks to find itself as its own curatorial gourd-vessel from Binnizá thought. If the word “art” doesn’t exist in Diidxazá, then we don’t need to insist on that label, or other categories derived from a globalised semantics. It doesn’t mean that there is a lack of powerful artistic creation. Quite the contrary, we – as any other nation without state – are abundantly endowed with a sensitive, sensual manner of thinking; a complex field of imagination and therefore of inspiration, that translates into fierce creation and anti-

**Left**  
Weaving Threads Installation view, Ikoots Backstrap Loomed Huipil made by Ana Palacios and Ofelia Gijón for Xigagueta, 2025. Photo by David Habets.

**Right**  
Weaving Threads Installation view, Ikoots “Cadenilla” stitch Huipil made by Ana Palacios and Ofelia Gijón, Xigagueta, 2025. Photo by David Habets.



hegemonic reflection. It unfolds in our own way. This is what participants have developed through rich proposals in essays, poetic writings, and visual works on the construction of identity, land, crime, belonging, textile justice, the romanticisation of indigenous peoples, extractive violences, technology, silence, loneliness, translation as transgression and emancipation. Latent energy seeks to be unleashed.

As a self-taught visual artist, Diego Matus explored the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as an introspective landscape, a tool for transformation and intuitive expansion through ecosystems redolent with luminous bodies, and atmospheres with spiritual symbolism. Family, stones, people on the streets, plants – everything can be a teacher at the same level. There is a very strong link between ecosystems and our ancestors, manifested through empirical herbal remedies, where the healing of body and soul is manifested. For Matus, the flowers encountered on the way to his grandma’s house are a landscape of the utmost importance. Thinking about the meaning of a garden in the Isthmus – which is more like the wide space in between houses – is also part of reconsidering a relationship with the land, and the blurred lines of what property and ownership mean.

Guendaabiani’ is one of the most abstract and important concepts in Binnizá thought. One of its meanings is wisdom, meaning the correct relationship and communication between the faculties of the mind and body. It also refers to being of all light, or beings of all lights. Matus chose Guendaabiani’ as the name for the “estandartes” or flags that he developed to be activated in a procession. Based on an often-used object in Binnizá processions, he reconfigures the meaning of the flag or banner as a celebration of knowledge, rather than a symbol of power. He also created a visual communication for the programme, based on ideas of movement, dance, wind, and the region’s flora and fauna. We couldn’t be more honoured to have his work as a visual identity.

Translated by Eva Posas, the original line: ¡Ay!, didxazá, didxazá, didx' a rusibani naa, naa nanna zanitilu', dxi initi gubidxacá'. Didxazá/ El Zapoteco, by Gabriel López Chiñas. Taken from Máynez, Pilar, *Lenguas y literaturas indígenas en el México contemporáneo* (PDF), México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2003 (Serie Totláhtol, Nuestra Palabra 5). [www.historicas.unam.mx/publicaciones/publicadigital/libros/414/lenguas\\_literatura.html](http://www.historicas.unam.mx/publicaciones/publicadigital/libros/414/lenguas_literatura.html)

“We’re learning how to be, how to exist in our own language”. This statement by poet, translator and elementary school teacher Fernando Magariño, was expressed in one of our sessions. Through his poetry, Fernando has been diving into the richness of Zá thought and the depth of the Diidxazá language, through images laden with symbolism and reflections on memory and time. Specifically, he focused on writing about the Didxabixe’, that represents a “word of silence”, one that transcends the physical, anchoring itself in the void and the intermediate space where words not only express, but also construct realities. Through metaphors such as “sweeping until there is no solid ground” and “clouds that know nothing of perishability,” his work addresses both material and spiritual purification, alluding to the act of “cleaning” as a process of cultural and emotional healing. The evocative language in Fernando’s writing *The Didxabixe’ or Word of Silence* asserts the connection between language, culture, and memory, inviting us to cherish the knowledge of the Binnigula’sa as an act of poetry and resistance.

Language revitalisation, also referred to as language revival or reversing language shift is a common term we can frequently hear in the context of languages without state. Those kinds of terms already imply a judgement about the state of a tongue. Such a paternalistic gaze is unwanted. We decide when our language is dead. We translate ourselves, we don’t need someone to come translate for us. We can translate how we see fit, playfully, from our own hearts. Nations without state languages can adapt themselves to their own context. Through everyday life and simple acts such as sharing a drink, we can also translate our language. That’s why Magariño also did a cooking class on Cuuba Ladxiguenda – a drink made with seeds – so we could sip Diidxazá, internalising.

Language weaves. Language is woven into the materials and objects we use.

“Ay! Diidxazá, Diidxazá, tongue that gives life. // I know that you will die // the day that the sun dies.”<sup>8</sup> – a famous line by Gabriel López Chiñas, part of his poem *Didxazá/ El Zapoteco*, perhaps one of his most famous ones. Artist Ana Palacios, in collaboration with artisan artist Ofelia Gijón, managed to weave a huipil alluding to the same poem, but this time written in their own Ombeayiüts language instead. By doing so, the artists intertwined the two language forms that they’re trying to keep alive: both Ombeayiüts and backstrap loom-weaving. In an installation made with fishnets, sand, stones and huipiles from Ikoots artisan Gijón, and the essay *Telling Threads*, Palacios reflected on textile justice, and how its materiality literally carries our languages. As both a Binnizá and an Ikoots woman, she wrote about her family history, reminding us that – just like the xigagueta or tortilla gourd – migration can occur across countries and continents, but also between towns like Juchitán and San Mateo del Mar, just 50 kilometres away.

A small fragment of her text:

Beyond aesthetics, and the fact that currently “textiles are in fashion” for designers of world-class brands and contemporary art museums, it is necessary to remember that each piece is situated, and by being situated, it is recognised as an element of voice and also of history.

Textiles speak to us profoundly, not only through their shapes and colours, but also through the stories they carry. They generate a unique way

of seeing the world, as they are a tangible manifestation of our identity and the relationships we establish with the environment we inhabit. When we interact with them, we are not just observing an object, but participating in an ongoing dialogue with the past, the present, and the transformations of the future. Thus, textiles are not just a material, but a vehicle of knowledge and a way of understanding our place in the world.

I hope that one day we can read more stories written by us, and not by outsiders who, from an anthropological perspective, come to research and write about us. We are also capable of telling our own stories, without the intervention of third parties. This work is a step towards new ways of expressing what we feel and questioning ourselves, but it is also a step towards making narratives visible.

“I hope that one day we can read more stories written by us, and not by outsiders who, from an anthropological perspective, come to research and write about us.”

Our language will die when the sun dies. Ombeayiüts apndrom ombas, wüx apndndrom ombas teat nüt.<sup>9</sup>

What is territory? With *Gui’chi’ ze’ lu*, visual artist Dell Alvarado relates her roots through maps and cartographies, the very tools that facilitated early extractive and colonial forces. Her work is based in counter-cartographies, understanding them as a form of collective affections, a recording of agreements, a visualisation of the things that maps don’t show. Alvarado delivered an alternative mapping of the territory contrasting the natural resources extraction in Unión Hidalgo. A big map of the area was available for people to intervene, tracing other lines, other more personal expressions of relating and thinking about the land. It transformed into a communal constellation of routes and feelings. Next to it, the small format paintings done with pigments from regional soil, observe her hometown, establishing a dialogue with neighbours, subtly denouncing the extraction of wind resources by foreign companies as well as the rehabilitation of the interoceanic train that facilitates even further more extraction. This affective mapping has allowed her to reconnect with the community, creating a sense of belonging within the urban landscape, the everyday and the recognition of a particular territory.

“One always goes back to the beginning”. This phrase by filmmaker and writer Paulina Amador somehow summarises our complex relationship, in terms of being pushed to leave the places that we come from. It also refers to her own creative path, after teaching herself the techniques of filmmaking and re-learning how to write in Diidxazá. For Amador, not everything in the Isthmus is about the body and nature. She finds it important to speak about the other things, like the constant social violence or the technological exposure, in and on our own land. The clash between the contemporary technological world and her Binnizá traditions form the starting point for approaching technology through her mother-tongue.

Confusion between technology and the possible ways of referring to it in Diidxazá, are part of Bagayaa or Evil Eye, a story that belongs to the series of

9 Palacios Ana, *Narrar hilos*. México, 2025 (fragment translated by Eva Posas) Unpublished.

collection cinematic visuals from Amador's own creation. The lives of Binnizá women are surrounded by premonitions, dreams with meaning, promises, and knowledge that they have shared from generation to generation with their daughters, friends, or neighbours. Languages maintain their own codes, and the Diidxazá is expressed with its own elements. Within the Binnizá community, there are midwives, village prayer leaders, and women brought as captives by soldiers or mercenaries who stayed to inhabit another language, making it their own over time. All of them are also mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and neighbours who supported each other and learned to defend themselves, to explore the processes of the time, to care for each other and their children, to share a patio in order to weave together.

From her hometown of Juchitán, technology seemed unreachable – or at least only accessible for the rich, for the privileged ones. However, she insisted on appropriating the “master’s tools”. Through neologisms and playing with language, she works by re-writing history, despite the power relationships: to re-write and re-think, any story with the means you have. Paulina performed two powerful readings, intertwining her visual works with popular local technologies such as the megaphone. Paulina and Ana also shaped the workshop Identity through collage together, an exercise between visual materials and the “hearts” or leftover fabrics from the artisanal huipil production – inviting participants to reflect on what it is that shapes identities.

### **Guenda sicarú**

Xigagueta began with a very personal desire to contribute to my community: a tremendous desire to honour my mother, my grandmother, my aunts, and the people, place, and language I come from. It has served as an emotional ray of light that provokes an awakening, reminding us that the creative and reflective activities that inspire can be found anywhere; they don't need to be called “art” or “poetry.” As I mentioned above, in Diidxazá there is no proper word for art. My mother Eva Rasgado might say “guenda sicarú”, among many other ways of phrasing it. It doesn't matter. It is precisely in this gap – this threshold, between what we understand from our modern education and the embodied experience of other ways of being in the world – that our power lies. This is the space that Xigagueta holds.

That threshold is obscured when the situation of violence is so present and so direct. The romanticised tropical image of the Isthmus is doomed to clash with a reality of systematic inequality, racism, corruption, drug wars, human trafficking, and the devastation left after the disastrous earthquake of 2017. Due to its geography, as the passageway between Central America and North America, between the Pacific and Atlantic Ocean, the circumstances of social vulnerability and violence have been rising. According to data from the Oaxaca State Attorney General's Office, Juchitán is the municipality with the highest rates of armed violence in the state, with an increase in homicides and executions – an average of sixty per month. Next to social structural inequity, this is presumed to be linked to the wave of cartel violence, erupting over transit routes from Chiapas – the same routes followed by migrants who are dubbed as “irregulars” after their entry from Guatemala, thereby becoming targets for organised crime.

During the programme of Xigagueta, my cousin was murdered. Ana's

father suffered an attempted kidnapping. At the doors of my family home, funeral processions numbered two or three a day, week in, week out. Any artistic, creative proposal feels insignificant, almost absurd, in such a situation. I include such a direct and personal mention of this situation because it was a heavy companion to the programme. We talked about it many times, sharing all the worry and anxiety we harboured; it snuck into our party. I'd like to think that even so, it didn't ruin it. Xigagueta became a safe haven where we could talk about the issues that worry us, that we understand and that affect us directly. We have to repeat it as much as possible: what matters first is life. The rights to be alive and have a safe decent life.

Most of the participants are professionally dedicated to activities other than arts and literature. Elementary school teachers, office work, or nursing are some of their jobs. All of them are brilliant creators, full of powerful thoughts; they have a language full of courage. It has been a great joy for me to put myself at the service of their ideas, to accompany them and help them find the form they desired. If once I found the context of “the arts” a disturbing space, the participants in Xigagueta have restored my wonder and reminded me that wonder and astonishment is everywhere.

How to make room for other methodologies? Which means may be brought to other territories? What is “art” for in a region like el Istmo? What does it mean to be Binnizá here, there, or somewhere else? Our language formed the starting point, as a guardian of secrets and as a tool of strength and emancipation. Texts have been written, in bilingual versions of Diidxazá or Ombeayiüts and in new visual representations of them. Xigagueta seeks to be a support platform for artistic creation in the region. Within the field of the arts, we're still part of a dynamic centre-periphery; almost all of us who call ourselves artists or cultural workers do so from major cities or state capitals, like Mexico City. This is also the case in the Oaxaca region: artists with any degree of recognition today have made their way from the capital city. On the one hand, artists refer to their places of origin, experiences or cultural background, but in order to develop their careers, they have to distance themselves, to live far from all of that. Centralisation happens at all scales; even in the Isthmus, cultural capital is focussed in Juchitán.

For Xigagueta, our wish as a platform is to support creation with fair compensation, to showcase it first among those close to the region, centring people from the community while at the same time, projecting beyond. In this instance, it was possible with the support and trust of Nieuwe Instituut and Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, departing from generous conversations with Eva Rasgado “Binnizá”, Irma Pineda, Lukas Avendaño, Michel Pineda and Victor Fuentes.

Given the social outlook of the region – indeed, the entire country of Mexico – the question of what a programme like Xigagueta can do, and what it means, is one that reverberates frequently in my mind. All that remains is to do, to try to respond with actions filled with love for the land from which we come. To keep persisting, despite everything.

## On Remaining Porous: research as a lived practice

by Delany Boutkan & Federica Notari



Procession, an activation of 'Guendabiani' by Diego Matus for Xigagueta, 2025. Photo by Juana Pola.

**EVA POSAS** is a curator, writer, and editor. Her work has evolved at the intersection of curatorial and editorial practices, the politics of language, the power of subtlety, identity, and intergenerational memory as a form of reflection. She is the initiator of Xigagueta, a program of art, writing, and thought from Binnizá territory; the author of Mbuchi: Turtle Words. On Forbidden Mother Tongues, published by PrintRoom in the Netherlands in 2024. Since 2024, she is curator of Resquicio at Casa de Lago, UNAM. She has a background in German Literary and Language studies; additionally, she conducts research and dissemination activities related to Binnizá culture.

Interested in collective learning processes, Posas was part of the team behind Materia Abierta from 2019 to 2024. Alongside Mónica Hoff, she co-curated the edition Ni apocalipsis ni paraíso in 2021. From 2020 to 2021, she was selected as a curator in residence at the Jan van Eyck Academie and as a fellow at Nieuwe Instituut from 2022 to 2023. She has collaborated with various institutions in Mexico City, Guatemala, Bogotá, Gateshead, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Basel, Zurich, Berlin, Copenhagen, Venice, Los Angeles, and New York.

In an era where institutional gravity favours speedy solutions and measurable outcomes, what does it mean to hold space for the unresolved? Reflecting on a decade of the Nieuwe Instituut's Research Fellowship, Delany Boutkan and Federica Notari advocate for a shift from the institution as a concrete host to a porous body.

We are working within and together with cultural institutions at a moment marked by overlapping crises, urgencies, histories and demands for response, emerging from distinct yet intersecting contexts. From an institutional point of view, this can make the present feel no longer like a shared, directional duration, but more like a series of fractured realities: environmental, political, technological and institutional, each (rightly so) demanding attention, articulation, and resolution, now. In this context, uncertainty is increasingly treated as a liability within institutional, funding, and governance structures that privilege clarity and measurable outcomes. Complexity is met with acceleration: clearer positions, faster decisions and firmer conclusions. Solutions operate less as ways through situations; rather, they are signals that the subject remains governable—proof that the situation is still under control.

Over the past year, we [as researchers based within the institution] chose not to host our yearly Research Fellowship. Instead, we took some time — time being a scarce asset within cultural institutions — to focus on what hosting research actually means, and what we can imagine it to be. After a decade of fellowships with over forty individual and collective practitioners at the Nieuwe Instituut we returned to institutional records from before our own time, mapping who had been hosted and tracing their practices, often finding connections between fellows and recurring topics across the years. This act of stocktaking, getting-to-know and learning-from became a way of situating present and future fellowships within a longer trajectory.

Cultural institutions are not outside these conditions of intersecting crises and accelerated decision-making. They tend to absorb them through planning cycles, funding structures, public accountability, and expectations of relevance. As institutional workers involved in hosting the Research Fellowship, and as researchers ourselves, we sometimes participate in these pressures, even as we try to resist them. The pressure to conclude is rarely stated outright, but it shapes how research is framed, supported, and evaluated. Ambiguity is permitted only temporarily and not-knowing is expected to resolve. Institutional workers as well as “external” researchers are often asked to hold space for inquiry while simultaneously translating it into forms that can be recognised, contained, and communicated.

## “Research moves through pauses, returns, partial articulations, and moments of intensity rather than linear progression.”

Research often sits uneasily in such conditions, not because it avoids engagement, but because it unfolds differently. Research moves through pauses, returns, partial articulations, and moments of intensity rather than linear progression. It emerges through sustained exchange, speculation, and trust —, often asking institutions to act less as stable hosts and more as porous bodies, reshaped by what they host. Our own decision to pause allowed these reflections to unfold slowly: through a series of conversations (over coffee, on online platforms, individually and collectively) and through a publishing trajectory that permitted the material to percolate gradually, across the year.

This essay grows out of this year of reflection on what it means to host research and serves as a repository for these branches of inquiry and connections. We worked through this reflective year in conversations with other institutional workers hosting research in the form of fellowships and residencies, writings and conversations by and with former fellows published through KoozArch and a day of reflection, creativity and festivity at Nieuwe Instituut — with guests Cláudio Bueno, Akil Scafe-Smith, Seth Scafe-Smith, Lou Mo, Manuela Zechner, Marina Otero Verzier, Najia Bagi and Siegrun Salmanian — where we explored the concept of research as a shared, embodied experience shaped by collective learning, real-life contexts and unexpected encounters. The event was hosted alongside Brandon LaBelle and Katia Truijen, the authors of the book *Epistemic Imaginaries: Learning as Festivity*.



-1 Digital Lab. Photo: Roel Backert

Following this line of thinking and doing, in this essay we ask a set of practical, yet rather existential, questions: If hosting can make research possible, how does it also define what can appear and what cannot? What kinds of reflexive, administrative, and temporal literacies are required in cultural institutions to host knowledge that remains situated, unresolved or provisional without abandoning the need for moments of articulation and shared grounding?

In times when knowledge is rapidly abstracted, universalised and instrumentalised institutions can become vessels to actively support research as situated and relational, where fellowships can be an institutional tool capable of holding complexity, locality and connection instead. To understand research as situated, and support this, the conversation, “Near and Far: researching intersections of site, story, and space” highlights the urgency to understand how research unfolds across different sites, histories and geographies through fellows who traverse different sites, stories, and spaces.

Over the years we learned that hosting a fellowship within an institution goes beyond providing space, funding, or visibility. It is to recognise that research and practice emerge from specific sites, histories, bodies, and relations, and that these conditions cannot be abstracted. Hosting, in this sense, is an ethical commitment to supporting knowledge as situated and embedded. It means meeting research where it’s at: where and how it lives at that current moment. And entails recognising that institutional distance does not only separate, it can also enable connection. This approach carries institutional consequences: it asks institutions to slow down, to suspend predetermined outcomes, and to allow research to unfold according to its own local conditions rather than institutional timelines.

This approach is sharpened by the role trust plays in facilitating such work. In the first conversation, which opened the publishing trajectory Marina Otero Verzier describes an intentional shift away from bureaucratic control. In looking back at how the fellowship has been hosted she says: “We tried to reverse that logic and say ‘we trust you.’” In the context of fellowships, trust must become infrastructural. It creates space for research that is experimental, vulnerable, or unfinished — forms of knowledge that are often excluded from institutional recognition but are increasingly necessary in times of social, ecological, and political instability.

This understanding of trust carries throughout further conversations, revealing how it underpins modes of knowledge exchange and production. In the conversation *Being with the Many: Practices of Trust with O grupo inteiro*, lumbung.space & lumbung.kios, “trust”, Reinaart Vanhoe says, “operates within the space of uncertainty”. In an institutional landscape increasingly driven by clarity and deliverables, especially when linked to research, the fellowship becomes a rare structure that legitimises uncertainty as a necessary condition for knowledge. Supporting situated practices, then, is not only about inclusion, but about defending the possibility of research that resists simplification.

Situated research also rarely belongs to a single place. In the commissioned piece by Lou Mo, *Define and Empower: The School of Mutants*, she emphasises the need to bring work “from the outside into the

western institutional system without forgetting to keep building and showing outside of this realm.” Fellowships thus operate across multiple sites at once. Sustaining practices that remain accountable to their communities of origin, while temporarily intersecting with institutional space.

Hosting is not a one-directional act; it requires the institution itself to remain porous, responsive, and open to transformation. If fellowships are to support situated practices, then the institution hosting them cannot remain unchanged. Although institutions appear and often function as fixed bodies: concrete-built, and in the case of Nieuwe Instituut quite literally made of concrete. Yet, the institution is also a porous body. And porosity is not a given; it requires labour and continuous maintenance. Porosity means adjusting timelines, revising formats, and allowing practices to influence institutional priorities. Porosity is oftentimes uneven, and therefore never fully present, its capacity always tested. We are learning to understand fellowships as pressure points that keep the institution in motion, revealing limits and testing alternative ways of working.

As Reinaart Vanhoe mentions: “Oftentimes though, this has its limitations, at times, there is no porosity, and in these cases, there is the reckoning of what institutions, at times cannot do. Porosity is not a value statement; it is a daily practice, and as such, not one that is always there in full. It’s easier to critique institutions from the outside, but when you’re inside, you see the constraints... how do we take steps forward, build alliances, and reshape institutional frameworks?” The institution, then, is reshaped not through distance or critique alone, but through involvement, alliance-building, and collaboration also from within. This diversity of ideas and practices generate a rich and healthy institution.

As Krista Jantowski writes in *Being with the Many* “When institutions step back slightly – when they allow themselves to be hosted by something else...there’s a different kind of openness.”. This stepping back suggests that porosity is not only about inviting others in, but about shifting positions, and allowing for these shifts to occur. Hosting itself, however, becomes rigid if left unexamined and must remain temporal and provisional. Ren Loren Britton uses the analogy of “wedges... to hold the door open to create more space,” as small acts of support as mechanisms for institutional change.

**“The contemporary demand for conclusions to urgent questions isn’t neutral; it’s symptomatic of a world trying to govern itself out of collapse.”**

The contemporary demand for conclusions to urgent questions isn’t neutral; it’s symptomatic of a world trying to govern itself out of collapse. These pressures seep into cultural institutions as well, particularly those engaging directly with social and political questions. From inside an institution, this often shows up as an everyday insistence on clarity: when will the research land, what will it produce, how can it be communicated? Administrative systems such as budgets, contracts and reporting formats shape what kinds of knowledge can appear and which ones struggle to find space. As WORKNOT! learns to love the messenger puts it pointedly, “spreadsheets... determine the mechanism of distribution of tasks, resources, and outcomes.”

**Left**  
Remapping Collaborations session in May 2023. Photo: Tomas Mutsaers.

**Right**  
The gerobak, or mobile kitchen, in the GUD Instituut Living Room. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

What often looks like neutral logistics slowly reproduces hierarchies of value, visibility, and attention.

From this position, hosting is not only about offering space and stepping back. In *Being with the Many*, the conversation with members of O Grupo Inteiro, lumbung.space and lumbung kios frames trust not as a soft condition but as a sustained relational commitment: one that accepts uncertainty, disagreement, and change as part of working together. Hosting involves staying present even when relations are unclear, unwanted or unexpected.

Working inside an institution, this raises difficult questions: why does research need to justify itself through measurable milestones? Whose timelines are we implicitly privileging? In *Define and Empower the School of Mutants*, companionship and moving at a shared pace matter more than individual success. Being together becomes a way of producing knowledge through the everyday that pushes back against extractive, competitive rhythms.

If hosting research in and with cultural institutions means accepting instability, it also means learning to work with time differently. Research, in our experience, rarely unfolds in neat sequences. It moves in bursts, pauses, regressions, and returns. Yet institutional timelines often expect linear progression in the form of proposals followed by development, outcomes, and evaluation. These temporal norms don’t just shape how research is managed; they shape what kinds of research are even possible, or sustainable, in the first place.

**“Research, in our experience, rarely unfolds in neat sequences. It moves in bursts, pauses, regressions, and returns.”**

Across several conversations with former Fellows, this tension comes up repeatedly. In *Refusing the Format*, Fusun Tretken and Chris Lee speak about practices that move sideways as much as forward, resisting rhythms that equate motion with progress. Similarly, *Near and Far*, a conversation with Robin Hartanto Honggare, Luna BuGhanem and Daniel Frota de Abreu, reflects on research as a process that unfolds through proximity and distance, rather than through steady accumulation. These are not delays or



digressions; rather they are ways of thinking that require time to stretch, fold, and sometimes stall.

Hosting this kind of work asks for what we've come to think of as temporal, or unruly literacy. This doesn't mean abandoning structure altogether. It means being clear about the forces at play, while designing frameworks that can host interruption, silence, and return, rather than simply extending deadlines. In *Xigagueta: A Vessel for Contemporary Art, Writing and Thinking*, Eva Posas describes thinking as a vessel that holds fragments, hesitations, and unfinished ideas.

A common concern, of course, is then often where this leaves conclusion. If everything remains open, how do we avoid endless drift? What we are beginning to understand is that unruly time does not mean rejecting closure altogether. It means working with temporary, situated forms of closure: moments where research pauses, crystallizes, or becomes shareable, without necessarily being final. WORKNOT!'s essay *Against Collective Exhaustion* reminds us once again that constant productivity exhausts not only people, but thought itself.

To host and do research with(in) a cultural institution is to learn how to sit in the in-between. Between beginnings and outcomes. Between institutional walls and the outside conditions where research is situated. Between the self and the collective. Between the public and the private. Between what can be shared and what remains behind the scenes. Between hosts and researchers, and their shifting roles.

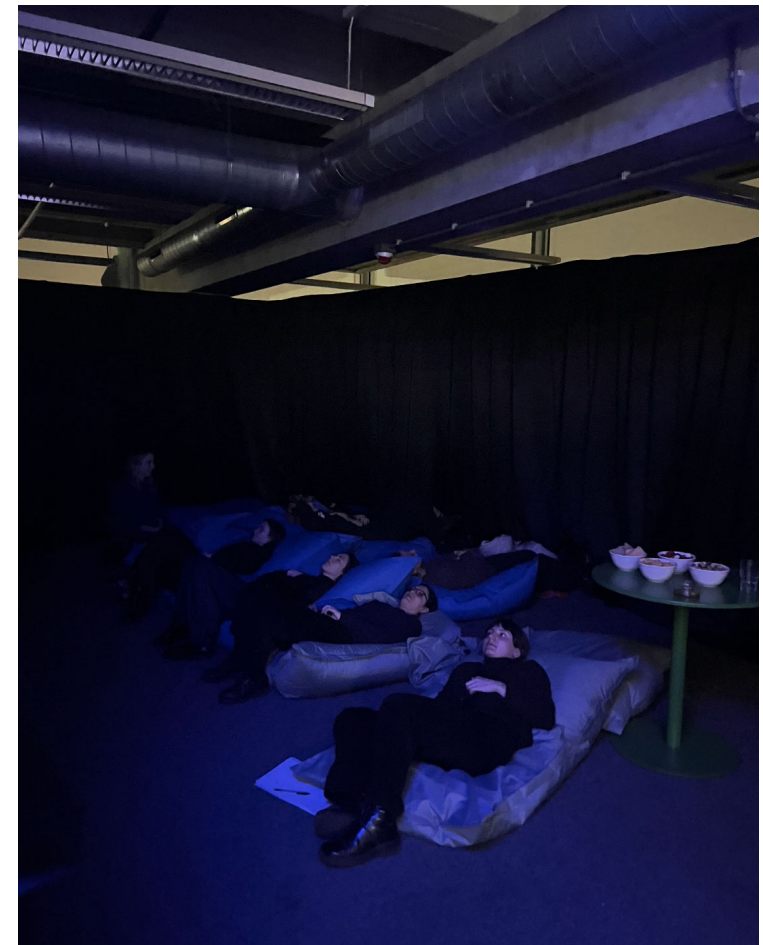
Over time, we have come to understand hosting not as a function, but as a practice of attention. We no longer see hosting as support alone; we see it as a responsibility to reshape the conditions we operate within. Hosting makes research possible, but it also shapes its tempo, its exposure, and its limits. Hosting is never neutral, even when its intentions are generous. It therefore requires vulnerability – not only from the institution, but from us who host from within it. It means allowing the institution to stay porous, to resist premature closure, and to act from the perspective that knowledge does not only accumulate but also disrupts. To host research is to encounter practices that unsettle what the institution believes it knows, what we believe we know and how we are taught to know. Perhaps it even asks the institution to shift, at times, from host to guest. It demands openness to being changed.

Research, however, does not happen outside of a life. It happens through someone's body; through their loved ones, their rent, their health, their doubts and their histories. To host a fellowship is to stay with someone while they are still figuring something out, within the real conditions they are living through. Protecting their time and attention as it unfolds. It means not mistaking slowness for failure, and not turning uncertainty into something to fix. Research moves at the speed of a life. And when we rush a life, it is not only the work that breaks. This is what we carry forward, not answers but a commitment to keep the institution breathing – and as hosts, to remain attentive to what becomes possible when it can.

**DELANY BOUTKAN** is a researcher, editor, and curator with the Nieuwe Instituut's Research team, where she coordinates the annual International Call for Fellows and has led various collaborative research projects and public programs. Her recent work focuses on language as a design material, exploring its practical, theoretical, and pedagogical dimensions within design and architecture. Her writing and editing have been featured in a range of publications, including *Extra Extra Magazine*, *PIN-UP*, *Metropolis M*, *Disegno Journal*, and *Kunstlicht Journal*. She is the co-author of *Remapping Collaborations (2025)* and currently sits on the editorial advisory board of *MacGuffin Magazine* and the governance board of *Design Platform Rotterdam*.

**FEDERICA NOTARI** is a researcher and programmer at Nieuwe Instituut with a focus on practices of place-making and sonic infrastructures. She initiated *Through Sounds*, a project investigating sound infrastructures through research, events, and the publishing trajectory, *Clipping*. Federica is the founder of events and collectives *Words off the Page* and *Discoteca Amore*.

Research Nights: Epistemic Futures, an evening on collective forms of research.





**APPENDIX**

Fellow 2014-2014

pg. 122

2024 | TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS - TOOL SHEDS | 2023 | ESTING GROUNDS - TESTING GROUNDS - TESTING

**DIASPORIC HOMEMAKING**

Luna BuGhanem **pg. 23**

Diasporic homemaking refers to the way migrants finance and construct houses in their homelands through remittances, correspondence and visits. In Mount Lebanon such dwellings are identified by the country of the emigrants, such as the American or Dutch house. During her fellowship, architect Luna BuGhanem will build on her research to document how these houses take shape and how the process challenges traditional architectural practice. She aims to compile a Diasporic Homemaking Toolkit to support spatial practitioners without a permanent base, capturing the tools, insights and relationships that allow diasporic communities to make home from afar.

**LUMBUNG.SPACE AND LUMBUNG KIOS**

lambung.space & lumbung kios **pg. 65**

lambung.space and lumbung kios began as prototypes at Documenta 15 that explore collective digital and economic self-determination. The projects seek to build infrastructures that allow distant but allied artistic practices to work towards sustainable networks. During the fellowship, the team will convene a majelis – a collective assembly – to share knowledge, set agendas and involve current and future collaborators. They will also establish a temporary Lumbung kiosk in Rotterdam as a space for experimentation, learning and public engagement. By reflecting on lessons from the prototypes and listening to network members, the project aims to imagine global systems that are grounded locally and responsive to regional differences.

**VARIA**

Varia

Responding to the theme of 'Tool Sheds', Varia proposes to preserve digital culture through open distribution of resources and ethics. The Rotterdam collective produces software tools as 'patches' to meet specific needs and is now focusing on the platforms through which its resources are accessed, notably the website and archive. The fellowship will involve reviewing how other self-organised initiatives have been archived, stocktaking and mending existing tools, and developing shared vocabularies with peers. A final 'patchworking' phase will weave together tools, methods and relationships so that Varia's digital infrastructure becomes a stable yet flexible space for making public, co-maintenance and solidarity.

**MEMÓRIA FORENSE**

Daniel Frota de Abreu **pg. 23**

Memória Forense is a transdisciplinary research structure that investigates preservation practices through the lens of colonial histories and environmental extraction. Using Rotterdam's port as a case study, Daniel Frota de Abreu examines how new infrastructures for capturing and storing carbon dioxide mirror the capture and storage of natural history collections amassed during colonial expansion. Through archival study and fieldwork on the port's expansion, he will juxtapose the temporalities of industrial and colonial extraction. By bringing these axes together, the project seeks to generate new perspectives on how societies remember, classify and preserve both materials and historical narratives.

2022 | NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME | 2022 | NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME

**MOTHER TONGUES, TRANSCENDENTAL TECHNOLOGIES AND SPACE**

Russel Hlongwane **pg. 50**

Based in Durban, South Africa, cultural producer Russel Hlongwane works across research, design, film and curation to investigate tensions between heritage, modernity and tradition in Black life. His fellowship extends this enquiry to language, architecture and technology from a Zulu perspective. By considering the Zulu imagination as a reservoir of knowledge, he asks how vernacular concepts can inform architectural and technological practice and how the Zulu language can serve as a repository for accessing ancestral knowledge. The project situates these questions within broader networks across Southern Africa and beyond, building on Hlongwane's experience of collaborative working groups and cultural production.

**XIGAGUETA**

Eva Posas **pg. 104**

Eva Posas explores how languages deemed indigenous and suppressed continue to vibrate beyond words. She argues that even when mother tongues are silenced, they live as 'phantom languages' embodied in rituals, objects and gestures. Her project centres on the Xigagueta, a lacquered tortilla vessel used by her Zapotec community in southern Mexico. By treating this object as a meeting place, she proposes to trace other phantom objects, collect oral histories and co-create a 'vernacular library' without walls in Juchitán. Through storytelling, collective making and publishing, the project develops social and pedagogical strategies to amplify Zapotec language and craft atypical contemporary writing tools.

**BUILDING COMMODITIES: STORIES FROM THE PLANTATIONS' PAST**

Robin Hartanto **pg. 23**

Architectural narratives about Dutch colonialism in Indonesia often celebrate monumental buildings while overlooking the extractive reality of plantations. This project examines how infrastructure on plantations – from processing factories and botanical stations to immigration centres and hospitals – contributed to the production and circulation of commodities that sustained colonial rule. Drawing on architectural and environmental history and colonial studies, Robin Hartanto will collect field and archival materials from Indonesian plantation sites and Dutch state and corporate archives. The research reframes colonial architecture not only as individual buildings but as part of a broader system of extraction that continues to shape landscapes.

**ACCESS SERVER**

MELT

ACCESS SERVER is a digital arts project that addresses the inequitable labour imposed on disabled people when requesting access features such as captions, sign language or scent-free spaces. During their fellowship, disabled and trans\* researchers MELT (Ren Loren Britton & Isabel Paehr) will develop a website and email server offering templates and small payments to recognise the work of making access requests. By collectivising individual emails and linking them to a shared resource hub, the project builds an interface between disabled users and organisers. It aims to transform institutional relationships to accessibility, promote shared knowledge and reduce barriers through community care.

- NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THEME - NO THE | 2020, REGENERATION: NEW INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES - REGENERATION: NEW INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES - REGENERATION: NEW INST 2019-2020, BURN-OUT. EXHAUSTION ON A PLANETARY SCALE

**THE SCHOOL OF MUTANTS**

School of Mutants **pg. 36**

Building on previous installations about educational utopias linked to Senegalese independence, the School of Mutants evolves as an itinerant school that operates across different places and times. Its members gather testimonies, archives and visual material from African and Afro-Caribbean contexts to highlight lesser-known experiments in knowledge production and transmission. The fellowship expands this work by exploring Dutch colonial histories and radical education, and by considering how decentralised forms of learning emerge amid the ruins of techno-scientific projects. The research questions how situated pedagogies can foster decolonised, terrestrial futures and how interwoven cultural contaminations can open possibilities for subjectivities and action.

**DROUGHT, NURTURING, ORÓS, CAATINGA, SERTÃO**

O grupo Inteiro **pg. 65**

This six-month beta phase imagines a 'becoming-with-Caatinga' institution as an act of resistance to extractivist and developmentalist agendas in Brazil's semi-arid north-eastern biome. Caatinga, often portrayed as inhospitable, is characterised by cycles of life and death and reciprocal socio-environmental practices that have resisted colonial exploitation. O grupo Inteiro proposes to treat the institution as an essay, using research, experimentation and collective processes to listen to the biome and renegotiate ways of caring for water. Recognising decolonial positions inherent in Caatinga, the project seeks mutual exchange rather than projection, drawing on alternative practices and knowledges to inform new forms of institutional practice.

**FOLLOWING INFRASTRUCTIONS**

Resolve Collective

Following Infrastructions challenges conventional notions of the institution by focusing on infrastructure as a decentralised, dissipative and participatory practice. Resolve Collective posits that access should be an active process and that organisational space can be reconfigured to support communities of care. Through action-research, the project explores three methods: 'folding' and 'unfolding' institutional space to map and reorganise its parts; identifying 'leaks' and 'loopholes' through workshops and interventions with human and more-than-human participants; and documenting and valuing dissipative relationships within institutions. The goal is to generate strategies for infrastructural transformation that redistribute resources and enable networks of maintenance to flourish.

**ALIEN POSSESSION**

Dele Adeyemo

Dele Adeyemo examines how the circulations underpinning modernity – rooted in transatlantic slavery – persist in contemporary spatial production, contributing to planetary burnout. He introduces the notion of 'Alien Possession' to describe the colonial division that replaced collective animistic beliefs, such as the Yorùbá philosophy of Ifá, with self-possessed individuals shaped by European modernity. By interrogating architecture as a product of this division and engaging with Ifá's animistic cosmology, the project explores more-than-human existence and geological time to imagine alternative ways of making space. Adeyemo seeks frequencies and movements inspired by Ifá that can inform designs for remaking the world beyond opposition and resistance.



THEME - NO THEME - THEME - NO

**DESIGNING THE SURFACE**

Chris Kabel

Designing the Surface examines how finishes determine a product's appeal, function and identity. More than decoration, coatings can protect objects, simulate ageing or convincingly imitate craftsmanship. This exhibition surveys artefacts across categories such as lustre, patina, faux, Teflon and agency, revealing surfaces as sites of contradiction where appearances deceive. By inviting visitors to look closely at how products transform through their final layers, designer Chris Kabel challenges assumptions about authenticity and survival in the design world and shows that the outermost layer can be an active agent in shaping perception.

2015 | NO THEME - NO

**THE CONTENTS**

Simone C Niquille **pg. 50**

Simone C Niquille explores digital identity, data ownership and imaging technologies through film and writing. The Contents examines how bodies are increasingly digitised for entertainment, interface design and biometric surveillance, asking how these practices reshape power structures. By straddling the film industry's special effects, corporate interface innovation and national ID schemes, the project questions the future uses of stored digitised bodies. It highlights the relationship between resolution and authenticity, referencing cases such as Jan Krissler's replication of a fingerprint from a high-resolution image to unlock a phone. Ultimately, Niquille interrogates who controls narratives, screens and avatars in the networked space of appearance.

**BLACK AND WHITE AND RED ALL OVER**

Noam Toran

Noam Toran traces political theatre of the early twentieth century, from Soviet Proletkult and European agitprop to socialist, anarchist and union-run troupes in the Americas and colonies. The project examines how these theatrical forms blended fiction and fact to foment radical consciousness. It will take the shape of a 'living' research piece in which the materialities of early political theatre – its methods, tools and communication codes – are revived through adaptations and re-enactments developed collaboratively with local professionals and the public. By filling Nieuwe Instituut with sets, costumes and musical scores that echo historical energies and urgencies, Toran seeks to inspire new critical responses to contemporary socio-political conditions.

2014, WOOD - WOOD

**ALCHEMIC DIALOGUE**

Fusun Turetken **pg. 88**

Fusun Turetken's research uses Deleuze and Guattari's concept of panmetallism to critique capital and conflict through the lens of metals. Analysing key marketplaces like Wall Street and the London Metal Exchange, she investigates the production, destruction and reconstruction of the World Trade Center and tracks how its materials are reincarnated as everyday commodities after 9/11. Structured around the periodic table, her narrative links elements to events, tracing rhizomatic networks of objects, subjects and institutions. By exploring mining, raw materials and finance alongside the afterlife of the towers' metals, the project writes a forensic history of power in the post-9/11 era.

**PLASTIC**

Tal Erez

PLASTIC: Promises of a Home-made Future is the third exhibition in Nieuwe Instituut's Things and Materials programme, following Biodesign and WOOD. Curated with designer Tal Erez, it explores the cultural, economic and social significance of plastics. The show traces a century of material innovation, highlighting both imaginative potential and apocalyptic visions. It situates plastic within contemporary cross-fertilisation between nature, science and creativity and reflects renewed interest in craft and material quality. By examining how technological innovation in plastics affects society, politics and economics, the project invites visitors to reconsider their relationship with this ubiquitous material.

2013 | NO THEME - NO

Ruben Jacobs

During his fellowship, Ruben Jacobs developed the Soft Strategies events The Moral of Things and The Ethical Designer, and wrote the essay Neuhaus in 2019. These activities suggest a focus on ethical considerations within design and philosophy, indicating a thematic exploration of morality and ethics in design practice.

Annet Dekker

New Archive Interpretations is a series of commissions launched by Nieuwe Instituut in 2014 under the guidance of Annet Dekker. It invites artists, designers and researchers to examine how digital archives influence and differ from their analogue predecessors. Through these projects, participants reflect on the shifting nature of archival practice in the digital age and the impact of new media on preservation, access and interpretation.

**WOOD**

Dan Handel

WOOD: The Cyclical Nature of Materials, Sites and Ideas is an exhibition within Nieuwe Instituut's Things and Materials programme. Curated by Dan Handel, it explores the cultural narratives and material qualities of wood. The show situates wood between romantic appreciation of forests and their status as managed, market-driven landscapes, and highlights experimental applications in architecture and design. Featuring design objects, architectural projects and artefacts from national and international collections, the exhibition references diverse geographical, historical and cultural contexts to reveal the complex stories embedded in this natural material.

**AERA FABRICA**

Roos Meerman

Collaborating with designers, material experts, researchers and industry, Roos Meerman continued her Aera Fabrica research in a temporary open lab, sharing her process online and offline. Inspired by the machine, Meerman explores hidden qualities of 3D printing, seeking tactile and organic results from a technique often associated with impersonal aesthetics. In Aera Fabrica she developed a method that combines blow-moulding, glass-blowing and 3D printing, allowing larger forms with thin walls to be blown, creating transparent, glass-like plastics. By programming shapes in advance without using moulds, her technique points to more efficient production and new aesthetics.

Sascha Pohlfepp

Sascha Pohlfepp, who advised on Nieuwe Instituut's Garden of Machines exhibition, explored the blurred distinctions between artificial and natural in the Anthropocene. As human activities drive geological and biological change, classical oppositions between nature and artifice lose meaning. By considering the garden as a crafted environment where artificial and natural co-exist, Pohlfepp proposed it as a metaphor for the world in the Anthropocene. His essay invites reflection on how we conceptualise and design environments when the artificial is no longer separate from the natural.

**INTERWOVEN**

Diana Scherer

Dutch artist Diana Scherer received the 2016 New Material Fellow for her project Interwoven, in which she trains plant roots to grow into strong, resilient materials. Using moulds to guide the roots into intricate patterns, she collaborates with Radboud University to explore potential applications, including growing a dress underground. The fellowship provides Scherer with a six-month mentorship from Nieuwe Instituut to further develop this innovative concept. The jury noted its originality and potential for unforeseen results, recognising that working with living roots could yield new sustainable textiles and challenge perceptions of cultivation and design.

**DRONES AND HONEYCOMBS**

Malkit Shoshan

Malkit Shoshan's long-term research project examines how contemporary warfare and global security regimes shape physical environments and cities. As front lines increasingly shift into urban spaces, the distinction between war zones and civilian life dissolves. Through Drones and Honeycombs, Nieuwe Instituut links innovation and conflict to design, assessing how military apparatus affects society and engages architecture and urban planning. The work comprises three sub-themes: drones and emerging security systems; compounds as architectures of enclosure; and missions addressing global wars, territories and design initiatives. The project reflects on the Netherlands' design practice and humanitarian role within these intertwined contexts.

Matthew Stadler

In a 2013 lecture, writer Matthew Stadler reflected on how technological and political developments undermine traditional notions of the interior. As computer screens become additional 'windows' in our homes, they also act as cameras looking back at us, complicating boundaries between private and public. Stadler's work, including the book *Minders*,



**KOOZARCH MAGAZINE** is an open-access platform for architectural discourse, speculative spatial imaginaries, and design research. Hosting an intergenerational and intersectional chorus of critical voices, Koozarch attempts to challenge historically extractive practices, championing a more regenerative, inclusive, and thoughtful approach.

**KOOZARCH STUDIO** engages in special projects and partnerships through the curatorship and design of exhibitions, events, publications, podcasts and much more. These carefully curated partnerships support our ambition of supporting and platforming cultural projects that matter, both in their own right and by cross-funding Koozarch's open-access platform without the need for advertising. Collaborators and clients approach Koozarch for our distinct editorial and curatorial approach, and for our capacity to transform concepts into projects that are both intellectually rigorous and deeply engaging

**NIEUWE INSTITUUT** is the Netherlands' national museum and institute for architecture, design, and digital culture, located in Rotterdam. It manages the National Collection for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning, houses a library and research center, and hosts exhibitions, public programs, and debates. The institute aims to experiment and push boundaries in these fields, addressing pressing social and environmental issues through its work.

Since its foundation in 2013, Nieuwe Instituut has conducted and supported research in the fields of architecture, design and digital culture. Exhibitions, lectures, archival research and publications have served as outputs of research projects and, more importantly, as active platforms for their development. Intended as a means of supporting and learning from different research initiatives and methodologies, **NIEUWE INSTITUUT FELLOWSHIP** is ultimately an opportunity to rehearse other ways of thinking and doing.

#### **CREDITS**

This publication was produced on the occasion of the 10 year anniversary of Nieuwe Instituut Research Fellowship Programme.

#### **Nieuwe Instituut Research Fellowship**

Marina Otero Verzier, Founder  
Delany Boufkan, Researcher & programme coordinator  
Federica Notari, Researcher & programme coordinator

#### **KoozArch team**

Federica Zambeletti, Founder & Managing Director  
Shumi Bose, Chief-editor  
Federica Dino, Graphic Designer  
Anna Mazzon, Editorial co-ordinator

#### **Copyright** © KoozArch

No part of this pdf may be used or reproduced in any form or manner whatsoever without prior written consent, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and