

spaces & voices



BINOWEEFSEL

HOE IK EEN BOS
BEGON IN MIJN
BADKAMER TOI HUISTUIN
OUR LIVING SOIL



Taal VOOR DE TOEKOMST

BEST BEFORE
WHAT ARE MEN TO ROCKS
AND MOUNTAINS

BEHOUD DE
BEGEEFTE

Klimaat & CCUS
PS

LAPPERSFORT POETS
SHOPGIRL
WEVELGEN SOCIETY
CLIMATE FESTIVAL



a seat for the sea



Poetic Mapping: Spaces and Voices in Activist Art Projects in Belgium and the Netherlands

Art Act Research

de Klimaatdichters and Poëziecentrum Ghent

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Introduction

Summary

This research aims to create a poetic map of spaces and voices in Flanders and the Netherlands that form the starting point of projects at the crossroads of ecology and poetry (possibly combined with other art forms). In this way it will elaborate on the central aims that we, de Klimaatdichters (Climate Poets) and Poëziecentrum Gent (Ghent Poetry Center), have formulated for our ArtAct project: to focus on climate poetry and practices from a more-than-human perspective, engaging in conversation with, and giving a voice to, spaces and landscapes, in order to inspire climate awareness and action in an innovative and creative manner.

The point of departure for this research will be formed by projects in the public space, or virtual space, that explore the interaction between animals, plants, time, climate, nature, and humans. By focusing on the spaces in which these projects develop, we aspire to venture beyond a human-centered way of looking, thinking and experiencing, in order to deepen our connection to other life forms.

In this research, the Klimaatdichters (Climate poets) will describe a number of projects by Dutch and Flemish poets that meet the criteria mentioned above, and combine these into a poetic (textual) road map, supported by an introduction and relevant quotations.

Introduction

This research was created in the context of the European ArtACT program, a collaboration between Sweden, Spain, Germany, Belgium and Slovenia. The different countries examine the connection(s) between art and activism within their national contexts, focusing on different multidisciplinary practices. For the Belgian project, the Ghent Poetry Centre has chosen to cooperate with the Klimaatdichters (Climate Poets). The Klimaatdichters are a group of more than 220 poets and word artists from the Netherlands and Flanders. We use our poetry to fight for a more climate-friendly world, by instigating new forms of thinking about the climate crisis we are currently living in. We believe in poetry as a force, a place where we can discuss, think, elaborate, and examine fixed ideas. By fueling our readers' imagination, we hope to forge new connections and ideas in their minds, which, in turn, can lead to activism, participating in current politics, and other actions that can help mitigate the ongoing destruction of our environment. As Klimaatdichters, we are hopeful without being naïve. We know we need a significant system change, and that art or poetry alone cannot change dominant systems like capitalism. However, we believe that poetry, and art in general, can play an important role in the climate debate, by consoling, reframing and providing new images and ideas. 'The usefulness of poetry has less to do with delivering messages (which we can just as easily get from prose), and far more to do with what poems can do to our language, re-enlivening and reactivating it, and thereby drawing us into a different form of attention and awareness' (Zapruder, 2017).

Moving beyond a human-centered approach

For a long time, humans have considered themselves to be the centre of the world, more intelligent and advanced than any other species. This vision has led to a perceived separation between humans and nature, which, in turn, has wreaked havoc on the planet. Fortunately, this idea has been subject to debate recently, and it is becoming more and more clear that humans can no longer be seen as the undisputed measure of things. As humans we are an integral part of nature, not apart from nature,

and we are not better than, or even too different from, other living species like animals, plants, trees and soil.

When we internalize that we are not separated but connected with all living things, we can come to terms with the new geographic history we entered with the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is the new geopolitical time we are living in right now: humans have changed the geo-elements of the Earth so drastically by extraction and pollution that the stability of 'nature' that we knew before is gone (Latour, 2019). Mutation characterizes the new geopolitical time we face. This world will change so drastically that an age of constant political, cultural, and geographic change is upon us. The balance between humans and nature has long been disrupted, and we must come to terms with the idea that 'nature' (a sphere we all are part of) is not a soulless, objective thing but instead a self-regulating ecosystem—like a superorganism (Filosofen van het Antropoceen, 2018).

In this research, we want to move beyond the human-centred worldview. We want to bring another way of looking at the world to the table, by focusing on 'the elemental kinship between the human body and the breathing Earth' (David, 2011, p. 3). This deep interconnection and interdependence we have with everything else, is what Thich Nhat Hanh calls 'interbeing'. We are not separate from nature, we 'inter-are' with nature (Nhat Hanh, 2017).

To validate this interdependence and connection, listening to and including non-human agents is crucial to creating a worldview without hierarchy because, within this view, there is no difference between 'nature' and 'human'. There is no discrepancy between them and us. There is only kinship, the interconnected relationship between all that there is. For this reason, our research will put an emphasis on projects that depart from spaces, and that try to give a voice to all the actors in that space, be they human, animal, plant or other. It is useful to focus on projects that center around a space because it combines the experiences of all different actors that reside in that space. Art can offer a public space for reciprocity and polyphony in a changing world, becoming the intermediary that can connect and synthesize the voices of all these actors. We aim to look for what Robin Wall-Kimmerer calls the 'grammar of animacy'. This means viewing nature not as a resource but more like a 'relative', thus recognizing kinship with plants, mountains, animals, the elements, and so forth (Wall-Kimmerer, 2017: 8).¹

Our research has been informed and inspired by lauded writers like Bruno Latour, David Abram, Jeroen Dera, Eva Meijer, Timothy Morton, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Silvia Federici, Donna Hathaway, James Bridle, Geert Buelens, and many, many others.

Poetry and politics

Poetry (and art in general) can be a sanctuary to question things. It can also serve as a political field of contemplation. Also critical is the importance of poetry in the public and political sphere (The Politics of Poetry, 2012). The relationship between poetry and politics has often been debated and also trivialized. The *l'art pour l'art* movement is convinced that there is no room for politics in poetry, and that the only purpose of art is intrinsic. A work of art is created autonomously and has, therefore, no moral, didactic, or utilitarian function (Gautier, 1834). In this view, art has set itself free, so to speak, from moral boundaries. Following this statement, poetry itself is only written for the sake of its beauty.

In this research, we want to align ourselves to a different viewpoint that has re-gained momentum over the past decades, departing from the idea that poetry and art are not written only for aesthetical purposes (see Buelens, 2012). Literature and art are not created in a vacuum but rather are permanently embedded in all the relationships surrounding them. We cannot separate politics, art, and the world around us. These concepts all have mimetic relations, and literature (and art) is a

¹ We would like to express our gratitude to conceptual artist Jacqueline Heerema who helped us develop and refine the ideas that are laid out in this introduction.

reflection on the 'real' world. As Latour (2017) states: 'The difficulty lies in the very expression "relation to the world," which presupposes two sorts of domains, that of nature and that of culture, domains that are at once distinct and impossible to separate completely'. In this sense, poetry, and art in general, are also inherently connected to politics (Van Heusden, 2007), especially poetry that has consciously been created to participate, in its own way, in the climate debate.

Poetic Mapping

In this research, we investigate spaces within Flemish and Dutch poetry, and spheres beyond literature, that engage with imagining more than just human voices. Therefore, we needed to find another way of grounding, a way to convey a different type of knowledge. We made the choice to perform an idea of embodied knowledge embedded in identifiable cultural and political places. And with 'identifiable', we mean searchable on a map. The forests, seas, bathrooms, internet spheres, and fields that are the central spaces where the various projects take place, are thus recognizable and provide a new way of gathering ecological connections.

To us it was crucial to find a poetic form in which we could show this inherent interconnectedness, which is why we chose Poetic Mapping as a research method. We used the physical spaces we already knew where the voices of different (non-human) actors were included, to lay out a map for ourselves. The spaces we found are not only in the Netherlands or Flanders but all around the world and the world wide web. From the places we were already familiar with, we traced paths to other sites that paid attention to non-human voices, which were then also included in the map. We used the information we gathered from the stakeholders we interviewed to expand the map in an organic way, with the text of our research serving as the legend of the map.

By combining a vector map made by a Ukrainian artist with a 16th-century astronomical celestial map, as a metaphor for the world wide web that holds the virtual space for many of the projects we collected, we aimed to create an inclusive poetic map of the projects we encountered during our research. We included a compass/wind rose depicting the four directions, combined with the four elements that make up our world, to show the interconnectedness of the spaces and voices found in our research. In the text, the projects are accompanied by the elements they focus on.

Not only did we examine Dutch and Flemish poetry and art projects that emphasize non-human voices, but we also compiled a small (unfortunately, we did not have limitless space within this article) database of other art projects. You can find the places through reading the QR-code on the map and in the 'Other projects and Organizations'-appendix.

At the end of the article we have included a tarot card that served as inspiration for the research with some words of explanation.

The poetic mapping method aims to transfer the knowledge we gathered during our research in a different, more creative and intuitive way. By using this specific method of writing and researching, we want to show that embodied knowledge is embedded within the material world: this knowledge is inherently connected to all there is.

Poetry and literature are places par excellence where different voices can be heard and come to fruition. By creating new connections and paths between a wider range of voices and imaginations, we can be inspired to look at the world in a different, more inclusive and connected way. This research therefore does not aim to arrive at a fixed conclusion or point of view about art and activism; rather, it is an ongoing search for voices and spaces where different perspectives are brought to life.

Projects



Background and mission

In the Spring of 2020, Belgian poet Moya De Feyter, also a Versepolispoet, sent out an email to her network asking her fellow poets if they, too, felt great concern about the state of the planet, and would be willing to raise their poetic voices together to create awareness. Her plea was widely heard and today, the Klimaatdichters is a lively collective of over 200 poets from the Netherlands and Flanders that wants to fight for a better climate using poetry in all its shapes and forms.

Because the movement was started during the Covid pandemic, it had to be created and developed almost exclusively online. The internet became the virtual space where all ideas, brainstorm sessions and programmes were thought out and shared. Fortunately, with the gradual decline of measures, the [Klimaatdichters](#) now have the opportunity to become more visible also in the outer world, creating their own programmes and projects as well as participating in large festivals and broader projects at the crossroads of art and ecology.

Their message is clear: 'we are lyrical about nature and furious about its destruction'. With a rich amalgam of voices, they are able to express this message through their poetry, confusing, educating and inspiring their readers in the process.

Selection of projects and initiatives

Since their foundation in 2020, the Klimaatdichters have created and participated in a host of initiatives and projects. A few of these projects will be highlighted here:

[Anthology](#)

In October 2020, the first Klimaatdichters anthology, *Swimming lessons for later*, was published by Vrijdag Publishers. 99 Klimaatdichters, both young and old, famous or just starting out, contributed to the book, which is now enjoying its third printing, selling over 2000 copies. All the revenues from the book go to One World Tree Planting.

[Festival programmes](#)

The Klimaatdichters were asked by the prestigious Poetry International Festival to curate part of the programme of the 2021 festival edition. They organized a roundtable conversation on how to express the climate issue in poetry, led by Poet Laureate of the Netherlands Tsead Bruinja, a poetic marathon and a project in the public space consisting of poetic geocaches that could be found and listened to during a walk around Rotterdam, where the festival was held. The Park Vertelt festival also asked the Klimaatdichters to curate part of their 2021 festival programme. Due to Covid, the festival was cancelled. However, four Klimaatdichters from four different countries worked together during an artist residency, and in August of 2022 the festival featured a Klimaatdichters stage and an opening performance.

[Endangered species programmes](#)

On 16 April 2021 the Klimaatdichters organized 'Songs for life' at Pakhuis de Zwijger in Amsterdam, the first in a series of multidisciplinary programmes about threatened species. 16 poets read their poem from the anthology, accompanied by Babette Wagenvoort's rich and evoking images and Wanderwelle's soundscapes. In November/December of 2022, the next programme, about the hare,

the rye lily and the rainworm, will be performed in theatres in Flanders and the Netherlands. Poëziecentrum in Gent will be hosting one of the evenings.

Website and agency

On their website, the Klimaatdichters keep track of all events and projects they participate in, creating a hub of information about activities in the realm of poetry and climate. The website also hosts the Poem of the Month, which is selected from the submissions poets send to the website every month. The Klimaatdichters also have their own 'agency', selecting and sending out Klimaatdichters to read their poetry at various festivals and organized events in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Protest meetings

The Klimaatdichters have been present during various Climate Marches in the Netherlands and Belgium, and have also teamed up with extinction rebellion, reading poems during several of their protest meetings.

ArtACT and future projects

Currently, the Klimaatdichters are working on the ArtACT project together with Poëziecentrum Gent. In the future they would like to start a yearly climate poets residency, create new threatened species programs about light pollution, sea life and the crow, a drone project called 'the changing landscape, earthsong, a poetry forest, and ecopoetics keynote speeches (a subsidy has been granted for a keynote speech by Forrest Gander).



Background

[KNOCKvologan](#) is a residency and study hub for art, literature, field research and nature preservation, situated on the Isle of Mull, one of the larger Hebridean islands on the west coast of Scotland. Run by Klimaatdichter Miek Zwamborn and artist Rutger Emmelkamp, KNOCKvologan conducts a steady stream of innovative, collaborative and experimental projects. All activities are inspired by, embedded in, or entangled with the landscape. Few places on Mull are so far away in all directions from a surfaced road. The sense of wilderness is enhanced by the exceptionally rocky coastline, the wooded ravines, the extensive bogs and the lack of obvious signs of humans.

'One of the first manifest rules we set for ourselves was to work with the elements, not fight them. To understand which initiatives would thrive we needed nature to guide us and we needed to listen to and interact with the landscape'.

Mission

We believe that a landscape, looked at through different eyes, worked with and mapped out in omnifarious and sensory ways, will grant new insights and outlooks, generate stories and offer possibilities for a more sustainable relationship between humans and their habitat. With our approach, we aim to contribute to a smarter and more sustainable culture, enhancing biodiversity and thus the health and prosperity of ourselves and the environment.

Being a creative hub we have the capacity to imagine alternative possibilities. By initiating art and literature-based projects we conduct a constant flow of experiments which inspire new ways of thinking, making and living. With an artistic mind-set, we can disrupt the conventions of organizations, bureaucracy, consumer behaviour and government. Through beauty, we show fresh and inspiring perspectives on the world around us.

Selection of projects

Residency programme

Artists and scientists immerse themselves into the landscape with the goal is to facilitate a wide range of projects which, one way or another, have in common that they are inspired by and investigate the relationship between humans and their natural environment.

By conducting and facilitating a broad scope of experiments and researches, KNOCKvologan aims to build a colourful and multifaceted vision of the land. By bringing together local knowledge and incoming expertise, we hope to contribute to both the natural and cultural richness of the area.

The incoming tide

Miek mapped the incoming tide at Erraid Sound. The route and movement of the ocean were recorded for 6 hours with GPS while following the tideline and transposed into a [drawing and poem](#).

WE ARE OCEAN – *Water Walk*

This walk gathers people from all over the globe to jointly walk towards rivers, lakes, seas, glaciers, or even at home (confined due to a global pandemic) around a creatively staged body of water. You can choose the location, hour and duration of your walk, it can be minutes, hours or days. It can be a walk of music, of silence, of workout, of meditation of poetry and more. You can find more information [here](#) and [here](#).

Edges - recordings

The Ross of Mull, out on the edge, was home to many Gaelic poets, storytellers and song-writers over the years. Today a collective, Ross of Mull Poets, brings together eight to ten people, with very different backgrounds and styles, who share and record their work in progress, based in the landscape that they live and work in and that has shaped them. Recordings can be found at <https://knockvologan.net/studies-projects/2020/10/14/recording-edges>.



Taal voor de Toekomst (Language for the future)

The speculative project 'Language for the future, in conversation with the North Sea' took place from March to October 2021, and was initiated by explorer and biologist Arita Baaijens, founder of [Living Landscapes](#), in cooperation with the North Sea Foundation (Stichting Noordzee). The project rewilds the Dutch language in order to do justice to the biodiverse and multi-voiced world we inhabit.

'Language for the future' advocates a rich and poetic-ecological vocabulary, and grammar rules that express the interdependence of species. An important element of the learning process is the learning language machine (algorithm) that was trained to speak on behalf of the sea. Experimental texts in which the voice of the sea resonates illustrate how the sea could tell us a thing or two if we care to listen. The poetic, wild language that emerges is a co-creation of the language machine, the North Sea, the public and writers. The project explores the contours of innovative language for the post-Anthropocene, and is inspired by the following question: What is the essence of a language and literature in a future world in which humans and more-than-humans understand each other and ecologically intelligent action is the norm?

Background

The language in which we express our concerns about the climate and in which we propose solutions for the future is a legacy of the nineteenth century, an exciting and optimistic era that was dominated by Western male scientists. But the belief in technology and progress is outdated, as is the idea of modern man as a rational being. Technology is as much part of our society as is our connection with nature. The latter also deserves a place in the stories we tell each other and the vocabulary we use.

The 'Language for the Future' project advocates a society in which humans and more-than-humans fully participate and have rights. This requires that we communicate with other sentient beings. This is not as strange and far-fetched as it may seem. If we can empathise with a fictional character in a novel, we can also empathise with a landscape, a porpoise or the North Sea.



Lappersfort Poets Society

In the early 2000s, the Lapperfort forest (Brugge region) became a symbol for threatened zone-alien forests in Belgium. Citizens occupied the forest by chaining themselves to trees and were tasered and removed violently by the police. A group of poets that called themselves the [Lappersfort Poets Society](#), participated in the struggle both physically and by means of their poems. They formed a diverse network for sustainability and participation that wanted to connect people and movements, with the hope of also creating a constructive political dialogue. Eventually, the decision was made to erase 3,5 ha of trees but to maintain a part of the forest as a 'poetry forest', which currently includes the Hugo Claus [poetry path](#), initiated by Luc Vanneste. The city of Bruges appointed a 'Free City Poet' who would write poems to comment on actual events but who would also focus on nature. These poems were included in the seasonal walks that were organized in the forest, an example of how nature education and poetry can be combined. Lies Van Gasse was one of the Free City Poets. Examples of the poetry she wrote for this project can be found on her [website](#).



A Seat for the Sea, artistic research into deep sea mining

GSR (the deepwater division of Belgian dredging group DEME) has a cooperation contract to conduct Deep Sea Mining activities within the Cook Islands' exclusive economic zone. The metal nodules that are mined take millions of years to form, but industry is in a great hurry to retrieve them from the deep sea, to refine metals from these nodules. This is worrying. Not only the nodules but also the life attached to them will be removed.

[A Seat for the Sea](#) is a project organized by Repulse (Greet Brauwers and Raf Custers) to start up a creative exchange with Cook islands inhabitants and to give a voice to the sea and the people who live around it. They have asked the Klimaatdichters to contribute poems that can be used as a means of communicating creatively with the islanders.



What are Men to Rocks and Mountains

Exhibition by Platform Post about the underexposed stories of extrativism (the extraction of minerals). By subverting the dominant narratives around this topic, such as economic growth and innovation, with spiritual, magical and speculative perspectives, the exhibition is a critical reflection on the current situation of mineral extraction, by means of alienation. The [exhibition](#) aims to create new rituals and give a voice to the minerals themselves, that are regarded as independent entities.



Literaál

In 2003, the [Behoud de Begeerte](#) ('Keep the Desire') foundation realized the [Literaal-project](#) consisting of 103 poems that were installed along the Belgian coastline. These poems tell 'The Truth

about the Sea' and have been chiselled, painted, carved, laserbeamed or written. Some of the poems are still visible. A prominent part of the project was the poem 'Oda Maritima' by Fernando Pessoa which was long enough to be carved into the pavement along the entire coastline.



Our Living Soil exhibition

[Our Living Soil](#) is a research project into cultural meanings, representations and values of the soil in a time of planetary change. Artists who are doing research on the soil in all kinds of ways took part in the Zone2Source exhibition at Amstelpark in Amsterdam, reflecting on the meaning of art as fieldwork. How can we, through art, strengthen the connection with the location and the process of research? Among the participating artists were Klimaatdichter Miek Zwamborn and Klimaatdichters Board member Jacqueline Heerema.



Shop Girl - Dominique De Groen

Flemish poet Dominique De Groen wrote her book *Shop Girl* (2017) about the basement of Primark, a place where Vergilius and the late capitalist society are coming together. In the cellar, a body becomes one with the textile giant's supply chain, known for exploiting its employees. The language in the book becomes fluid as the reader moves through the seemingly unstoppable system of the chain. Within this space, the body becomes only an object of capital; there is no inherent meaning to the living body other than to work and to become one with the product that is made. The one speaking is the chain; there is no longer a difference between the body and the capital. They have become one. Therefore the 'it' is now non-human. Without a human supervisor, it lives only by the system's rules and functions independently, without interference. Creating clothes, leaving millions of microplastics in the environment.

We all have been in the [Checkout Zone](#), the title of one of the poems in the book, more than once. We stood in line waiting to pay for our goods. In that way, almost every human is contributing to the system of destruction, contributing to destroying the planet. Thinking about how our bodies are almost only meaningful in the relationship to work, we can learn about our exhaustion, about connection to the rest of the world, to trees, water and soil. The system we live in becomes almost like an unstoppable beast, non-human, like something out of our control. Reading *Shop Girl* teaches us to listen to the language of the supply chain and to learn to take back control over our bodies partially, as far as that is still possible. You can read the poem Checkout Zone [here](#).



How I Started a Forest in my Bathroom/Hoe ik een Bos Begon in mijn Badkamer - Maartje Smits

The book *How I started a forest in my bathroom (Hoe ik een bos begon in mijn badkamer)* by Maartje Smits (2017) investigates the apparent dissimilarity between humans and 'nature'. Within the work, these differentiated relationships are held up to the light. Is there a difference between humans and 'nature'? Are we not part of nature? Aren't humans nature? And what is the definition of nature, then? Are the ferns in the window frame nature? The ecoducts, connecting two parts of forests together? In different photos of ecoducts it is shown how oddly random the fences are placed. The borders show how the government chooses where humans can come and up until where animals are allowed. The borders are thus also a metaphor for the discrepancy in how the government looks at the ecological classification. There is, according to them, defiantly a difference between nature and

humans. Nature is the part where the animals live, and the rest is the civilization. It makes sense that people call tribes 'primitive', as in, still close to nature, naïve, not civilized.

In the book *How I started a forest in my bathroom* (2017), the human voice slowly becomes less human because the protagonist gradually surrenders himself to the woods in the bathroom. The 'human world', the bathroom, becomes intertwined with 'nature' and abolishes the discrepancy between nature and humans: 'the elemental kinship between the human body and the breathing Earth' (David, 2013, p. 3) becomes the centre of the work. The human becomes nature, and a non-human voice takes over.

The [title poem](#) of the book is an example of this. The human becomes the fern: how could I / ever have dared / to distinguish myself from plants / where did the mix begin, and I / watched my barely ferns grow lonely / on the windowsill (translation Vivian Glass).



Opabinia - Fredrik Lucien De Laere

In the work *Opabinia* by Fredrik Lucien De Laere, we follow a reader who gives a voice to extinct animals. The animals are sung to by a prayer-like voice that dedicates its attention to the way these species used to live. In the different poems, a whole scala of species comes forward, each one having another way of living and relating to the world. Within the other pieces, different animals get a voice; the one who sings to them is like a God looking at the world they created. By showing how these species used to be, we get an idea of what we lost during the process of capitalism. Hundreds of thousands of species become extinct in the system some think is best for us and the world around us. Some believe that capitalism brings autonomy to the people, but it also takes away the independence of the species some think less of. Non-human earthlings are demoted in the endless growing economies. This work of poetry gives these earthlings a voice.



Animal Languages: The Secret Conversations of the Living World - Eva Meijer

In *Animal Languages: The secret conversations of the living world (Dierentalen)*, Eva Meijer literally gives animals a voice by showing how different species communicate with other animals around them and us. In the book, the various ways of speaking and showing communication skills are shown and explained. This work indicates that we, as humans, are sometimes not very interested in the other earthlings who live with us on this planet. Therefore, there are many things animals do we do not want to know or understand. Some of us see animals as less than humans because animals cannot 'think'; they only use 'instinct'. But Meijer shows that these ideas are outdated. She writes: 'Thinking has long been perceived as an activity *for* human beings and *about* human beings. But this is changing; animals are increasingly being considered, particularly in ethics and more recently in political philosophy. Language, however, is still largely unexplored territory: the philosophy of language has devoted hardly any attention to animals. This is unfortunate as 'language gives us insight into animals, and non-human animals can give us insight into language.' By learning about the language of animals, we can learn more about the world around us. And most of all: we can finally understand the stories all species want to tell us, and we assume they want to tell us a lot. About the destruction of our planet, about the grief they might feel for losing many known earthlings and habitats.



Bindweefsel/Connective Tissue - Saskia Stehouwer

In 2019, klimaatdichter Saskia Stehouwer published her [compostable poetry book](#) *Bindweefsel* (*Connective Tissue*). She made the paper for the book from food scraps and plants and wrote each of the 35 copies by hand, assisted by her father and a friend. The idea behind *Connective Tissue* was to try and create a book in a sustainable way without burdening the earth. The book also plays with the notion of temporality; the author encouraged all readers to put their copy on the compost heap after reading so that it could once again be part of nature.

Interviews

Interview with Geert Buelens

Geert Buelens (1971) is a Flemish poet, essayist, columnist and Professor of Modern Dutch Literature at Utrecht University. His work focuses on the interaction between literature and society, in particular on how writers and other artists deal with moments of crisis. His newest book, *Wat we toen al wisten* (*What we already knew then*, 2022) is about the 1972 Club of Rome report and the environmental crisis.

Educated within an academic system that strongly propagated 'autonomous art', Geert Buelens has instead focused his research on moments in history when art and society were strongly intertwined, such as WWI, when poetry was openly used as a propaganda medium. In the course of the 20th century, the role of poetry was marginalized because it withdrew itself from society. Currently, he sees a reversal of this tendency and believes that poetry is once again moving into the heart of society.

Geert is a strong advocate for literature's (and art's) potential to voice a message in times of crisis. When asked in what way poetry can contribute to the environmental crisis we face today, he refers to the Dakota pipeline protests, in which poetry played an important role. As part of the protests a poem was written by all protesting parties, involving the native communities whose ancestral lands the pipe was supposed to enter. The poem's length spanned the entire area designed for the pipeline. According to Geert, the poet can give words to people's feelings, and this is a pivotal way for poetry to contribute to spreading a message in times of crisis. Especially when poems are made into **songs** they can have a lasting effect, because the audience can actually participate actively and spread the message by singing the songs. As an example that has inspired him, Geert mentions the Iranian girls singing their version of the 19th century Italian protest song *Bella Ciao* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFPdyN3BUDY>).

Clearly, Geert is familiar with the concept of art activism. Cultural democracy is not a term he has heard before but he is well aware of political incentives to democratize culture. He also mentions modern technology, which acts as a democratizing force by enabling more people to become makers and participaters instead of passive recipients of art. He sees a role for today's poets as a sort of motivational speakers, who help people in voicing their activism and staying inspired. The growing focus on performance poetry for example, could attract a more diverse audience and help de-marginalizing poetry.

The project he is most familiar with is the Lappersfortbos society (see Projects). Other initiatives that he mentions are the street poetry website by Kila van der Starre and the Behoud de Begeerte project (see Projects). As a poet, he is currently involved in A seat for the sea (see Projects).

Interview with Mahlu Mertens

Mahlu Mertens (1987) is a theatre-maker, poet and literary scholar. Together with Hanne Vandersteene she forms the core of the company Grensgeval (Border Case). Her research focuses on climate change literature that breaks with the dominant paradigm (dystopian, post-apocalyptic novels).

'If you expect art to bring about social change in a direct way, you will be disappointed'. Mahlu believes that this idea carries the risk of reducing art to a political tool or to propaganda. Art that tells you what to do, that is taking the moral high ground, is annoying and ineffective. According to Mahlu, art's greatest potential is not to be found in reciting the facts or trying to hammer down a message in an overtly literal way. We already know the facts, and rather than empowering us, this knowledge often leads to a state of helplessness. Art is uniquely equipped to address our emotions, or affect. It can help us to explore, and come to terms with, our complicated feelings of despair, numbness and hope, and in that way it might bring about change, albeit indirectly. Art can be our companion, a place to discover how we can live and feel in the anthropocene.

In the words of Adeline Johns-Putra: "Could cli-fi affect how we think and act on climate change? The paradox is that the harder cli-fi tries, the less effective it is. Many writers want to inspire change, not insist on it: the line between literature and propaganda is one that most novelists respect. Literature invites us to inhabit other worlds and live other lives. Cli-fi at its best lets us travel to climate-changed worlds, to strive there alongside others and then to return armed with that experience" (*The Conversation*, 26-11-2015).

Mahlu is familiar with the concept of art activism. Like Geert, she hasn't heard the term 'cultural democracy' before, but she knows what it means. Sometimes it is used as window dressing, as a fancy name for social-artistic work, but when it's done in the right way, inviting more participation and diversity, making art accessible to a wider and more varied group of people, it can be of great value.

Mahlu mentions some theatre projects around art and ecology which are mentioned in the Other projects and Organizations-section. The project she has been most impressed by is the third part of a theater trilogy by Ontroerend Goed, a theatre performance company. This third piece is a monologue called *World without us*, a contemplative poetic text about a world without humans, which asks a lot of its audience. The storyteller reports what happens in an apparently factual manner, which shows the hubris and the grandiosity of the human race. The world will keep on turning when we are gone, so who are we trying to save but ourselves? Because emotions seem to be absent in his story, the affect is transported onto the audience, which leaves a lasting impression.

In her own poetry Mahlu tries to investigate her own responsibility, her feelings of guilt and how to deal with them, but also places of power and hope and the feeling of connection that make it possible to move from the individual to the collective. For her, poems are often too literal. A good poem plays with rhythm and language, which elevates it from being a mere political message or an obscure expression.

As a literature and theatre researcher, Mahlu wants to do research that is societally relevant. She believes that we can learn a lot from the way societal trends are represented in literature. For example, certain inventions have been made after reading scifi, because it can help to expand people's idea of what is possible.

As with her poetry, Mahlu is interested in ways of communicating differently, departing from the power of the collective rather than our individual powerlessness. One of the unique qualities of theater is that it is a collective shared experience, which can be very powerful.

She quotes Jill Dolan, from her book *Utopian performative*, who sees theatre as a place to "embody, and, even if through fantasy, enact the affective possibilities of 'doings' that gesture toward a much better world".

Such moments of utopia in performance can, Dolan claims, "lead to both affective and effective feelings and expressions of hope and love not just for a partner, ... but for other people, for a more abstracted notion of 'community,' or for an even more intangible idea of 'humankind'".

This is closely related to Rebecca Solnit's idea of hope, which according to her is "an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. It is the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand." (*The Guardian*, 15-7-2016). It is this unknown space that art can make visible, if even for a moment, widening our imagination and deepening our awareness.

Interview with Maartje Smits

Maartje Smits is a poet, working with image and language. Her books are published with Uitgeverij De Harmonie. She teaches transmedia storytelling and design at various artschools and in her spare time she's a beekeeper in Amsterdam.

What do you think about the potential of art to bring about social change?

I find it difficult to say how much effect art has; you can never say that in advance. But I think right now, every act of making art is political and an act of resistance because we live in a world so focused on financial gain and liberalism.

If I make something fluent, an abstract concept about nature and the false distinction between man and nature, and I know how to make that tangible in a poem, then poetry is a very effective tool. A poem can make you feel something and can touch you. Sometimes a poem is more potent than an argument or a banner.

Do you know of specific projects at the intersection of poetry and ecology that explicitly aim to bring about social change? If so, which projects have impressed you the most regarding the artistic value and social impact, and why?

Art that changed my perspective: The performance art of Timo Segal changed me because he brought me into contact with Bruno Latour. Bruno Latour says that there is no difference between man and nature. Adrienne Rich has also taught me a lot because she writes about feminism, which is also about equality.

Projects that touch me the most often are projects that highlight or show something that was previously invisible. For example, a student who graduated last year who has hung up her entire medical file in the room. She is intersex, and the records show how sexist the medical world is. The work is not a call for change but exposes something and questions it.

The artist Tinkerbell also did a houseplant tour because companies that engage in tax evasion have offices in Amsterdam South with a houseplant. After all, otherwise, the offices are not officially in use. And she organized tours there.

I am interested in the language used to discuss specific topics, such as motherhood, porn, nature and recreation. The language we use says a lot about the general point of view.

With my projects, I try to recapture the language. I want to touch on the language and then use it to show that I don't have to resign myself from this position. For me, making poetry and art is about being able to say: Normally, I do it this way, and now we're going to do it differently.

Have you ever personally engaged in artistic practices to effect social change? What was your motivation? What work have you done? How would you describe the results of this activity? How could it have been different/better?

I think poetry par excellence is questioning things and leaving you in a state of confusion. I also do this in my work, for example, by sharing my confusion.

I have written about the ecoducts. Because I found it interesting that I was not allowed to cross the bridge, while the bridges are for nature. But why can't I cross it? The government is saying that people are not part of nature. So I can endlessly write poems about nature; when am I nature?

Interview with Dominique De Groen

Dominique De Groen (1991) is a Belgian writer and visual artist. She has published four volumes of poetry, as well as poems, fiction, and essays in a variety of magazines.

What do you think about the potential of art to bring about social change?

This is something I think about often because my poetry is entirely political. I believe in the political potential of art. I think that art has the potential to take people out of the self-evidential. Art can make you feel different about 'normal' things. But also, I am afraid that I do not get a hold of people that think differently from me. Are the people who read poetry not already the people who agree with me? Still, I believe that changes can trickle down slowly.

When someone writes a poem, and teachers read it and use it in their lessons, the lyrics reach different audiences.

I try not to overestimate the role of art, but I also want to be hopeful about it. I believe that the part of imagination is essential in imagining other worlds. You can't change something until you can imagine it.

Within the status quo, art can put things in a different perspective.

I think that education, in particular, is critical to change political matters. Since this year, I often go to schools to give political workshops. Young people in schools are not yet fully formed and can, therefore, more easily start to think differently. In a class, it is also less segregated, so you reach many different people. In a poetry reading, it is a cultural elite, after all.

I tell the students that not all poetry is about love or romance and that poetry can also be a place of resistance. Then I dare them to write about politics and ecological themes themselves so that I can teach them how to be an activist within the artistic sphere.

Art is permanently embedded in the political and global sphere. When you say that your poetry is 'autonomous', you almost seem to agree with the political status quo.

Do you know of specific projects at the intersection of poetry and ecology that explicitly aim to bring about social change? If so, which projects have impressed you the most regarding the artistic value and social impact, and why?

Yes, there is a project that has started in the UK that I find very valuable. A day has been established to honour species that have become extinct at the hands of humans (Remembrance Day for Lost Species, 30 November, see Appendix 1, eds.). Art projects and rituals are performed on that day to honour the animals. Those projects are all stored on the website, creating a kind of archive of what we have lost.

Have you ever personally engaged in artistic practices to effect social change? What was your motivation? What work have you done? How would you describe the results of this activity? How could it have been different/better?

The bundle I wrote, *Shop Girl* (2017), manifests a non-human voice. When I was writing *Shop Girl*, I read Timothy Morton's books. I was fascinated by the term 'hyper object', by which he means an object that is too big to comprehend with our human brain, just because it has too many facets. The

supply chain is a hyper object, but it is so abstract, so globally, some aspects are hidden, and some are not. Like cotton cultivation, the exploitation of the human body.

So, I had to move away from the individual experience because the problem is more at the level of the global systems. A lot of responsibility is placed on the individual consumer. Still, we must be aware that extensive systems have to change, and we won't get there if we only focus on individual behaviour.

But how do you do that, 'soak off'? Good question. You can never fully empathize with another entity, but you can strive for it, like a mathematical limit you can never reach but work towards.

I also think it's essential to take your topic thoughtfully. Do research into the entity you want to live in. In *Shop Girl* (2017), I wrote about bacteria and started to empathize with them, so I got more empathy for the creature.

Interview with Miek Zwamborn

Miek Zwamborn (1974) is an author, translator and artist. She imbues her diverse source material with a rigorous sense of subjective and the speculative, tracing the lives of her subjects but also her own experiences as a researcher and writer. She lives and works at Mull Island, Scotland, where she coordinates an artist residency.

Miek's belief in art as an activist practice is growing. 'It might be one of the few ways we have to contribute something, to create something that is more than just beautiful.' When she still lived in Amsterdam she never thought about these things, but living at Mull island she have become more and more aware of the fragility of the living world. In her art, Miek always departs from a place. It is important to express the meaning of such a place, because places can be very powerful. By giving room for the different voices of a place, also the non-human ones, the artist tries to ignite something in the reader or public.

Miek wants to leave a legacy to the people who will come after us while also doing justice to the people who came before. She believes activism does not need to be loud, but can rather consist of consciously and carefully feeling for what is right. She is not familiar with the terms art activism and cultural democracy but understands what they mean.

An example of her own work in this regard is a poem consisting of 24 frames describing small nature scenes of one place that she has looked at for 24 hours through her binoculars. A very small slice of time in which she has closely observed nature so that she can share it with other people to inspire them to connect more deeply. She believes you need to deepen your knowledge of, and connection with, your subject (for example an oak tree) before you are in a position to write about it.

Activism might also be trying to reach a different audience and to engage that audience in a more active way. Miek was part of a closing meeting for COP-26² organized by an older local poet who had been part of the demonstrations. It became a collective experience with poetry, music and food, to celebrate the positive things that were happening but also to mourn the environmental damage. Still, it is hard to reach people from different realms of life like the island's farmers and fishermen. It is important to not give up and have patience.

Miek mentions *Zeemaal (Sea meal)* as a project that has inspired her, as well as *On Sonorous Seas*, a multi-disciplinary project that listens to the sea (see Other Projects and Organizations). For her own work with regard to art and ecology, see Knockvologan under Projects.

² The 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland.

Stakeholder meeting

Participants and their stakeholder expertise

- Geert Buelens, Professor of Modern Dutch Literature at Utrecht University
- Frank Keizer, essay writer and editor of literary magazine nY
- Dominique De Groen, teacher of poetry at schools
- Miek Zwamborn, coordinator of Knockvologan art residency
- Jacqueline Heerema, conceptual artist, mitigator and curator
- Pim Cornelussen, coordinator of literary production house VONK&Zonen
- Sieglinde Vanhaezebrouck, literary program maker at Poëziecentrum Gent
- Saskia Stehouwer and Will Kranendonk, Klimaatdichters

Insights

The stakeholder meeting focused on the question whether poetry can be a form of activism, and if so, which shapes and forms it can take as an activist practice. The conversation made it clear that some of the participants do not see poets as activists because they believe that being an activist is to be 'show up physically' (Frank Keizer) and to 'use your body' as a weapon in the struggle (Dominique De Groen). Frank sees his poetry books as 'ecosystems that bring form a web of the forms and shapes literature and art can take on'. Geert Buelens holds that you can also 'be present as an artist', using the example of socialist poems. For him, the poet can fulfill an activist role as a type of 'motivational speaker'. Miek Zwamborn adds that for her, being an activist is also about 'not doing things', for example by living in a self-sufficient way. She believes that art can have an important function in bringing people together from different walks of life, so that they can share a collective experience. Jacqueline Heerema always tries to 'inspire change' by bringing together different perspectives, in order to tell multiple stories and not just the one that is told by the media. Pim Cornelussen agrees that the 'activating aspect' is the most important one. For him, it is not only about 'sending out' a message to your audience, but about involving them in the experience. Art's contribution, according to Geert, can be complementary to more physical forms of activism, in that art can 'keep alive a specific urgency while creating new worlds'. Dominique concurs that, while she does not see herself as an activist, literature can be a catalyst of change by 'imagining new forms of co-existence'. Poetry, and art, can connect, or reconnect people to their environment, says Miek, and inspire them into new forms of care and attention for the world around them. The participants agree that art should also try to involve a broader audience and not just the 'usual suspects', although this is not always easy to do. Education can play a role in this, as well as finding different multidisciplinary forms that engage the audience. Pim believes that the responsibility to create an impact should not be placed on to the writers but rather on the literary system around them.

Finally, Frank asks whether, and how, cultural democracy could be a means to expand the way in which a collective like the klimaatdichters approaches the process of art making and tries to be more inclusive and to reach a more diverse audience. The Klimaatdichters answer that they are a non-hierarchical organization that consciously reflects on the choices they make, the language they use and the precarious balance between art and activism. However, this is a process that is never ending and there is always room for more nuance and inclusivity.

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Appendix 1: Other Projects and Organizations

Apart from the spaces mentioned above, there are a number of other organizations that are creating opportunities for projects that connect literature/art and ecology, as well as artists from other disciplines that are creating similar projects. This is a non-exhaustive list of what we have found so far, mainly in Belgium and the Netherlands, but also in the UK:

[Tolhuistuin](#) in Amsterdam hosts a project to change the North of Amsterdam into an ecozone with the help of art, as well as the [Warming up festival](#).

[Arnhem museum](#) (exhibition 'Best before', about the question whether art can change how people connect with the earth).

[Wevelgem Climate Festival](#) that hosts, among others, lectures and poetry walks by Klimaatdichters.

[Horror Garden](#), Gosie Vervloessem's investigative workshop about the relationship between humans and plants.

[RIZOOM](#), a nomadic artwork in search of a more embodied vision of ourselves in the world (

[The Embassy of the North Sea](#) was founded on the principle that the North Sea owns itself. Here, the voices of plants, animals, microbes, and people in and around the North Sea are listened to and involved.

[Stichting Nieuwe Helden](#) (Company New Heroes) uses multidisciplinary storytelling to spark the imagination and to inspire and drive practical ethical conversations. Their Nature Building Project offers an interactive and experiential way to get people of all ages and backgrounds to building a greener world for everyone.

[Collectief Walden](#) (Walden Collective) creates interdisciplinary projects, installations, performances and spaces dealing with the urgency of the ecological crisis, where science, visual arts and documentaries are interspersed with poetry, mime and other art forms. An example is the RADIX audiowalk 'Stoepplantjes' ('Pavement plants') that explores the way we deal with so-called 'invasive species', taking the infamous Japanese knotweed as an example.

[Dichter bij de polder](#) (Dutch pun on the double meaning of Dichter: Closer to the polder/Poet in the polder) is a poetic bicycle route through the Alblasserwaard. 11 poets have chosen a specific spot to write a poem about. The project was initiated by Lions Alblasserwaard to have visitors look at the landscape through the eyes of the poets.

[Remembrance Day for Lost Species](#), November 30th, is a chance each year to explore the stories of species, cultures, lifeways and habitats driven extinct by unjust power structures and exploitation, past and ongoing.

[Climavore: On Tidal Zones](#) explores the environmental impact of intensive salmon aquaculture and reacts to the changing shores of Portree, Isle of Skye. Each day at high tide, the installation works as an underwater multispecies oyster table.

[On Sonorous Seas](#) gives voice to what is not apparent beneath the beauty of the Hebridean waters. Through art, music and poetry, On Sonorous Seas encourages a deeper listening to, and understanding of the sounds we may find there, and their meaning for the ecology of our seas.

[Vibeke Mascini](#), Doodsreutel, a performative art work to reanimate a single word—*doodsreutel* (death rattle) and to return it to the Van Dale (main Dutch dictionary).

[Alik van der Kruijs](#), Made by Rain, a textile register of rain fall at a specific location. It is an ongoing investigation into the effect of weather phenomena on daily life and is a self-initiated project.

Artists from other disciplines

Of course, artists from other disciplines are also engaged in topics around art and ecology. A few well-known examples, in Belgium and the Netherlands, are textile artist [Claudy Jongstra](#), visual artist [Herman de Vries](#), who uses nature as art to say something about the disturbed relation between man and nature, conceptual artist Tinkebell, for example her [houseplant project](#), and visual artist Babette Wagenvoort (for example, the Not in my backyard [wall drawing](#) about extinct species), among others. We received a lot of examples from the theatre world, which we have collected under the heading below.

Theatre performances in Belgium and the Netherlands

[Maria Lucia Cruz Corea](#), artist in residence at art centre Vierenuvier in Ghent, combines art and science in her work, for example in her workshops about [climate grief](#), collective human trauma caused by the loss of ecosystems, in which language plays a pivotal role.

[Rebekka de Wit and Anoek Nuyens](#), *Tenzij je een beter plan hebt* (2017): a theatre text about the growing call to reform the relationship between humans, animals, nature and things.

[Luanda Casella](#), *Ferox Tempus*, that shows the terror of climate destruction.

[Kyoko Scholiers](#), *Zone X*, a fictive guided tour in the year 2124, in an area that has been isolated from the world after disaster struck in 2034.

[Ontroerend Goed](#), *World without us*. See the interview with Mahlu Mertens for a description.

[Laika / Sien Vanmaele](#), *Zeemaal*. A sensory, connecting dining experience departing from the sea, *Zeemaal* ('sea meal') is the first part of a trilogy about Sien's extensive research into sustainable culinary answers to climate change.

[Dying Together/Earth](#), inclusive theatre performances by Lotte van den Berg about the dying out of species.



Ace of Air

Air is the element that makes us conscious of the creation of everything and the infinite connection between all that is. A light breeze, the rustling of leaves, a melody sung by a bird, the howl of a storm and all sounds in between.. together they are music.