

OUR
GIRLS
IN

#2

GR
O U IV
N S

#2

CONTENTS

Editorial

5

Shayma Mader

*No One Can
Obscure the Sun*

9

Myrthe Bokelmann
Célia Tort Pujol

*Assume Calibration Pose:
This Breath Isn't Mine*

19

Ruth Razan Loos

*Towards
Celestial Letters*

39

Loraine Furter

*Staying with
the Itch*

53

Sammy Saloji

*'Le Fil de Sucre-pourpre
de Mulohò' Explained*

73

askia Van der Bucht

*Where And Who
And What We Grew*

87

EDITORIAL

In *The Long Form* (2023), translator and writer Kate Briggs suggests that novel-writing is a matter of *grounding* and *foregrounding*, and as such comments on living conditions of a certain place and time. ‘All novels describe housing, living conditions, forms of human shelter’, the narrator observes in the opening chapters of the book (Briggs 2023, 56). Reading through Henry Fielding’s *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, Helen, the main character of the book and a recent mother, tries to imagine the (unevenly distributed) spaces described in the text:

Space, time: *extension* in all directions—though to the right the fabric bunched. Here was a smaller, shallower valley, ‘adorned with several villages’. Clusters of smaller, poorer houses, gathered around the towers of an old, ruined abbey. Look to the left, though, and here once again was spread. It was more land belonging to the house; a spread checked and marked by variety: ‘a very fine park, composed of very unequal ground, and, varied with all the diversity that hills, lawns, woods, and water... could give’. (Fielding in Briggs 2023, 57)

From that general setting, seen by the narrator as an ‘open-ended’ space full of ‘potentiality’, the character of Mr Allworthy, symbolizing virtue and kindness, emerges: ‘Now, a narrowing, a foregrounding: here was a figure in motion.’

The novel is thus conceived as a spatial arrangement, a space that grounds and holds entities, places and ideas, but that equally needs to be held by a human body in order to be read, unfolded, activated. This precondition of simultaneously holding and being held is what, according to Briggs, connects the novel to other ‘durational (which means interruptive) forms of being-in-relation’, such as Helen’s recent motherhood. In that sense, it touches upon matters of care and love (Briggs 2023, 328). ‘How much time does love take?’, literary critic E.M. Foster asked in his lecture course on the novel (Foster in Briggs 2023, 106). Drawing on cultural theorist Lauren Berlant’s essay ‘A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages’ (2011), love is defined in Briggs’s novel as a ‘rhythmed involvement’ or, quoting directly from Berlant, ‘an intention to stay in sync’ (Berlant 2011, 683). Love, they claim, as a ‘mess-making force’, thrives on incoherence and ambivalence, and takes us beyond the safety of our closed selves. As an ‘infra-structure for proximity’, it is a form of world-making, a matrix to connect to the world and simultaneously be enveloped by it (Berlant 2011, 684–85).

While Briggs frames the novel as a space of holding and being held, John Berger frames the image as an ethical act of keeping-close. In both, love, care and attention become spatial practices:

ways of structuring proximity in a fragmented world. The novel, the image and the body thus become parallel infrastructures of relation, that is, fragile architectures in which world and subject co-emerge. Through Briggs's notion of holding, Berlant's understanding of love as a relational tension between synchronization and disorientation, and Berger's conception of the image as a space of proximity, a paradox comes into view between shaping and receptivity, between carrying and being enveloped, a tension that becomes concrete in the following contributions, where researchers simultaneously position, construct and release, and where meaning emerges in what cannot be fully controlled, planned or fixed.

What is required to stay in sync with each other and with the world? And what happens when we fail to do so? When technological devices crash, when communication breaks down, when simply parting ways or when faced with violence, extraction, erasure even? In many different ways, the authors of this second issue of *Grounds* investigate the complex rhythms of human and more-than-human relationships and the infrastructures that facilitate (or disrupt) them. How to lay the ground for new configurations, allowing the foregrounding of other ways of living and being together within that space? How to think, feel and resonate with our gut, our itch, our embodied memory, our imagination, our jugular veins?

Contributions

In *No One Can Obscure the Sun*, PhD researcher Shayma Nader explores representations of Saydoun, a small Palestinian village destroyed by Zionist forces during the Nakba in 1948, as 'a walkable digital environment, a form of storytelling', at the intersection of three levels: the aerial, the remembered and the imaginary, as 'mutually entangled operations'. Saydoun is reconstructed through archival research and digital technology, a 'living contradiction to the colonial claim that it has never been'.

In their joint contribution, researchers Myrthe Bokelmann and Cèlia Tort Pujol reflect on their live performance, 'Assume Calibration Pose: This Breath Isn't Mine', during which the haptic devices—meant to mediate in the creation of dance and music—failed. What happens when technology breaks down and the embodied memory takes over? How to engage in 'gut navigation' (Kozel and Eeuwens, 2008), drawing from the memory of a working technological set-up?

Towards Celestial Letters forms an introduction to Ruth Razan Loos' research project 'Closer Than Your Jugular Vein'. The question of 'Where is *The Book*?' is approached and embodied in a spatial and spiritual sense. Through multiple iterations of

the book—such as in-depth reading, reciting texts, tracing the Qur’anic letters and designing a ‘mindful book jacket’—Loos explores how the ‘Text-as-Event’ can be both accessed and held, as part of a journey to realign the inward and outward.

With a nod to Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*, PhD researcher Loraine Furter’s graphic contribution, *Staying with the Itch*, discusses the many ways in which an editorial process can go wrong. In a plea to follow and trust our gut feelings, Furter examines how to identify and address problematic work conditions and gives tools to set up a good working structure, answer complaints or heal from a hurtful situation.

PhD researcher Sammy Baloji’s contribution centres on a self-written *Kasàlà*, ‘an oral form of praise poetry honouring individuals, ancestors or communities and functioning as a collective memory device’. As a fragmented narrative that centres on the image of sugar, ‘Le Fil de Sucre-pourpre de Mulohò’ explores the past and present interconnectedness of extractivism, slavery and artistry.

In *Where And With Who And What We Grew*, Saskia Van der Gucht reflects on a film she co-created with Matthias Kreuzburg as part of a collaborative cinema lab during a residency in Portugal in August 2024. It is a documentation of the making of ‘the seeds of simili’, but equally a contemplation on forms of co-living, site-specificity and moving on.

Kim Gorus, editor-in-chief

REFERENCES

- Berger, John. 2007. *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*. Pantheon.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. ‘A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages’. *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4: 683–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2011.01120.x>.
- Briggs, Kate. 2023. *The Long Form*. Fitzcarraldo Editions.

No One Can Obscure the Sun

Shayma Mader

On 24 April 2021, a group of friends, artists and researchers set out on a walk. We set off from Wadi al-Laymoon in Deir Ghassaneh with the intention of reaching Maqam al-Majdoob in Beit Rima. Along the way, besides some lesser-known springs, we had planned to explore two seasonal springs: Ein al-Hajar (The Spring of the Rock) and Ein al-Saboneh (The Spring of the Soap), the latter being rumoured to be haunted by a *marid* or rebellious demon. But our walk was cut short. With our feet still dipped in the cool water of the spring of Ein al-Zarqa, we were approached by a group of armed Israeli settlers accompanied by police dogs. Faced with the threat, we made the difficult but necessary decision to leave, ensuring we returned with everyone we had set out with.

Years earlier, in 2011, I took my first and last walk with my grandfather, Jalal Albess, and family in Saydoun, a destroyed village in al-Ramleh district from which my family was displaced during the Nakba in 1948. Saydoun once stood on the eastern bank of Wadi Saydoun, a tributary of Wadi al-Sarar, on the eastern edge of the Palestinian coastal plain. A small village built of adobe bricks, stone, mud and cement, inhabited by a couple of extended families (namely, Albess and Mansour) who lived off rain-fed grain cultivation and animal husbandry. In April 1948, during Operation Nachshon, Zionist forces launched a series of coordinated attacks on Palestinian villages surrounding Jerusalem and al-Ramleh during which massacres were carried out—most notably at Deir Yasin—and villages were razed. It was during this wave of violent expulsions and destruction that Saydoun was ethnically cleansed. Our visit in 2011 was also cut short, this time by what seemed to be a guard. What was once home to approximately 250 people had been turned into rows of horizontal vineyards feeding Israeli wine factories. Our return had lasted about an hour.

FIG. 1 PHOTO OF SAYDOUN TAKEN BY SABA' ALBESS IN 2010. SOURCE: PALESTINE REMEMBERED.



In the grand scheme of things, the ethnic cleansing and destruction of Saydoun seems like a minor detail. It was only a small village, after all. Insignificant against the total annihilation we are witnessing today. There's no need to think long and hard to be able to recall countless other walks and returns interrupted, denied and made impossible. Walks now cut off by a roadblock, checkpoint, armed soldier, armed settler, unleashed boar—or the idea of one of them. The following project began there, with walks interrupted and cut short.

Since 7 October 2023, many conversations with friends and family have started and ended with the conditions of the roads: which are blocked, which are safe, which checkpoints have shifted and popped up. Even the smallest movements now carry the weight of risk. My PhD research project too has shifted as I still try to make sense of its relevance and presumed value since Israel began its genocide in Gaza two years ago at the time of writing. Within SLARG, my project initially focused on practices of cultivation and on walking as a method of research, orientation and metaphor, understood as a fugitive and embodied relation to the land in Palestine, while examining how settler-colonial erasures and dispossessions are met with practices of resistance. This work was confronted by the impossibility of walking under conditions of intensifying occupation and its expanding architecture: military checkpoints, military gates, the separation wall, settler roads and settler livestock. This led me to wonder what the mundane looks like under these conditions and why it matters: What does walking mean when movement itself is restricted? What can a practice of embodied research offer when the land itself is rendered unwalkable (for Palestinians)? Israel's obliteration and indiscriminate annihilation of Gaza persists, while at the same time it wages a war across Palestine to thwart any possibility of a Palestinian futurity.

Saydoun: 31.841439, 34.903802 evolved as an attempt to reconstruct the village as a walkable digital environment, a form of storytelling, developed in collaboration with 3D artist and designer Axel Korban. When movement becomes impossible, it doesn't end, it shifts form. The digital landscape becomes a continuation of a walk, another way to move across a landscape and a time that has been and continues to be violently disrupted.

The digital reconstruction of Saydoun emerges through three interwoven and overlapping layers: the *aerial*, the *remembered* and the *fabulated*. Each reflects a different mode of knowing that has been fractured, silenced or manipulated by settler-colonial systems of control. These layers don't simply sit beside or on top of each other; they interweave, overlap and destabilize each other, forming a cartography that resists fixity.

How do we turn testimony into terrain?

The *remembered* takes shape through a memory map, a scale model of Saydoun made by my grandfather in 2012 that forms the starting point of this project. Etched from memory 64 years after the Nakba, the model maps out homes, springs, trees, paths, courtyards, providing the primary architecture without which we wouldn't have located the aerials of Saydoun. And without which we wouldn't have known what to search for. Alongside the model, I've drawn on scattered oral testimonies from Nakba survivors from Saydoun such as Ibrahim Ahmad Abdulrahman Albess and Ahmad Ismail Mansour; they offered

fragments of a social history in order to structure the spatial, social and economic dimensions of the village. The names remembered, the trees, the quarrels and the crops resist the finality of the colonial archive and the limits of its narrative, keeping memory in motion. As Bishara Doumani argues, it is precisely these unofficial, familial and vernacular forms of memory that push against the colonial logic of the archive. These ‘living archives’ transmitted across generations are anchored in structure, relation and continuity that official history denies; they are rooted in their lived experience, spatial fluency and habit.

FIG. 2 A MINIATURE OF SAYDOUN CREATED BY MY GRAND-FATHER, JALAL ALBESS.



The *aerial* layer consists of colonial military photographs and cartographic materials sourced from Zionist archives, including imagery dating back to the Ottoman and British Mandate periods. While these sources offer spatial data, they also function as instruments of dispossession, overwriting Indigenous presence and producing narratives that justify or deny colonial violence. In this sense, the aerial archive is both a moment of precision and a site of distortion; it marks borders but omits life. We don’t engage with it to affirm its authority, but to *destabilize* it through counter-annotation, counter-interpretation and visual interruption.

FIG. 3 STILL OF 31.841439, 34.903802, COURTESY OF AXEL KORBAN, 2026.



Where data ends, memory begins.

The *fabulated* doesn’t close the gaps between these archives, it confronts and inhabits them. The imagined is not an invitation to a pristine precolonial moment such as Fanon had warned against. Romanticizing the precolonial risks ossification, turning it into a static counter-myth

that reinforces colonial binaries of modernity and tradition. Instead, the imagined offers rupture. In ‘Venus in Two Acts’, Saidiya Hartman notes that the ‘requirement to tell an impossible story’ under conditions of silence necessitates a form of narration that is neither invention nor pure citation. It allows for what she calls ‘critical fabulation’: a mode of writing with, against and through archival violence to reveal what it disavows. In the reconstruction of Saydoun, this means accepting the impossibility of fully recovering what was lost, and instead imagining what could be otherwise. A fig tree that may not have stood exactly there, five or eight students dozing off beneath it while listening to al-Sheikh Salameh Salem, a radio playing in the centre of the village, and huge fields of grain reconstructed from a memory of sound.

These three registers—aerial, remembered, imagined—are not separate layers but mutually entangled operations. They bleed into one another. I ask: what happens when personal memory, legal documents, fiction and testimony are woven together? And how can we weaponize memory and refuse to let imagination be colonized? The aerial and the remembered give form and structure, the remembered gives density, and the imagined offers rupture and possibility. Together, they form not a simulation but, I hope, a practice of counter-mapping. The output is not a restored village, but a walkable digital terrain that insists on Palestinian presence in the face of archival erasure and disappearance.



FIG. 4 A MAP OF SAYDOUN MARKING ITS LOCATION BEFORE ITS ERASURE IN 1948. MAP SOURCE: PALESTINE OPEN MAPS / BRITISH SURVEY MAPS.

In the absence of a unified or protected national archive, memory work has become the domain of the everyday. The urgency to record, collect and narrate has increasingly fallen on individuals, families and small collectives, not as a matter of institutional responsibility, but of existential necessity. As Beshara Doumani argues, this archival impulse isn’t simply a romantic attachment to the past, but a response to a deep and growing pessimism about the future. The further away freedom, return and reparations appear, the more vital it becomes to preserve what remains, not just what was but what is. What is being lost is not only the physical territory, but also the everyday practices and social bonds that once formed an organic Palestinian world. As Doumani notes, ‘the two greatest archives of all’—the land itself and the bonds of daily life—are being actively dismantled. And so, Palestinians have turned to what is at hand: memory, testimony, family maps, memory maps and, increasingly, digital terrains.



FIG. 5 STILL FROM 31.841439, 34.903802.



This imagined reconstruction is a continuation of these diffuse, archival efforts that span oral history initiatives, grassroots digitization, community archiving and immersive technologies: the writers of village books who traced genealogies and the geography; community archives like Makhazin that open up a pace for vernacular materials; Walid Khaldi's *All That Remains*, a monumental record of destroyed Palestinian villages; Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh's *Palestine: Our Homeland*; Salman Abu Sitta's decades-long effort to document the Nakba through the Palestine Land Society and *Palestine Remembered*, offering not only a political map of loss, but a calculable and enactable methodology of return.

Layered onto these foundational works are new tools: game design, geospatial analysis, open-source intelligence and digital modelling. Platforms like Palestine Open Maps opened up historical cartographies to collective use and restored original toponyms and boundaries. Nisreen Zahda, who guided us to the aerials of Saydoun, has also reconstructed depopulated Palestinian villages as immersive digital environments in her virtual reality project *VR Palestine*. The challenge and motive lie in working against a colonial/media landscape and archive that manufacture not only consent in this genocide, but memory itself: what will be mourned, what will be recorded and what will be made legible in the future. In this sense, these projects are also concerned with fabulating a presence where settler realism insists there is none. It is the rendering visible of a people, of lives and relations that the archive tried to exclude.

To digitally reconstruct Saydun, we combined historical research with spatial technologies, working from both archival traces and familial memory. Through mapping, modelling and collaborative design, we created a walkable digital terrain that aligns remembered geographies with historical evidence. The process raised ongoing questions, not just about accuracy, but about what it means to translate memory into data. How do you rebuild from fragments? What kind of textures, trees, sounds can evoke a world destroyed by colonialism? What is the role of narrative, memory, error? These are not only technical or aesthetic choices, but political and ethical ones: decisions about how space, time and relation might be rendered differently, without flattening their complexity.

What does it mean to mark my grandfather's home as data? How do we resist the logic of ossification by animating its resonances? These are not just aesthetic concerns. They are political and ethical decisions about how space and time are remembered, rendered and rebuilt.

Reappearance, in this sense, is not merely about visibility. Rather, it is about disturbing colonial temporalities, refusing to disappear, and insisting on Palestinian presence where it has been systematically erased and denied. The reconstruction of Saydoun departs from these interruptions—of walks, maps, memory—and translates them into a digital strategy. It aims to extend the impossible walk into

a speculative one in which recollection, oral testimony, memory models and the pixel-by-pixel work together to fill the gaps. Saydoun reappears neither as a monument to what was lost nor as nostalgia, but as a living contradiction to the colonial claim that it never was, even though it can't be restored to its previous form.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Moussem Nomadic Arts Centre for offering a moment of pause, time and support during my artist residency there in April–May 2025, when *Reconstructing Saydoun*: 31.841439, 34.903802 began to take shape. I also wish to thank my SLARG research group at Sint Lucas Antwerpen for the critical conversations that informed this work.

REFERENCES

- Agha, Zena. n.d. 'Counter-Mapping the Archive.' Accessed 7 June 2025. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/46572/Counter-Mapping-the-Archive>.
- Doumani, Beshara. 2009. 'Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians: The Patrimony of Ihsan Nimr.' *Jerusalem Quarterly* 36: 3–12.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. 'Venus in Two Acts.' *Small Axe* 12 (2): 1–14.
- Khalidi, Walid, ed. 1992. *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*. Institute for Palestine Studies.

MAPS

- Abu-Sitta, Salman H. 2007. *Ṭarīq al-`awdah: Dalīl al-mudun wa-al-qurā al-muhajjarah wa-al-ḥālīyah wa-al-amākin al-muqaddasah fī Filasṭīn* (The Return Journey: A Guide to the Depopulated and Present Palestinian Towns and Villages and Holy Sites). Palestine Land Society.
- Murad al-Dabbagh, Mustapha. 2018. *Biladuna Filastin* (Encyclopedia: Palestine, Our Homeland). Institute for Palestine Studies.
- 'Palestine Remembered'. n.d. 'Saydoun'. Accessed 7 June 2025. <https://www.PalestineRemembered.com/al-Ramla/Saydun/index.html>.
- Palestine Open Maps*. n.d. Accessed 7 June 2025. <https://palopenmaps.org/en>.
- Zahda, N. n.d. *Virtual Reality Palestine*. Accessed 7 June 2025. <https://vrjpalestine.com/>.

Assume
Calibration
Pose:
This Breath
Isn't Mine

Myrthe Bokelmann
Célia Tort Pujol

What happens when technology fails?
The technological memory remains.
Technology impacts the physical,
tangible, embodied memory.

The technological apparatus being developed when you work with complex, custom-built software and hardware has a feedback effect on your embodied memory.

This is what enabled us to carry on
with the performance.

▨ Embodied technology.
We become technology.





Assume Calibration Pose: This Breath Isn't Mine



The context of this essay is The Algorithmic Gaze, our research group based at Sint Lucas Antwerpen. The group started in 2019 when Lieven Menschaert and Frederik De Bleser saw the coming wave of AI and decided to look into its implications in a way that was both creative and ethical. From the start, their design, software and hardware backgrounds have driven them to develop tools and collaborate with artists from different disciplines. While current commercial AI models are hyped, Lieven and Frederik's focus is on small, 'craft' AI that centres on the human dimension. This means training their own models from scratch, based on material created in collaboration with artists. In 2025 we launched the 'Strange Loops' research project with them. Within this context, we work with technological devices that function as mediators in the creation of music and dance. These devices can be modified in the course of explorative sessions, allowing for rapid iterations and real-time adjustments. At the heart of this research is the concept of 'trans mediations', converting one form of expression into another: sound to movement, movement to tactile feedback, notation to performance, physical gesture to digital response. What gets encoded and what gets lost?

We recently crafted custom software and hardware to design a feedback loop in which signals from Myrthe (dancer) provide input for Célia (musician). The current set-up consists of two devices: a motion-capture suit that records movements, and bespoke gloves enhanced with vibration motors. The suit, worn by Myrthe, sends signals to the haptic feedback device, which responds by emitting vibrations. Each sensor, present on each finger of the glove worn by Célia, is connected to one sensor of the suit (right arm, left arm, right leg, left leg). When Myrthe moves one of these body parts, the sensors on Célia's gloves vibrate accordingly. Currently, the vibration uses a binary communication system, so it either vibrates or not. We are exploring more options to find nuances in the vibration of the gloves that could also regulate pitch, register, volume and articulation.

This set-up allows a musician to feel the movement of a dancer and react to it, creating an interplay between digital signals and physical sensations, resulting in a responsive tactile system. One of the goals of the research is to step away from screens and move towards a 'somatic' AI, one you can experience with your eyes closed. We explore themes such as intimacy and trust in an age where 'big AI' is all about gathering as much data as possible without our consent. The somatic experience of technological devices allows us to feel present and to fully engage with one another and our physical surroundings.

On Thursday 24 October 2024, as part of the SLARG Research Week, we performed 'Assume Calibration Pose: This Breath Isn't Mine'. This piece, which had premiered in Barcelona a month earlier, used the above technological set-up. Before the performance, we had rehearsed and tested the tools: everything was ready and working smoothly. As the audience sat down, we opened the programme and saw that the system we relied on wasn't sending out any signals. After fifteen minutes of trying to solve the problem, we decided that our only choice was to perform without a working set-up, faking our way through it.

The initial feeling that came over us was nervousness. Our whole piece was built on the communication between the devices, and we had no idea what would happen if these tools weren't working. As we went through the piece, our attention was hyperfocused. Since we couldn't rely on the hardware and software to give us information, we had to rely on each other and the communication pathways we had built throughout the creation process.



After going through this performance in a crisis or problem-solving mode, we realized that something interesting had happened. Because we didn't have the technology, we had to be extremely attuned to each other, focusing deeply on our own movements, which came from scores, tasks and gestures developed in the course of our weekly explorations. We had to sharpen our listening skills and spatial awareness.

Kozel and Eeuwens (2008) describe this as gut navigation, letting an intuitive part of oneself move without much interference from one's thinking brain. In our case, what happened when the technologies broke down forced us to work in a similar way, namely, to rely on our intuition, on one another and on the memory of working with the technological set-up still present within us.



I [Celia] played the oboe with my eyes closed. This helped the audience to see more clearly where the input came from and to understand the haptic feedback loop. I only opened my eyes from time to time, whenever Myrthe's movements were far from my sight. I still wore the gloves, but they received no input; only the physical and sonic memory of the piece remained. The work we did with the devices was so present, however, that most of the time I managed to feel Myrthe's bodily movements by recalling their technological imprint, which included the sound of the oboe and the motion of my fingers. I tried to react as accurately as possible to Myrthe's gestures without feeling any vibration. I pushed myself to imagine the vibrations I wasn't receiving. The audience didn't know the devices weren't functioning, so the sound still had to be synchronized with Myrthe's movements. It was important to be accurate with the music, not only for the audience, but also for the choreography.

Although neither were fixed but rather continuously changing, they still followed a certain structure and had some agreed-upon cues. Sound qualities—articulation, dynamics, pitch—triggered the movement in a specific manner, so it was important to feed Myrthe's actions in a way that would still make sense for the trajectory of the piece.

R
E
A
D
N
I
G



In this set-up, every movement that I [Myrthe] performed provoked a sound. As Célia tried to be as faithful to the haptic feedback device as possible, I couldn't move without it having a direct sonic consequence. Therefore, the physical sensation while dancing became heavily based on my ears, which is different from the way I'm used to reflect on my own movement. Normally, my focus is on the way my weight is distributed through my feet, the air brushing past my skin, the clothes on my body, air passing through my nostrils and mouth, the feeling of my lungs expanding and collapsing,

my distance to the edges of the space. Listening through my ears is only one part of this equation. The shift in physical processing was disorienting. At first, it made me think that wearing the motion-capture suit was distracting me from being present in the room. Later, once we were forced to go through the same performance without a working technological set-up, I realized this wasn't true; the system merely shifted my attention.

When the system crashed, there was a necessity for us to acknowledge its flawedness. Rather than focus on the frustration of a system 'not working', we took the information that was there. Kozel and Eeuwens (2008, 227–28) describe this as follows:

It was no accident that the moments with the most dramatic tension between performers and captured data were created when the computers malfunctioned slightly, when they lagged, jumped, froze, made the image disappear and reappear, or even when, for inexplicable reasons, they caused the figure to distort or dismember herself. These glitches are consonant with spontaneity and autonomy, with affect and responsivity, with expression and pain.

Because we had become so familiar with the set-up, the accuracy of our interactions and direct responses almost didn't change. The performance appeared very similar to the one we would have done with the devices functioning, and in hindsight the audience didn't even realize what had happened. For us, however, the attention shifted in a very interesting way. Our presence in relation to each other felt stronger than usual, and the attunement to the smallest movement and sound of the other made us feel more intimately connected than ever in this performance. This experience made us wonder: *what imprint do technological devices leave on our bodies, memories and non-verbal communication?*

B-R-E-A-K-N-
I-G

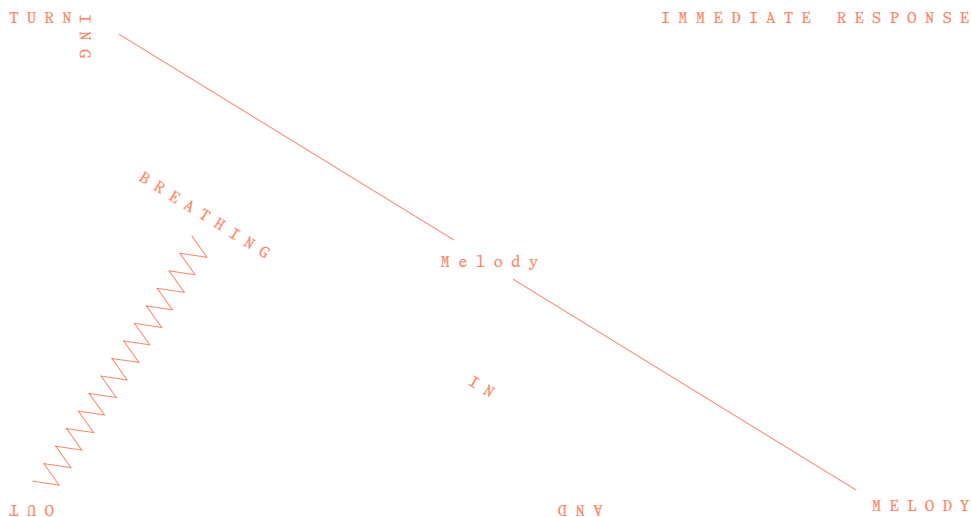




To answer this question, we decided to carry out an artistic exploration in the studio. The idea was to create a score which we would perform together. In this context, a score is a graphic document that guides our artistic exploration: drawings, lines, texts, word lists, etc. We each design a score individually, setting a timer. Once the time is up, we share the outcomes and choose one score to perform. Sometimes we perform it together; at other times, one takes on the performer's role and the other the spectator's. We also exchange these roles. We then spend ten minutes writing about what we experienced individually, and reflect on the task and resulting text together. The scores we have been developing in this frame are mainly inspired by the feeling of the suit: its fabric and resistance, and the breathing while playing the oboe, which led to laughing and crying.

These artistic explorations are essential to the work we do. In both music and dance disciplines, thinking goes hand in hand with doing. The discussion of ideas and their practical development or execution always meet and coexist in time and space. Through this shared process, we enlarge our common toolbox, which allows us to connect the ideas and thoughts we have with our experience and background. We create specific movement and music scores, tasks and trajectories that speak directly to our questions.

'Thinking with the feet' ... indicates not only how the actors focus on their physical presence on stage, but it emphasizes also how this concentration, or way of thinking, uses images, associations and intuition, and is a unity, a process that involves the whole body and mind. It is radically different from the usual way of thinking (Cremona, Gally, and Varley 2017, 164).



[16 January 2025, Sint Lucas Antwerpen, between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m., three months after the Research Week performance.]

To answer our question, ‘What physical and sonic imprint does technology leave on our bodies?’, we chose to perform a score at Sint Lucas Antwerpen that involved remembering and re-enacting the whole piece chronologically without any technological set-up. We left out all the devices and did a full run-through without any preparation, similar to the one we would normally do when performing with the technological system. In this exploration, we wanted to understand what sonic and physical memories had stayed with us from the system, so we chose not to discuss anything beforehand, allowing the embodied memories of the piece to take the lead of the exercise.

Not wearing the gloves had a considerable impact. Even though I [Cèlia] could sometimes imagine and visualize the gloves on my hands, I was playing the oboe without feeling the vibration. This input influenced the weight of my fingers, the pressure I put on the keys, the speed at which my fingers moved, the accuracy and immediacy of the physical response (even before the sonic one). I felt the need to be physically closer to the instrument and its sound as well as to Myrthe. From the beginning, the musical material became less hectic and more melodic because I had more time to decide what to play. Still aware of Myrthe’s gestures, I didn’t have to obey the vibrations and could organize the musical material without the pressure of the signals. Myrthe and I were mostly connected to the sound of the oboe, the breathing, our presence and the space itself; only our time existed.

This almost feels like coming home after a long holiday. Everything is exactly as we felt it, and yet it feels like everything has changed. There's a strong sense of comfort and familiarity that felt most present in finding you back physically. I know this body, this sound, this voice, this breath. It occurred to me that it felt like we hadn't been this close since the last time we did this but that it didn't feel that way. The feeling of closeness holds at least one of its roots in this space, so coming back to it is like returning to a place you once felt home in. Without a pressure to perform, but with the intention to let memory come to us there's a sense of ease. Also an out-of-body experience while at the same time being very much inside my own body. As if the physical sensations gave me the possibility to observe as much as feel. Maybe 60% observing, witnessing, 40% feeling. The actions were almost initiated onto us, less so by us. The voice sounded fuller than I remember it because maybe my ears were more open this time? The ideas didn't matter that much anymore. By now this piece feels a little like your home. Our home after a holiday.

Going through the performance without having the technological devices as communication tools to rely on heightened our sense of listening both to the sound and to one another through our bodies and skin. Without the 'distraction' of the devices, we understood our performative language better. Removing the technology from the score allowed us to take a bird's-eye view of ourselves as well as of the role of technology and the dramaturgy of the piece. As a result, this exploration felt almost more like a 'listening' than a 'doing' exercise. Re-enacting the piece in this analogue way led us to understand that the performative language we developed together with the technological set-up remained in the embodied experience of the work, but the feeling of sensory disorientation and 'hectic-ness' were gone.



The technological set-up used for ‘Assume Calibration Pose: This Breath Isn’t Mine’ constantly requires us to go back and forth to the laptop, the Wi-Fi-router, the devices and our colleagues with more extensive knowledge of the software: unplug, plug back in, recalibrate, close the programme, relaunch, and so on. After working with these devices for eighteen months, we have concluded that these interruptions lie at the core of working with technology. The set-up doesn’t allow us to be fully present within our bodies in the way we would normally be; it demands a constant shifting of attention between performing and solving technical problems. Leaving out the technology therefore provided us with a language we had developed in collaboration with the system, but this time without its interruptions, giving us space to be more loyal to our own presence in the room and to one another.

P U L L I N G

The technological set-up created a barrier between us, forcing us to focus more on its needs and input than on our bodies. Much of the creation process of ‘Assume Calibration Pose: This Breath Isn’t Mine’ was spent attempting to move through this barrier with as little resistance as possible, which was not always an easy task. To some extent, we believe we’ve succeeded in doing that; the more familiar we grew with the system, the more it became a source of inspiration—even, or maybe especially, in the frictions.

Contrary to what it may seem, the richness of most well-designed responsive computer systems increases in proportion to the time spent within them. The opening or revealing of the depths of potential physical/technological engagement arrives after much time inhabiting a context, as is true with dwelling in the dance studio, on the yoga mat, in meditation, or at rehearsals (Kozel and Eeuwens 2008, 77).

C R Y I N G

G G
G G G
G G G

What became apparent through this exploration was that working with the set-up taught us a different language to improvise in, move in, sound in. It gave us ideas of places to go we wouldn’t have reached without it and enforced a responsiveness in us that made us very attentive in ways we hadn’t experienced before. Once we let go of the technology, this language was still one we could speak together. Only now it enabled a more continuous and expansive presence in the room that had been enriched by a new understanding of attention and physical/sonic processing.

REFERENCES

- Cremona, Vicki Ann, Francesco Galli, and Julia Varley. 2017. *Thinking with the Feet: Actor's Techniques and Theatre Anthropology*. Odin Teatrets Forlag.
- Kozel, Susan, and Adam Eeuwens. 2008. *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*. The MIT Press.

Pictures taken by Danial Shah during the 2024 Research Week, Sint Lucas Antwerpen.

Towards Celestial Letters

Ruth Razan Loos

In this contribution, I introduce and contextualize my artistic research project ‘Closer Than Your Jugular Vein’. This postdoctoral project (2023–24) sought to develop an artistic book practice that could offer devoted time and space to reflect on the worldly, inter-worldly and other-worldly book dimensions of the Qur’an, *Al-Qur’an Al-Karim*. It does so by posing the question, Where is *The Book*? The Qur’an is approached as a ‘Book in/from heaven’ (timeless, infinite and preserved), as a recited and written *Mushaf* (physical manuscript/codex), and as a Book inscribed in the heart of the believer and expressed through Nature. My research focuses on an artistic and conceptual engagement with the Qur’an, which serves as the primary textual source for reflecting on its book-being across different realms.

Artistically, my project manifests in loose, unbound pages containing handwritten Qur’anic verses, devotional lettering and drawings that reference the multiple places and times of the Qur’an. As a visual artist, I investigate the relations between word as word, word as image, and image as word. Copying verses of the Qur’an in my personal Arabic handwriting is a meditative and repetitive act that connects my hand and heart, fostering deeper reflection.

‘The verses of the Qur’an are stores of treasure.
So whenever you open one of them,
you must see what lies inside.’
[Nasr 2017, 1242]

The verses are written in circular lines, slowing down the writing process and evoking circumambulation. Alongside the verses, I explore the lettering of, among others, the *shahada* (testimony of faith) and the *basma-lah* (an Islamic phrase beginning ‘In the name of God’), experimenting with mirroring and repetition. Drawn elements such as mosques, *mihrab* (a niche in a mosque indicating the prayer direction), leaves, trees and veins, along with the colours green and gold and the octagonal paper format, enrich the visual language of the work in its symbolic references.

The unbound pages—writing, lettering, drawing—are (for now) displayed horizontally, allowing one to engage with the work from multiple angles and discover the layering and repetition of motifs. This open-ended and sustainable format makes it possible for the practice to continue until all 114 *surahs* (chapters or divisions) of the Qur’an have been written. This approach, with its unbound format and mobile pages, calls for a carefully considered holder. My current artistic focus lies in designing a heedful book jacket as a cover for these pages: a protective, aesthetic and devotional casing that reflects the layered nature of The Book and its relationships, creating a space of care that prepares the heart for the sacred text and renews my intention.

ALL-ENCOMPASSING BOOKNESS

My artistic inquiry into the nature of books, book-being and bookness began with my PhD in the Arts (2012) in which I philosophically explored real and virtual dimensions or qualities of the book (with a small b), independently of any specific contents or form. The search for a book that could encompass all books led, some five years ago, to a personal revelation: My heart opened to the Qur’an as a world of divine signs. I discovered that *The Book* (with

a capital B) truly exists, beyond time and space. This marked the beginning of a new artistic research path in which I revisit the question as to what kind of multiple object or entity the book is, now approached as a sacred book and the Book of my faith, in order to understand some of its dimensions, qualities, directions and relationships.

My ‘where is *The Book?*’ question led me to the multi-site nature of the visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, knowable and unknowable book manifestations of the Qur’an and to its ‘all-encompassing’ quality (Nasr 2017, xxxii). The Qur’an as a book that is *The Book* concerns the in-librated (Word become Book) manifestation of the Word of Allah, and is an endless source of light, guidance, remembrance and wisdom for those who believe in it. A deep relational connectivity can occur between the ‘Author’, the Qur’an, the reader-believer, and the world as a Cosmic Book. For the believer, it is a Blessed Book, from an ‘omnipresent/absent’ Author (Shaw 2019, 106) and with content as Message. The Book is timeless and very much alive, it is a ‘Text-as-event’ that invites its reader-believer into deep reflection and transformation, for the Qur’an reads the reader and ‘looks into our hearts’ (Helwa 2020, 90). My artistic project explores how this layered and relational nature of the Qur’an can be approached and embodied through artistic form by looking more closely at its relational whereness: heaven, ear, heart, eye, nature...

وَلَوْ أَنَّ فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ
شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَمٌ وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ
مِنْ بَعْدِهِ سَبْعَةُ أَنْجَارٍ
مَا نَفَذْتَ كَلِمَتُ اللَّهِ

‘If all the trees on earth
were pens and the ocean
were ink, refilled by
seven other oceans, the
Words of Allah would
not be exhausted.’
[Qur’an 31:27]

ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ
فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

‘This is the Book! There
is no doubt about it
—a guide for those
mindful of Allah.’
[Qur’an 2:2]



FIG. 1 SLARG RESEARCH
EXHIBITION,
SHOWROOM SINT
LUCAS ANTWERPEN,
OCTOBER 2024

‘The words of the revelation are not just letters that capture meaning, but rather place-holders for the sacred vibration of Allah’s words.’
(Helwa 2020, 98)

The Qur’an as a Celestial Book is referred to as *Umm al-Kitab*, the ‘Mother of the Book’ (Qur’an 13:39) referring to *Al-Lawh al-Mahfuz*, the ‘Preserved Tablet’ (Qur’an 85:22). The Qur’an is revealed, memorized, transmitted, written down, recited in the Arabic language and script. Arabic, as a secular language and a script used by different languages, is here a sacred language and a sacred script, an ‘embodiment of the Word of God’ (Nasr 2017, xxx). Each letter can be associated with blessings such as wisdom, goodness, mercy, cure, sincerity, tenderness, knowledge, nearness, connection, guidance, certainty (Blair and Bloom 2017, 268–72). There are also the mysterious letters or openers found at the beginning of several surahs. The meaning of these *al-huruf al-muqatta’ah* or disjoined letters is known only to Allah, but multiple readings of what they may (re)present circulate in, for example, the science of letters, numerology, mysticism.

The Qur’an is not only the visual Book in codex form (*Mushaf*), it is also the memorized and recited Book. The word *qur’an* itself means ‘recitation’. ‘The Qur’an can be understood less as a book than as a sonic image of the divine continually present in all its parts. This presence precedes its analytical or linguistic content’ (Shaw 2019, 107). Citing the Qur’an in other languages than its language, namely (Qur’anic) Arabic, comes with the question of how to translate its eloquence. However, the power of the sound figure of the Qur’an, the art of recitation, is untranslatable. In my scribal practice, and when I write and ponder from letter to letter, verse to verse, surah to surah, this devoted time is always accompanied by the sound codes of the letters that touch my heart via the ear and remind me beautifully of their otherworldly dimensions.

The tracing of the Qur’anic letters, with their transcendental references to Celestial Letters, in my personal Arabic penmanship makes me reflect on ‘writing as a signifier or outward manifestation of Islam’ (Blair and Bloom 2017, 22). This invites me to carefully (re)consider my handwriting, in order to develop a heedful writing (process) more conscious of every letter. Writing becomes a specific interplay between hand, eye, mind, heart, pen and paper. The performative and reiterative act of writing allows me to reflect on the book qualities of the Qur’an and its call. My writing is deliberately slowed down by practising on circular lines by which I connect the circular, among others, to how a believer can feel encircled by the Text; how the Text has circular compositions and the circumambulation of a divine presence beyond the imaginable.

‘*Alif* [letter A] is the first letter of the Divine Name Allah, and *ba* [letter B] the first letter of the first word of the Qur’an, that is *Bi’smi’Llah* (‘In the Name of God’), the full text of which is known as the *bas-malah*. According to the science of the symbolism of Arabic orthography, the *alif* symbolizes the descent of the Divine Word from the world of Divine Transcendence, and *ba* its reception in the human world and in human language, which is thereby sanctified. The point under the *ba* symbolizes the meeting place of the two letters, of the vertical and the horizontal, and therefore constitutes the essence of all the letters of Arabic, hence of the Qur’an.’ (Nasr 2017, xxxiii)

IMMANENT & TRANSCENDENT PROXIMITY

The title of my artistic research project, ‘Closer Than Your Jugular Vein’ (I), is based upon a verse in the Surah ‘Qaf’, the letter ‘Q’. This verse, with the vein being a reference to a vulnerable place in the human body, speaks about a qualitative and relational proximity, a proximity closer than I myself can be to myself. Reading the full verse in English leads to different translations which can evoke different associations: ... and (We) know ‘what his soul/his own self whispers to him’, ‘whatever thoughts his inner self develops’, ‘the promptings of his heart’.

The verse speaks of closeness/nearness/proximity not in a physical sense per se, but encompassing in knowledge. It also speaks of ‘the Immanence of God in all of creation’ (Nasr 2017, 1267). ‘Allah is the Intimate [Al-Batin], He knows what is in your heart’ (Yousef 2020, 465). He is the Most Near.

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ وَنَعْلَمُ
مَا تُوسْوِسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ. وَنَحْنُ
أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ

‘And We have already
created man and know
what his soul whispers
to him, and We are
closer to him than (his)
jugular vein.’
[Qur’an 50:16]

هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

‘He is the First and the Last, and the Manifest and the Hidden,
and He is All-Knowing about everything.’
[Qur’an 57:3]

Al-Awwal and *Al-Akhir*, *Az-Zahir* and *Al-Batin* are four of the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of Allah. The first pair of divine qualities refers more to time, the second more to space. ‘*Al-Batin* means completely hidden and *Az-Zahir* means completely expressed’ (Meyer et al. 2011, 258).

The Qur’an embraces its reader and calls its reader from different sites aside the *Mushaf* as locus. Throughout my project, the question of ‘Where is *The Book*?’ brought me closer to different loci and the strong relation between qualitative distance and qualitative nearness. ‘Where’ is less a spatial concept than a spiritual closeness, and with a specific role reserved for the heart.

وَمَا تَسْقُطُ مِنْ وَرَقَةٍ
إِلَّا يَعْلَمُهَا

‘Not a leaf falls but that
He knows it.’
[Qur’an 6:59]

THE PONDERING HEART

‘Reflection (*fikr*) is the lamp of the heart. If it vanishes the heart has no illumination.’
(Nasr 2017, 185)

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونَ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَا أَوْ آذَانٌ يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا
فَإِنَّهَا لَا تَعْمَى الْأَبْصَارُ وَلَكِنْ تَعْمَى الْقُلُوبُ الَّتِي فِي الصُّدُورِ

‘Have they not travelled throughout the land so their hearts
may reason, and their ears may listen?
Indeed, it is not the eyes that are blind, but it is the hearts
in the chests that grow blind.’
[Qur’an 22:46]

The heart is one of the key images in Islam, appearing in many contexts and with many meanings. When one reads the Qur’an, one meets different types of hearts, different realms of the heart, different roles and

qualities of the heart, and with more inner or more outward dimensions. There are hearts that call and hearts that are called upon, and different objects that the heart can contemplate. There are hearts that are distracted, preoccupied, disconnected, rusted, blinded, hardened, closed; hearts that are hesitant, doubting, deviating, neglecting, unwilling, rejecting. There are hearts that are open, guided, inspired, polished; that are thoughtful, understanding, heedful, living, dedicated, insightful; that are perceiving, receiving, remembering. ‘In the Qur’an the heart (*qalb*) is the organ associated not only with sentiment, but also with consciousness, knowledge and faith.’ ‘The heart is the seat of knowledge and the organ of spiritual understanding’ (Nasr 2017, 16 and 841).

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْفُرْعَانَ أَمْرًا عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَفْقَالُهَا

In different translations I read, ‘to reflect’ is also given as: to give serious thought, to contemplate, to meditate, to earnestly seek to understand, to think deeply.

‘Do they not then reflect on the Qur’an?
Or are there locks upon their hearts?’
[Qur’an 47:24]

There are specific verbs used in (Islamic) Arabic for reflection/contemplation, each with its own nuances, contexts, processes, finalities, objects of contemplation, etc., such as *tadabbur* and *tafakkur* and that can be further connected to being mindful, heedful, discerning; and remembering or *tadhakkur* that comes with patience, gratitude, trust and so on. These verbs/concepts can refer to reflection more closely related to knowledge as evidence, or reflection related to seeing the consequences or outcomes, and transforming, embedding or implementing insights in daily life. Contemplation comes with transformation, with a becoming, and is the opposite of mere passiveness.

The meditative and repetitive practice of writing verse after verse connects my hand and heart, and it is to me one of the ways of cultivating a contemplative and transformative heart that the Qur’an seeks to address. Another way that I practise is by revisiting the letters in Nature in my drawings—Creation as *Zahir*.

رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا

‘My Lord, improve me in
knowledge.’
[Qur’an 20:114]

قَالَ رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي

‘My Lord! Uplift my
heart for me.’
[Qur’an 20:25]

THE EARTH AS A MOSQUE, GRATEFUL TREES
AND SACRED SILENCE

سَنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْآفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ

‘We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves’
[Qur’an 41:53]

Ayah, the Arabic word for verse, also means ‘sign’. A sign can be a sign, proof, token, wonder, miracle, exemplar, lesson—whether spiritual, ethical, psychological, etc. Aside from the recorded Qur’an, *Al Qur’an At-Tadwini*, Nature as a book of verses, the Cosmic Book or *Al-Qur’an At-Takwini* is



also the place where the signs of Allah — Allah’s creative speech — are manifested. The Qur’an points repeatedly to the verses/signs within us, around us, in physical events and phenomena, and in the world. It addresses, invites, calls and urges its reader-believer to reflect on these manifestations of the attributes of Allah: *Az-Zahir* Who is *Al-Batin*. One is encouraged to ponder, think, give thought, consider, meditate, contemplate, draw lessons, etc.—to nourish oneself intellectually, ethically and spiritually.

‘In everything there resides a sign of Him
 Providing proof that He is the One.’

(Abu Nuwas, quoted in Nasr 2003, 95)

Many wonders of Nature, of Creation are described in the Qur’an—a multiplicity of signs pointing at the Unity (*Tawhid*) of The Creator, *Al-Khaliq* and ‘signs for those who reflect’. Surahs can start with oaths (that can only be taken by Allah) such as ‘By the Sun and its brightness’, ‘By the fig and the olive’ (Qur’an 91:1, 95:1).

The author of *Green Deen: What Islam Teaches About Protecting the Planet* compares reading the Qur’an with ‘an existential walk through nature ... to see every aspect of creation as being a divine message’ (Abdul-Matin 2010, 7). He starts the introduction to his book with the title: ‘The earth is a mosque’, before continuing with: ‘and everything in it is sacred’ (Abdul-Matin 2010, 1).

وَعِبَادُ الرَّحْمَنِ الَّذِينَ يَمْشُونَ
 عَلَى الْأَرْضِ هَوْنًا

‘The true servants of the
 Most Compassionate
 are those who walk on
 the earth humbly.’
 [Qur’an 25:63]

The six ethical principles of the Green Deen are: ‘*Tawhid*: the understanding of the Oneness of God and His creation, *ayat*: seeing signs of God everywhere, *khalifah*: being a steward of the Earth, *amana*: honouring the covenant, or trust, we have with God to be protectors of the planet, *adl*: moving towards justice, and *mizan*: living in balance with nature’ (Abdul-Matin 2010, 5).

In the series of drawings that rhythmically alternate with the hand-written pages, I engage with elements that recall the *ayat* in Nature to be contemplated. I use different sizes of paper and play with pop-up elements, cut-out elements, folds and layers to evoke the figurative and symbolic references. Motifs such as mosque, prayer carpet and *mihrab* are often intertwined with vegetal elements. These drawn elements speak of different loci of the Qur’an and carry a strong directionality towards *Tawhid*. The *mihrab* in the mosque indicates the *Qibla* facing the *Ka’aba* in Mecca. Can the figure of the *mihrab* invite reflection on the *qibla* (direction) and the ‘*Ka’aba* of the heart’? I also work with the small strips that adorn the streets in cities like Cairo during the month of *Ramadan*, which is believed to be the month in which the Qur’an was sent down—the revelation, descent, *Tanzil*—another (otherworldly) ‘place and time’ of the Book.

One of the surahs I started memorizing and reciting during the writing of this text is *Surah Ar-Rahman*, reminding the reader of the balance of justice and not to transgress, not to defraud, not to exceed the balance (Qur’an 55:7–9). The *surah* speaks about accountability, about the sun, the moon, the stars, the trees, the seas, etc., and urges the reader to recognize blessings through the oft-repeated question about them. To me it is a striking question that helps me to be more aware of the blessings ‘hidden in plain sight’. Another verse in the same *surah* reminds me beautifully of humility:

فَيَايَ ءَالَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

‘So which of the favours
of your Lord would you
deny?’
[Qur’an 55:13]

وَالنَّجْمُ وَالشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ

‘And the stars and trees prostrate.’
[Qur’an 55:6]

It is not only the stars and trees, but everything in the cosmos, ‘everything created praises the Creator with its own *lisan al-hal* [the language/tongue of its state], the silent eloquence’ (Schimmel 1994, xiii).

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

CLOSER THAN YOUR JUGULAR VEIN (II)

A specific intermediate artistic step I introduced in my contemplative book practice is the design of a ‘mindful book jacket’ that combines different functions. I dream of it being a heedful portal: a protective (both literally and heedfully), aesthetic and devotional, close book environment; an object that can envelop the handwritten pages with the Qur’anic verses and hold in itself devotional reminders as well as prepare the heart. To me, this step is also a way to renew my intention or *niyyah*. Intention is very important in Islam and is linked to worship, the heart, sincerity and deeds. You do something for the sake of Allah, not for your own ego. The struggle of the ego and its false idols and attachments, the *jihad an-nafs*, is known as the greatest *jihad*.



Hafiza—I am not embarking on this design journey from a talismanic perspective per se. But I do like to stay with the verb (and its derivatives) ‘to protect’, from the root *ح ف ظ* which has many connotations. In Islamic religious practice, one way to protect and preserve the Qur’an is to memorize it in its entirety. The pre-existing Qur’an is protected in heaven, and one of the beautiful names of Allah is *Al-Hafiz*, Guardian, Protector, Preserver, etc. When I think of protection, I also think of my own heart. How can I protect my heart whether from myself—that is, from my ego—or from outside influences? The Book is present, but is my pondering heart present and can my heart become my sight? When I think of the book jacket—how can it hold space to look after, care for, respect, honour through curated visual and textual reminders? How can I play with different references to the multiple ‘where, how and when’ of The Book? At the moment I am thinking of three foldable panels with textile extensions. As these are not attached to the pages they hold, the envelope itself is also mobile. It could also function independently and from closed to semi-closed to open, horizontally or vertically displayed.

Three themes recur throughout my artistic practice that translate into a specific set of images and metaphors: the book / The Book, the figure of the heart, roots and branches like veins and vice versa. I am continuing to work with these motifs, now using the Qur’an as a lens through which to look at them anew. ‘The Qur’an as a lens through

‘le Coran est un acte (un effet) du lieu
d’où on l’entend: s’il est entendu d’un arbre,
il est l’acte de l’arbre ...’
(Badawi, quoted in Khatibi 1994, 29)

which to view Nature / the world’ could be reversed here: ‘Nature as a lens through which to view the Qur’an’.

‘Nature is not there only for our use. It is there to reflect the creative Power of God, and grace, or *baraka*, also flows in the arteries and veins of the universe.’
(Nasr 2003, 96)

I am looking forward to interweaving motifs that connect earthly and celestial realms in an artery-like landscape of the 99 (and more) Beautiful Names and also work with the ‘verticality’ of The Book.

‘The *sifat*, or attributes of Allah, the divine Names, have no independent existence of their own. They only exist as differentiated aspects of Allah. ... The 99 Names are manifestations of the qualities of Allah. ...

The Names exist as potentialities in the oneness of God. As hidden relationships within the divine field of being, they can best be understood in relationship with one another.’

(Meyer et al. 2011, 24 and 21)

ZAHIR × BATIN

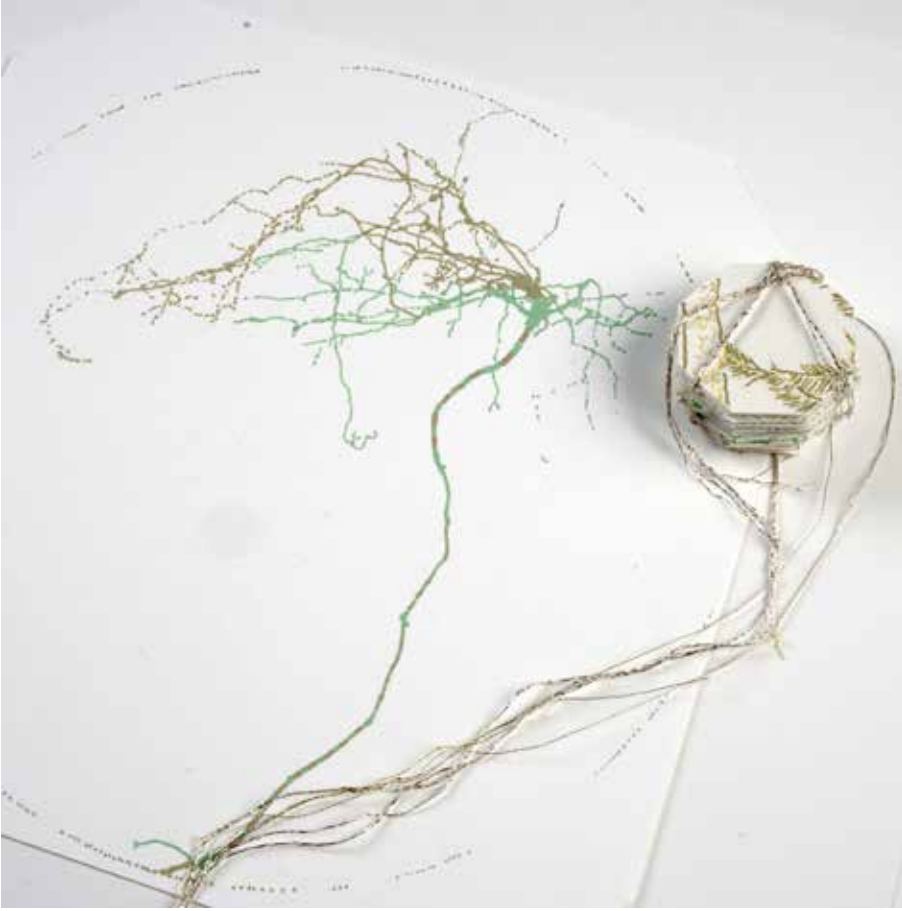
In my work I travel back and forth between image and word, word as image, image as word. This makes me reflect more on how an image (and a word) as a manifestation, and whether created, found or given, can function. Departing from the meaning and co-existence of *Az-Zahir* and *Al-Batin* helps me to look differently at the seemingly pairing paradox of the concepts of *zahir* and *batin*. *Zahir* (outward, manifest, visible, actual, explicit, etc.) and *batin* (inward, hidden, invisible, virtual, implicit, etc.) are intertwined. They are ‘two ends of a continuity’ (Marks 2010, 15). It makes me reflect on what is manifested, what is *zahir*, what is in plain sight, and what is intimate, or *batin*? What are the dynamics, the interplay between *zahir* and *batin* as they presuppose each other?

How can I understand *zahir* in order to understand *batin*, their mutual-ity? My practice is an engagement—visualizing as actualizing—to value *zahir* and seek *batin*. By creating my own ‘*zahir*’ I am partially answering (for myself, to begin with) the absence of representation of Islam in the city where I live. But it is much more than that. It concerns my devotional expression through which I contemplate. My writing, lettering and drawing is a way of silently and gratefully connecting to the divine, to Creation as *Zahir* and remembering and honouring Al-Khaliq—manifest and transcendent, evident from Creation without being visible. It is where the personal, the aesthetic, the epistemological and the devotional can meet. My practice involves creating a qualitative ‘where’, a contemplative and creative intimacy to reflect on the layered and multifaceted nature of The Book and how this brings me closer to Allah without having an image of Al-Khaliq and His Essence.

لَا تَدْرِيكَهُ إِلَّا بَصَرٌ وَهُوَ يَدْرِيكَ
الْأَبْصَرَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ

‘Vision perceives Him not, but He perceives [all] vision; and He is the Subtle, the Aware.’
[Qur’an 6:103]

Aside from continuing my writing and drawing practice ‘Closer Than Your Jugular Vein (I)’, designing the book jacket means creating different (recto and verso) surfaces, potential planes in different sizes and on different sides to engage with and that engage with each other. It concerns the design of designated spaces for (revisiting and rewriting) signs and reminders. The question as to how the tree looks into my heart or how I can learn from the silence of the tree will accompany me. My artistic practice is part of my daily religious journey, my experiences and development,



and how I progress the sacred text from letter to letter, leaf to leaf, breath to breath, heart to heart. The title of this essay, *Towards Celestial Letters*, refers to the orientation of my practice, my heart, my *niyyah*. On a personal level it also concerns the renewal of the intention to align my inward and my outward, my *akhlaq* (character) and *adab* (behaviour). Responding to the call to responsibility is part of the dynamic and transformative journey. It is about overcoming the hurdles and psychological idols set up by my own ego. It is about embarking on a mindful journey, participating in the Text-as-event, both sensory and suprasensory, and towards a more lofty understanding of (the performativity of) the Text and a place where patience and gratitude are gracefully twined.

وَقُلْ رَبِّ ادْخِلْنِيْ مُدْخَلَ صِدْقٍ وَّاَخْرِجْنِيْ مُخْرَجَ صِدْقٍ

‘My Lord! Make me enter in a sincere manner, and make me go forth in a sincere manner.’

[[*Qur'an* 17:80]]

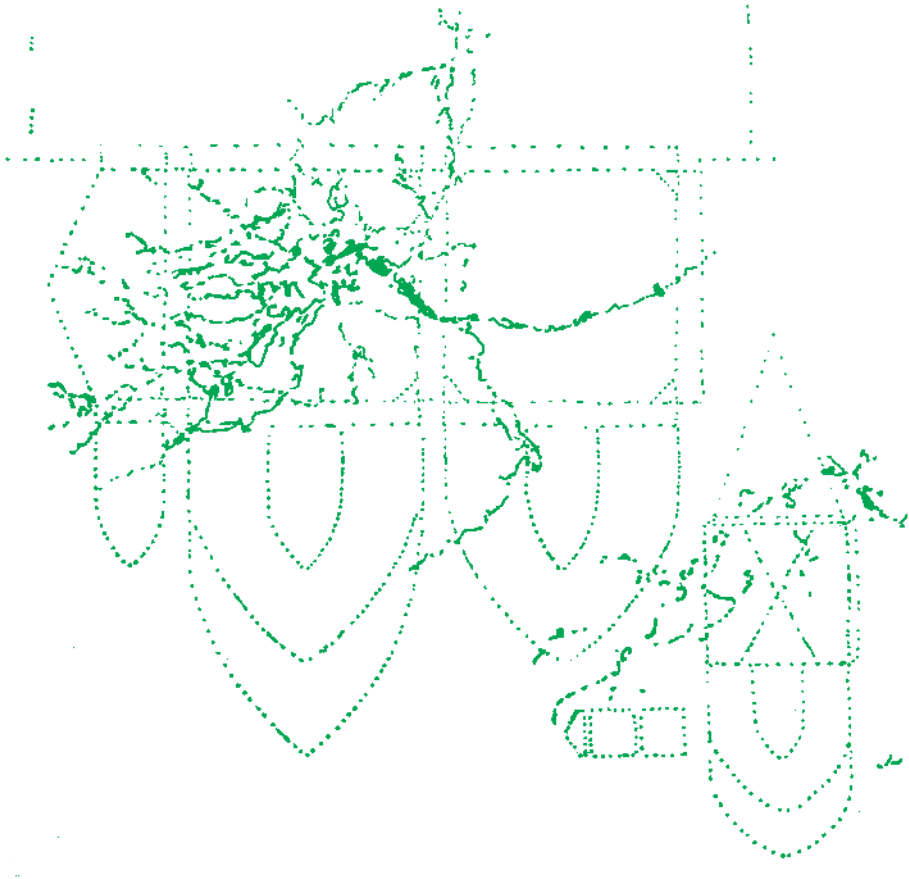


FIG. 6 SKETCH BOOK
JACKET (SUMMER
2025)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the editorial board of *Grounds*, Nassira, Fares and Noor.

REFERENCES

- Badawi, A. 1972. *Histoire de la philosophie en Islam*. Vol. 1., Vrin. 80–81.
- Blair, Sheila, and Jonathan Bloom, eds. 2017. *By the Pen and What They Write: Writing in Islamic Art and Culture*. Yale University Press.
- Helwa, A. 2020. *Secrets of Divine Love: A Spiritual Journey into the Heart of Islam*. Naulit Publishing House.
- Khatibi, Abdelkébir, and Mohamed Sijelmassi. 1994. *L'art calligraphique de l'Islam*. Éditions Gallimard.
- Marks, Laura U. 2010. *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*. The MIT Press.
- Meyer, Wali Ali, Bilal Hyde, Faisal Muqaddam, and Shabda Kahn. 2011. *Physicians of the Heart: A Sufi View of the 99 Names of Allah*. Sufi Ruhaniat International.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 2003. 'Islam, the Contemporary Islamic World, and the Environmental Crisis.' In *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, edited by Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin. Harvard University Press.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, ed.-in-chief. 2017. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. Harper Collins.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. 1994. *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam*. State University of New York Press.
- Shaw, Wendy M. K. 2019. *What Is 'Islamic' Art? Between Religion and Perception*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yousef, Jinan. 2020. *Reflecting on the Names of Allah*. Al Buruj Press.

TRANSLATIONS

(Qur'an 31:27) (partial verse) — Dr Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran * (Qur'an 2:2) — Dr Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran * (Qur'an 13:39) (Qur'an 85:22) * (Qur'an 50:16) — Saheeh International / T. Usmani / A. Maududi (Tafhim commentary) / Al-Hilali & Khan * (Qur'an 57:3) — T. Usmani * (Qur'an 6:59) (partial verse) — Saheeh International * (Qur'an 22:46) — Dr Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran * (Qur'an 47:24) — Dr Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran / T. Usmani / M.A.S. Abdel Haleem / M. Pickthall / A. Yusuf Ali / Al-Hilali & Khan * (Qur'an 20:114) (partial verse) — T. Usmani * (Qur'an 20:25) — Dr. Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran * (Qur'an 41:53) (partial verse) — Saheeh International * (Qur'an 91:1-2, 95:1) — Saheeh International * (Qur'an 25:63) (partial verse) — Dr Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran * (Qur'an 55:13) — Saheeh International * (Qur'an 55:6) — Saheeh International * (Qur'an 6:103) — Saheeh International * (Qur'an 17:80) (partial verse) — Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Reference Quran.com

TRANSCRIPTIONS

Al-Qur'an Al-Karim	القرآن الكريم
Mushaf	مصحف
Shahada	الشهادة
Basmalah	بسملة
Surah	سورة
Allah	الله
Umm al-Kitab	أم الكتاب
Al-Lawh al-Mahfuz	اللوح المحفوظ
Al-huruf al-muqatta'ah	الحروف المقطعة
Bi'smi'Llah	بسم الله
Alif, Ba, Qaf	ألف، باء، قاف
Al-Awwal	الأول
Al-Akhir	الآخر
Az-Zahir	الظاهر
Al-Batin	الباطن
Fikr	فكر
Qalb	قلب
Tadabbur	تدبر
Tafakkur	تفكر
Tadhakkur	تذكر
Al Qur'an At-Tadwini	القرآن التدويني
Al-Qur'an Al-Takwini	القرآن التكويني
Tawhid	التوحيد
Al-Khaliq	الخالق
Ayat	آية
Khalifah	خليفة
Amana	أمانة
Adl	عدل
Mizan	ميزان
Qibla	القبلة
Ka'aba	الكعبة
Ramadan	رمضان
Tanzil	تنزيل
Lisan al-hal	لسان الحال
Niyyah	نية
Jihad an-nafs	جهاد النفس
Hafiza	حفظ
Al-Hafiz	الحافظ
Baraka	بركة
Sifat	صفات
Zahir	ظاهر
Batin	باطن
Akhlaq	أخلاق
Adab	آداب

Staying with the Itch

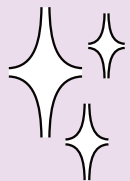
Lorraine Furter

A graph{ic} novel{l}a,
self-defence manual,
choose your own
adventure hybrid
about how things
can go wrong in
an editorial process...

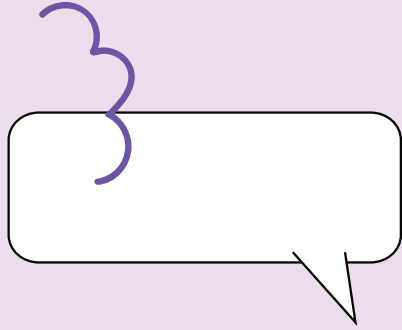
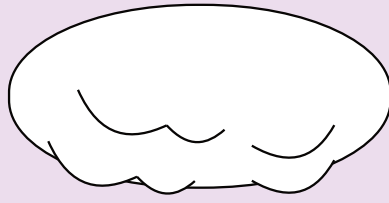
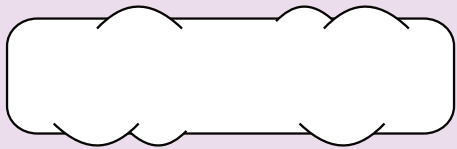
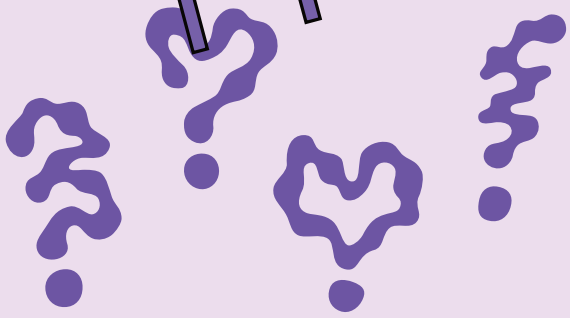


STAYING WITH THE ITCH

TW
BAD WORK
CONDITIONS
x_x
SAD STORIES
DRAMA



EMPOWERING
TOOL
HOPEFULLY
NOT
PATRONIZING



Welcome! This graph{ic} novel{l}a aims to unfold situations in which things go wrong in an editorial process, from a designer's perspective and beyond.

Full context and story
starting next page>

It is inspired by lived experiences and stories confided, highlighting their systemic dimensions (not something personal, unique to a specific context, but a situation influenced by many societal, historical and political factors). It tries to bridge theory and practice, learning from both to help (me and others) identify and act upon such situations in the future. It centres reparation, healing, empowerment in self-defence style.

Jump directly to the tools on page 11

In this experiment I use a mix of graphs, graphic novel, novella and novela. The graphic novel reference is used as a way to transmit the details of a situation with concrete dialogues and (my) internal thoughts and emotions. The more diagrammatic forms present the complexity of a process in a synthetic (over)view.

For instance, the ideal ✨
editorial process, page 7

The novella format allows me to work on short writing bits, and the novela refers to drama and emotions which are so important and yet too often erased from "serious" research productions and editorial workflows.

To reclaim emotions, go to page 11
Start a healing process on page 14

I take these annoying returning memories along with me, or I "stay with the itch", as I called it after Donna Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble*, which invites us to "stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth" and reconfigure relations and ways of "making-with".



Lorraine Furter

A graph(ic) novel(I)a about how things can go wrong in an editorial process...

TICKING ALL THE BOXES

Or: I cannot work like this!!

I often think about annoying situations and uncomfortable experiences I went through in my graphic design work and in my research around artists' books and alternative editorial practices. They become stories I play and replay in my head, dramatic novellas for which I imagine better endings...



Luckily I'm surrounded by people and groups that question the way things work (or don't work) and how we can refuse the repetition of oppressive structures. For instance:

"We Cannot Work Like This: Decolonial Practices and Degrowth" was initiated at the Contour Biennale 9 in 2019. I met its local group in Sint Lucas Antwerpen, School of Arts through the inspiring project Break The Canon Make The Canon.

Recently, I had such a bad experience that I realized it was a good pedagogical summary of everything that can go wrong in an editorial process. It checked so many boxes that it felt like a sign urging me to do something about it: a case study to learn from, with emblematic turning points, to be shared further and transformed into an empowering tool, for others and myself in the future.

Hopefully...

But first...

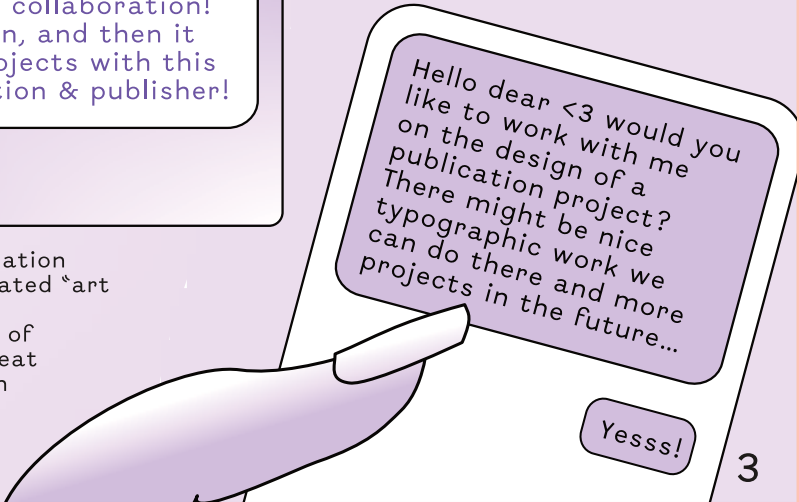
How did I end up in this situation?
Why didn't I see the red flags??

As often, it started with excitement and passion:

I'm so happy about this new collaboration! First this publication's design, and then it seems there will be more projects with this great outsider art organization & publisher!



"Outsider art" is a term used for creation outside of the dominant and legitimated "art world" (schools, museums, market...) It is connected to a complex history of how Western societies create and treat "outsiders" (for instance, people with disabilities) and how allyship and agency can be reclaimed.



With my friend and colleague (another freelance graphic designer) we get prepared to work together on this new adventure!

The first exchanges with the editors are very friendly, the project sounds great, and we talk about working on their new website too...

But then this publication project is cancelled because the associated exhibition is suddenly cancelled and postponed by a few years...

We quickly get another publication project proposal from them:

Here are some images and an intent note:
[female dominatrix figures ... editorial discourse about the supposed transition dreams of this outsider artist]

I have an itchy gut feeling...

There are visuals that I don't feel so comfortable with: an insistence on (almost) naked pin-up women + an obsession with bombs...

... but who am I to judge, as a cis woman?

And after all, they started working with us because their previous designer sexually harassed an intern at their last event...

they know our feminist position, they would be extra careful with sexist content...

I quickly end up ignoring my doubts, everybody is very excited, I don't want to be a killjoy, especially after what they went through with their long-time designer...

Let's go, I want to trust this institution and their publishing project, they make meaningful work with outsider artists and are renowned and respected in my field!

Time passes, and the project is delayed by a few months because the contents aren't ready, the associated exhibition will be taking place later, the curator who initiated the project is going through a burnout...

No problem for us, we understand and we are anyway always quite busy, and in the meantime I'm also ending up on a sick leave for two months: solo mum exhaustion in a capitalist world...

As we finally start working with the main editor, in our first work session we take the time to talk about working conditions and process, an important topic for us. We seem to understand each other, we share experiences of precarious work in the cultural field...

But we quickly feel that something is wrong...

Main editor:

We're used to working in a "ping-pong" mode on the design.

When can we really start?

You know, before, we worked very closely with our designer...

We used to call in the evenings, he would do things overnight... He was a founding member of the publishing house.

My collaborator & I:

Hmmm, what does that mean exactly?

We know it often happens in independent design/editorial practices, but on our side we need to work with a clear schedule, planned in advance, and all the contents ready, to avoid having to work in the evenings. We don't want to work in such stressful conditions anymore.

Yes, yes

I realize it doesn't work for everyone... This transition is a challenge for us at the moment. We're all used to working as volunteers, more or less, in our publishing house...

OK... we're sure we can find ways of working together that respect our different needs and rhythms!

...in retrospect, we should have prepared a written contract and collaboration agreement at this very moment (see p.16)

But it felt too early, with so many things undefined...

That's exactly what these kinds of documents are for: agreeing on guidelines to react to the unexpected!

Still, the process isn't easy. From the beginning, the project is complex: many images that contain a lot of handwritten text, the editors' desire to transcribe and translate the texts, but this is a huge undertaking. An important part of the contents aren't there when we start, the number of pages isn't fixed and there are still a lot of unknown elements in the project, making it difficult for us to have a good overview and start with the design, but also to make a realistic price estimate. At the same time, we feel that they really want us to start the design to meet the due dates...

Can you do another test with the captions on top?

Yes

When can you start working on this other part?

But... we don't have the final contents...

We already told them we didn't think this would work, but it seems they need to see it to believe it...

Just start anyway, they'll come!

Can you also do a version with the captions on the left?

Yes...

With my collaborator, we start worrying seriously:

I feel stressed and stuck by their way of organizing and communicating with us...

Me too... the way they insist on us doing test upon test on details while the content isn't ready is very confusing... They get frustrated but it also seems too much for them.

Sometimes I feel they should do the design themselves!

Little by little, we also understand the underlying stakes for each of the people involved in the project...

The initiator of the project is a curator, artist and collector of the artist's works.

The main editor/coordinator is doing this kind of editorial work for the first time, after working for many years in the shadows of the main figure of the publishing house.

She gets so involved in the project that she ends up doing a part of the design that we identified as far too much work for the means and timing of the project...

At one point, she confides that this project will help her request a state-funded artist subsidy.

The director of the art institution & editor is a friend of the curator.

The art institution & co-publisher received state funding and money from associated exhibition venues which will show the artist's work.

For us there's the promise of other freelance jobs with the arts institution.

We address the workflow issues at our next meeting. The discussion isn't easy.

This workflow is very confusing for us... We're losing a lot of time with this constant back-and-forth process, the timeline is becoming very blurry, and we see you're getting frustrated. It's not a good way to work for either of us.

You know, it's also stressful for me, but we're all volunteers in this publishing structure. And that's how we've always worked.

We're still used to the close collaboration we had with our designer...

He was so responsive!

... are you sure you are still available and up for the project?

Yes, but...

dreaming the

IDEAL EDITORIAL PROCESS

The editorial team members:

GATHER CONTENTS
SELECT EDIT
TRANSLATE

ARRANGE COMPOSE

FEEDBACK (+small edits or changes)

predefined number of structured feedback

VALIDATION

CORRECTIONS

= no changes anymore, ONLY spotting mistakes

PRINT

DESIGN (sample)
ADJUST TEST

pre-defined number of design tests & changes

DESIGN (whole content)

integration corrections & final typos

getting files ready for production

Ideally, the design work only starts when the contents, editorial project and structure are ready and clear.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE EDITOR/COORDINATOR:

- make sure things are clear, structured and OK for everyone
- if things don't work as planned, imagine solutions together with the collaborators
- if there are delays, do close follow-up and rescheduling...

COMMON RESPONSIBILITIES:

- make a contract
- communicate if there is an issue
- accept to pause and (re)think

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE DESIGNER:

- make meaningful design proposals related to the given context and the project's needs and conditions
- respect the timeline planned and the due dates...

(see also the Design Justice Network principles for more ethical concerns ♥)

The project continues as it started, with a few periods of more quiet workflow but an increasing stress as things slowly move forward and some more confusing things appear with the contents...

We also want to talk about this “poor jew” sentence here: what does it mean?

Our translator noticed that too... The curator who initiated the project is in burnout and he’s our only link with the artist. We think he means well, he just writes down things he heard...

We’ll ask him to clarify...

Weeks & months pass

The workflow is so bad that we lose the sense of gravity of some of the red flags we meet along the way...

This is a reminder for the future: bridging theory and practice is a real challenge!

The image proposed by the editors for the cover:

A drawing of a nuclear explosion and a naked female body lying underneath

We propose another cover image with a powerful androgynous figure that gets accepted

When we ask them what should be on the spine:

A missile falling

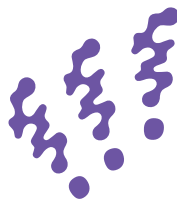


For the future: pay attention to the reproduction and normalization of violent representations (e.g. bombs) even or especially when they’re “beautiful (art) images”.

Long story short, things got worse and worse, culminating when antisemitic hate speech was discovered by the translator working on the last contents in a layer of a drawing, two weeks before printing.

We tried to address the gravity of the situation with the editors and the art institution’s director, but we soon realized they were minimizing the situation because of the rush to production and the stakes.

We asked for these issues to be taken seriously but they came back to us with a pressing email about the printing due dates (solving the antisemitic “issue” by adding a disclaimer in the colophon of the book...)

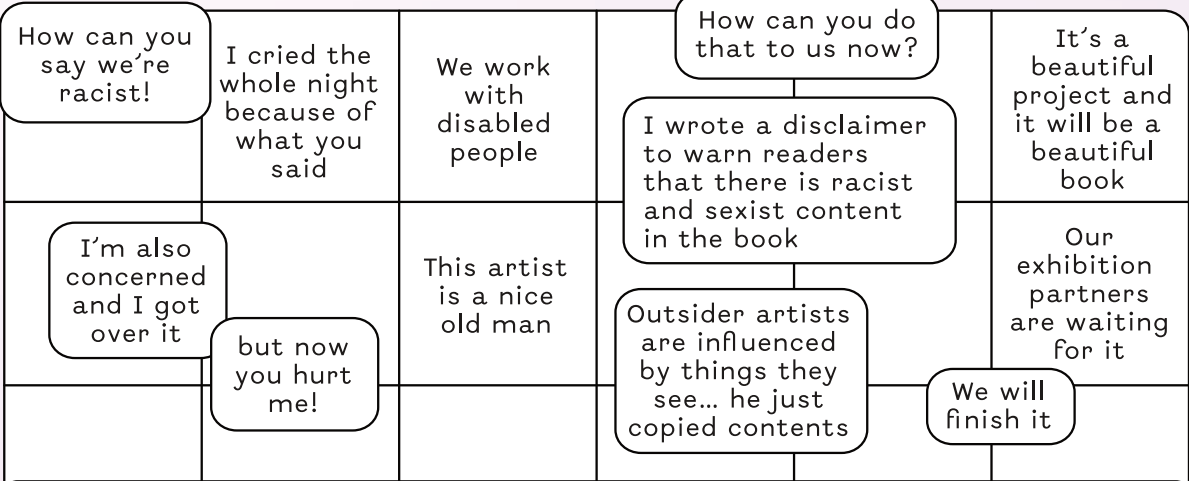


TW HOSTILE COMMUNICATION
ANTISEMITISM
RACISM & WHITE TEARS
SEXISM
ABLEISM

In a current global context of wars and genocides, the rise of the extreme right and fascism this is not something we can align ourselves with...

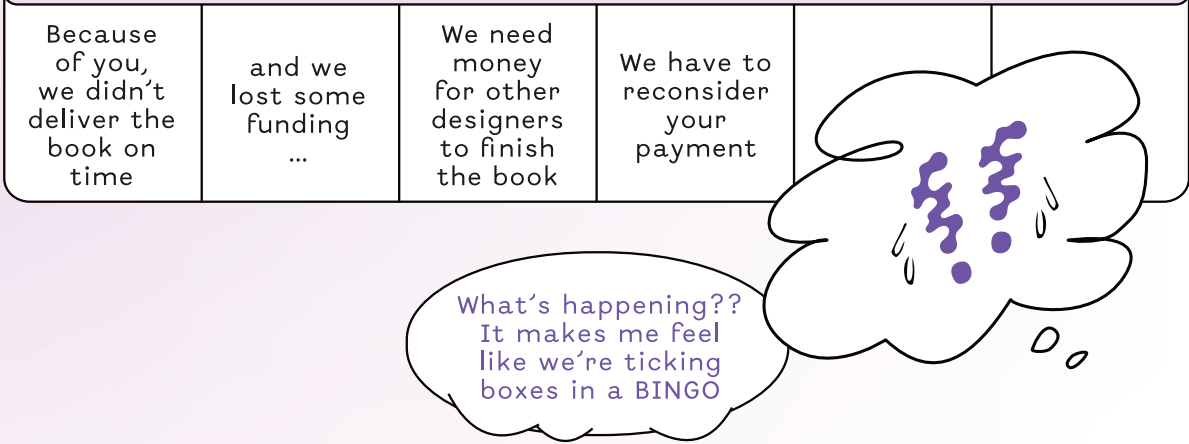
With my collaborator, we decided to send them an email letting them know we wanted to stop working on the project because we didn't want to contribute to the publishing of that content (even with a disclaimer in the colophon) and we no longer trusted them...

Their reaction to our email was very intense:

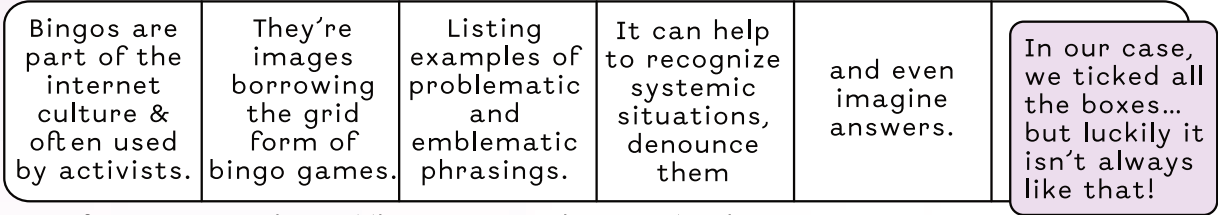


This situation ended up hurting all parties ... who were already exhausted by an impossible workflow which clearly didn't help with the communication, despite our efforts to be very pedagogical — in vain.

There followed a never-ending series of emails trying to justify ourselves as we were targeted as the problem, resulting in a re-negotiation of our fee...

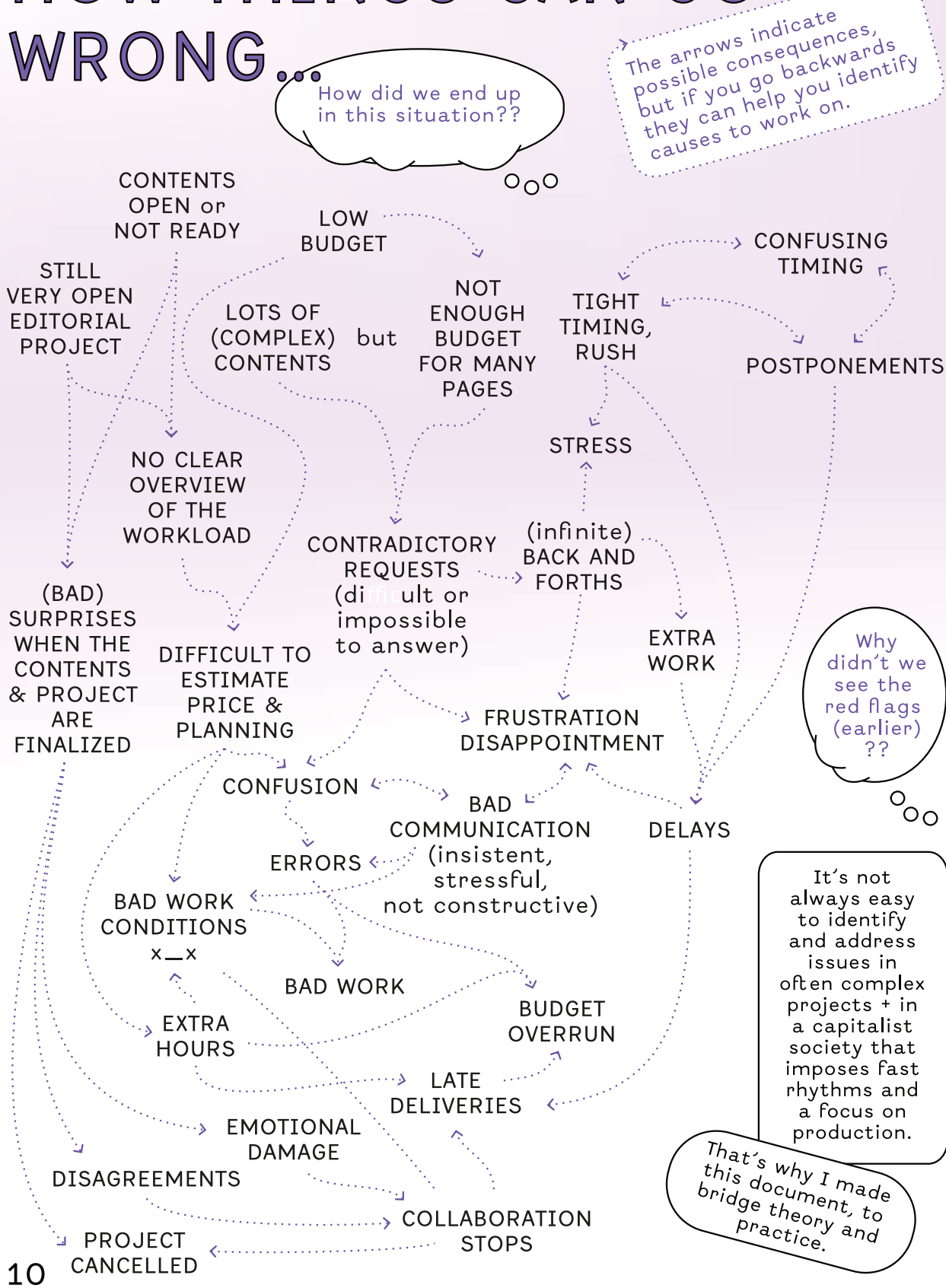


LEARNING FROM BINGOS



See for instance: <http://bingo.ttttoolbox.net/EN.html>

HOW THINGS CAN GO WRONG

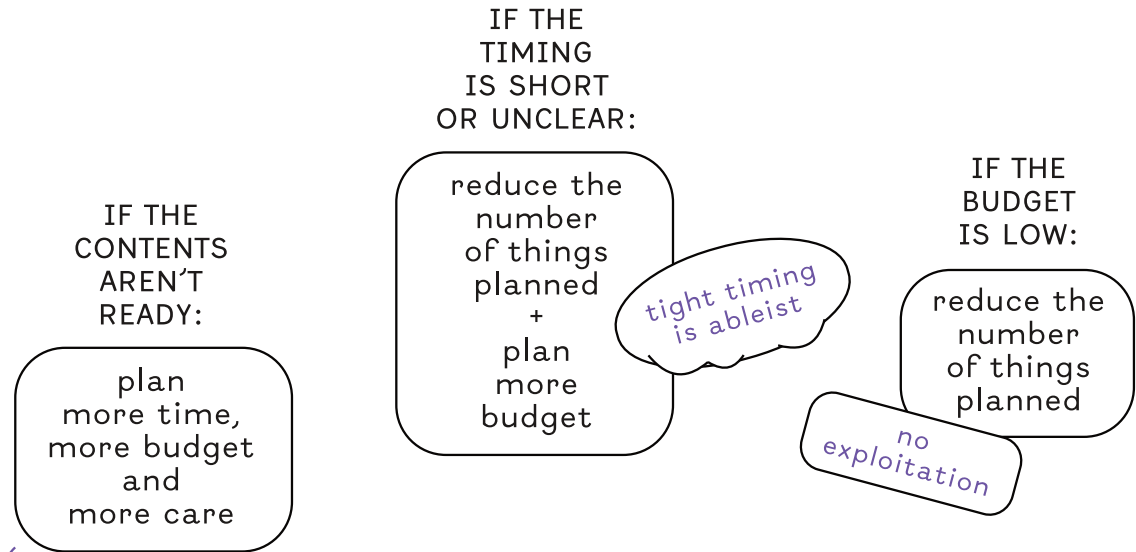


WHAT YOU CAN DO:



SUGGESTION: trust (your) (gut) feelings, as early as you can, and when things seem wrong, raise the issue with your collaborators. You can use this document as a guide for a constructive discussion.

PROPOSE / PRACTISE:

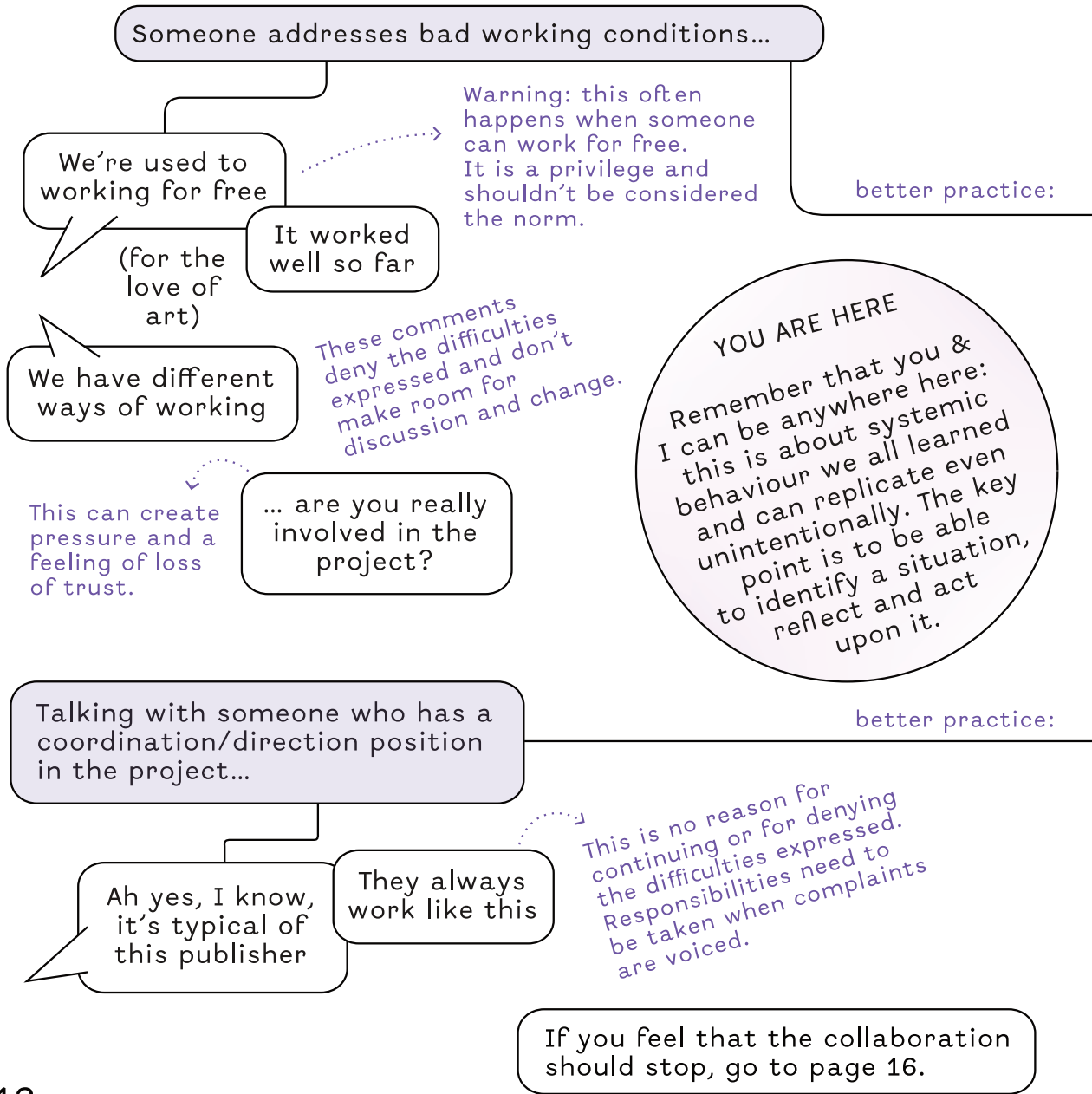


When things are very open/undefined, there is a risk that the people involved won't agree with the content once it's ready. For that, it is good to plan enough time (and money for people's time) to sit down together as new content and new decisions/directions are taken, to check in with everyone about the continuation of the project.

COMPLAINTS & CARE

Addressing a problematic situation or work process requires courage and is often risky: as Sara Ahmed analysed in her work on complaint, people who point out problems in institutions are often perceived as the problem themselves... 

YOU MIGHT HEAR / SAY:



WHEN THINGS BECOME EVEN WORSE :'(

We should never minimize the discrimination that other persons can't get over.

I'm (also) concerned and I got over it

Addressing a discrimination in the process

How can you say I'm racist!

I cried the whole night because of what you said

I'm shocked, I'm hurt

(White) tears and fragility come when someone feels hurt that others might see them as a "bad person". The issue is that it moves the attention on themselves, it blames the ones who expressed suffering from discrimination, and it then becomes difficult to have a constructive discussion and start working on the issue to move forward. Racism at work is a topic that isn't covered here, but it is important to remember that things can be intertwined.

You're/this person is too sensitive

This minimizes the person's feelings by suggesting that it is a personal issue. When it's about work conditions or discrimination, chances are that more people will feel the same.

You should have brought it up earlier / in a different way

This is tone policing. When someone feels hurt or oppressed, always assume they did their best to communicate things with you.

PRACTICE:

If you literally said these words or had a discriminatory behaviour: stop, calm down, and start thinking. Brief apologies are a good start. Don't take up too much space, and don't argue or try to explain or justify yourself.

Instead, you can try:

I didn't realize this could be such a difficult work process / a racist mechanism / ... Sorry if that was the case, let me take a bit of time, consider it and then let's see together how we can continue from there.

better practice:

ANSWERING COMPLAINTS

IN GENERAL:
when there is
an issue, take
the time to
address it,
the whole
process will
benefit from it

IF A COMPLAINT
IS VOICED:
listen
& take it as
an opportunity
to learn and
grow

IF SOMEONE IS
HURT IN THE
PROCESS:
think about
reparation

A good way to approach conflicts is to address the systemic dimensions behind a behaviour and find tools to engage personal responsibility in acting upon it. If both sides can acknowledge that everyone can make mistakes, it's already a fruitful starting point.

Get informed. But don't ask the concerned person to do the pedagogy — it was certainly already a lot of emotional labour for them — unless you pay them well (if and only if they are willing to do that job). You can read anti-discrimination resources and learn. You can pay specialized (and concerned) people to coach you on the anti-discrimination journey. It is a long-term learning journey: a tough but necessary, confronting, nurturing and meaningful one.

HEALING ✨

Even if the project wasn't put on hold and you didn't get what you needed at some point in the process, you can take a break to evaluate calmly what is at stake for you here and come back to the project with proposals that are aligned with your needs and capacities.

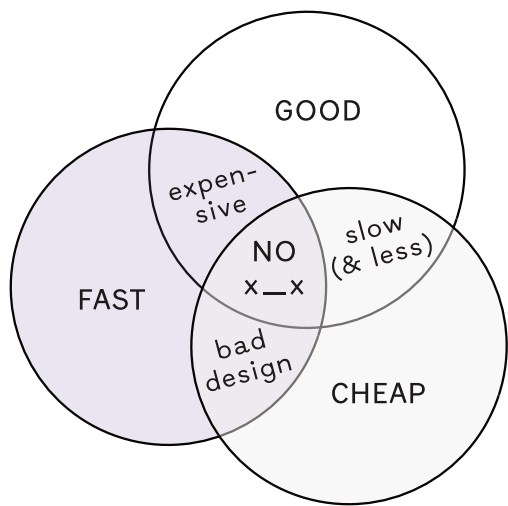
When you can, think about ways to repair the pain you endured. What can you do for yourself that will help you move forward (in the direction you want)?

If the discussion isn't constructive anymore, it might be necessary to stop the collaboration. You can go to page 16 and then focus on getting paid for what you've done so far.

In my case, transforming a bad work and human experience into an empowering tool was a healing trajectory

FINDING BALANCE

This journey made me think about
a graph I saw when I was a student:

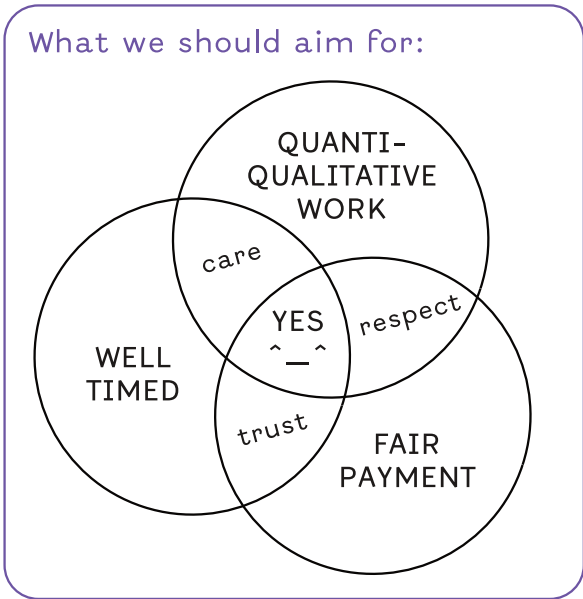


The idea of this graph is
“you can’t have it all, pick two”:

Qualitative but fast = expensive
Qualitative but cheap = slow
Cheap AND fast = bad design

... but it’s quite problematic
because it reproduces a system
built on negotiating bad
working conditions.

... and rethink it:



A well-estimated
and consented
schedule, in
balance with the
quantity, quality
(depth) and
payment of
the work.

A clearly defined
project, in terms
of the quantity and
quality expected.
As regards the editors,
it means preparation
and coordination.
As regards the
designers and other
people involved, it
means an engagement
towards the set goals
of the project.
To be defined according
to the schedule and the
payment.

A realistic and
consented payment
for the work and the
time it is estimated
to take.

REFERENCES

By order of appearance and using a custom intersectional citation style:
Staying with the Trouble by Donna Haraway, Duke University Press, 2016
Design Justice Network principles: [designjustice.org/read the principles](https://designjustice.org/read-the-principles)
BINGO GGGO, 2021: bingo.ttttoolbox.net/EN.html
Complaint! by Sara Ahmed, Duke University Press, 2021 + feministkilljoys.com

COLLABORATION AGREEMENT / CONTRACT <3

Did you discuss and sign a collaboration agreement or contract together with your collaborator? It's a good place to start, to make things clear, know each other's needs and boundaries, and define conditions: if a condition isn't met, one can ask to change, and after raising the issue several times, put an end to the collaboration.

In a contract, talk about postponing due dates (from both sides) and changing the calendar: it happens a lot and often creates misunderstandings. How can it be dealt with to avoid losing everyone in a loose schedule?

Planning intermediary invoices is a good way to set moments to evaluate how the project is going. If the project isn't defined enough to agree on a precise price offer, you should do one anyway, either with options, or one based on a precise number of working hours that can then be renewed if the project goes beyond.

Time is really key. Plan moments to check in on time (maybe in sync with intermediary invoicing?). When you realize that things are taking too much time, how can this be addressed together, and what can be adjusted in order to get work/time/payment in balance again? Ideas: make things simpler, do less, or get more budget and time!

You should always have the option to pause/stop/leave a project that becomes hurtful.

Many thanks to Alice Marion, Diana Arbaiza, Alicia Cristo for their precious feedback and encouragement.



Thanks to all my collaborators so far, from whom I've learned so much.

Thanks to the *Grounds* editorial team and especially to Kim Gorus for her close follow-up.

Fabulous font: Abordage, by Ange Degheest and her feminist revivers.

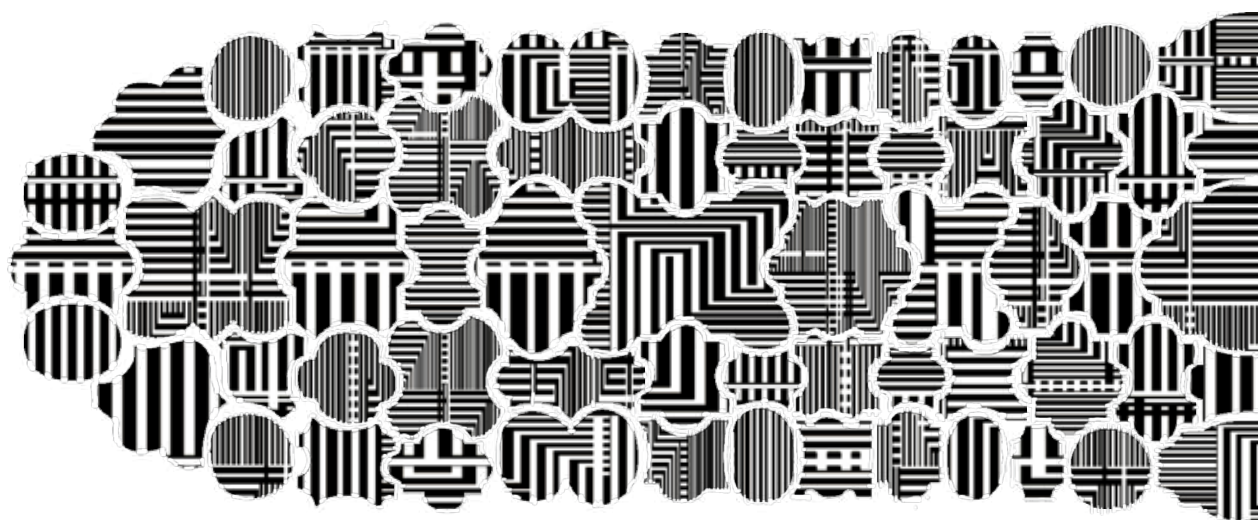
Talk about possibilities to leave/stop the project. Mention it in the agreement too!



THE END

‘Le Fil de §ucre-pourpre de ^Mulohò’ §explained

§ammy §aloji



In my practice as a visual artist and artistic researcher, I investigate the histories embedded in the landscapes, objects and societies of the Democratic Republic of Congo, asking how form and material can carry memory, power and meaning. Two traditions from the Luba—a Bantu ethnic group from south-central Congo known for their rich artistic, political and ritual heritage—lie at the heart of this inquiry: the *Kasàlà*, an oral form of praise poetry that both honours individuals, ancestors and communities and functions as a collective memory device; and the *Lukasa*, a mnemonic board used by initiates to transmit the history of the Luba kingdom. Within my PhD project ‘Contemporary Kasàlà and Lukasa: Towards a Reconfiguration of Identity and Geopolitics’, I bring these northern and southern Luba practices into dialogue with one another, creating a new, living archive. The aim is not to erase colonial contexts but to situate them within Congolese systems of knowledge, generating ways of remembering and narrating that acknowledge colonialism as an ongoing system.

MATERIAL

For this contribution to *Grounds*, I decided to publish my first self-written *Kasàlà*, in which sugar takes centre stage. In my visual work, I often explore the global connections between the economy, politics and aesthetics in relation to extractivism, with a focus on copper. In this case, it is sugar that fills this role. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sugar held both economic and sculptural value. Cultivated as a commodity of empire, it was also staged as a medium of artistic spectacle. Art historian Ewa Kociszewska (2020) has shown how sugar statuettes in late Renaissance Venice—such as those produced for the 1574 ball honouring Henry III—mediated antiquity and embodied civic identity, while Maureen Cassidy-Geiger (2007) has demonstrated how sugar confections at the Dresden court under Augustus III participated in a cultural interplay of silver, porcelain and the politics of hospitality.

By weaving these histories into the poetic form of the *Kasàlà*, I approach sugar not simply as a substance, but as a sculptural and mnemonic medium. Just as sugar was moulded into ephemeral statues carrying symbolic weight, the *Kasàlà* shapes words, memories and relationships into form. In this sense, it becomes both an artistic and a research method: a way to connect materiality, memory, extractivism and belonging, while giving voice to silenced objects and concealed stories within a wider geopolitical reflection.

The economic and political dimensions of sugar are inseparable from its artistic value. Its expansion relied on enslaved African labour, making Black bodies themselves instruments of capital, their exploitation underwriting both economic growth and cultural spectacle. Sugar thus embodies convergences of aesthetics, wealth and violence: a marker of class distinction and aristocratic display, and simultaneously a product inseparable from transatlantic slavery. Invoking sugar within the *Kasàlà* makes this entanglement visible, using words and material together as sculptural tools to reveal how extractivism, slavery and artistry remain intertwined across histories and into the present.

FORM

The narrative of the *Kasàlà* is fragmented: both in terms of the subject, as I go through different pieces of history, and in terms of the *Kasàlà* itself, which is fragmentary, built out of verses to respect the idea of narrative splintering.

Besides the fragmentary nature of the writing, repetition is another key figure of speech in the *Kasàlà*. When you listen to the *Kasàlà*, whether reading it in silence or out loud, elements recur with slight transformations. For example, the thread mentioned at the beginning of my *Kasàlà* starts off as a copper wire before changing into uranium and later transforming into rubber. This repetition is not redundant but evolutionary since I want to keep moving forward in the story itself.

A third element of form brings us back to the question of material and is directly linked to my artistic practice, namely the element of collaging and my aim to reconnect different territories and histories across pre- and post-colonial eras. I've always created collages within my practice, either in the literal sense of cutting and gluing images, or by merging different stories and materials to create a narrative. This collaging technique enables me to start with fragments of existing works that I find interesting from a genealogical perspective. I integrate these pieces into my work, for example by bringing them into dialogue with historical narratives and popular music. In this way, I explore questions of history, morality and sexuality, as well as the unspoken aspects and political and social dimensions of urban planning. This repetition, collaging and fragmentation all refer to memory and the possibility of forgetting. Memory functions in a fragmentary way, and so in these fragmentations I'm allowing myself a repetitive response that nevertheless transforms and evolves. Therefore, the *Kasàlà* can never be finished.

Existing as a fragmented collage, it can always be added to, and depth can be given to the present.

TEMPORALITY

Besides the material and form of the *Kasàlà*, there is also its temporality. I traverse temporality, which includes the notions of the past, the present and the ever-expanding future. Where does the problem begin and where are we going? That's what the *Kasàlà* wants to talk about—the encounter between the West and Africa, between sugar, matter and body, but also about economic transformations. It highlights how, through this type of economy, we find ourselves in power relations—relations of domination, slavery and racism.

This reflects why time is important to me. Time highlights the origins of the problem while emphasizing the need for a solution, which almost becomes a question in itself by the end. Within the question of genealogy, there is the question of religion as a transformation of colonization—the very element of conquest I evoke when referring to Stanley, and indirectly to Elon Musk. I'm trying to find a way to talk about these historical and contemporary personalities, representing time as cyclical rather than repetitive, whereby we find ourselves in a loop. If there was domination in the precolonial period and domination in the colonial period, and if there is domination today, where will it go in the future?

Temporality contains the notion of origin—which is also included in the *Kasàlà*—still in terms of genealogy and mythology. All peoples and civilizations try to explain their existence through mythology. Mulohò, the god of the Luba people, is the link in my *Kasàlà* to this mythological realm, which enables humans to connect with the metaphysical, the spiritual and the unknown—forces that explain human existence and balance human frailties.

*M'ayant entendu, Mulohò se tut,
prit ce tambour et me le donna;
M'ayant donné le tambour,
Mulohò me brancha un fil;
Il m'a mis un fil au coeur.
Mulohò bouge-t-il le fil,
Je me lève tout de suite,
J'écoute par le fil,
Et j'entend ce que raconte Mulohò.*

*D'où monte le soleil,
Il ne nous vint point d'affaires;
Tous les ennuis nous viennent d'où il alla se coucher;
Il en vint des portugais montés sur des boeufs,
Il en vint des moines vêtus de robes blanches; venus de la terre du Saint Père.
Ils versèrent, soit disant, de l'« eau bénite » sur le front du roi Kongo;
Par la suite, les nôtres remplirent par milliers les cales des bateaux sans
jamais revenir;*

*Désormais peuple du Mundus Novus,
crachant du coton rouge sang,
Écumant la canne à sucre de sa semence pourpre.*

« Parles-moi de la sculpture en sucre pourpre! »

*« Dès que Henri III, roi de Pologne et de France, entra dans la Sala delà
Scrutinio,
il vit la disposition offerte de dames dans le Palazzo Ducale,
D'aucun ignore qu'il préférerait la chair fraîche, vivantes et naturelles aux
figures artificielles et sans vie...
Quel plaisir il dut éprouver, lorsqu'il monta sur son estrade et vit une si
longue file ordonnée de 190 belles femmes.
Des nobles vénitiennes délicates, toutes disposées,
Possédant un teint fin, comme les roses et les lys.
Des femmes pleines, agréables.
Qui se réjouissent d'avoir les cheveux blonds,
ce qui les rend si excellentes que les femmes de toutes les autres nations.
Ces femmes de l'île qui donna naissance à la déesse Venice-Venus.
Vêtues d'étoffes de soie plus blanches,
Couronnées de perles petites et grandes,
diamants, saphirs,
rubis, améthystes
portées en colliers, chaînes, ceintures et bracelets,
Savez-vous combien le sang vénitien est rare et beau,
surtout chez les femmes,
Ces noblesses admirant une armée de figurines en sucre si rares:
Des figures anthropomorphes en sucre rosat parfumé,
toutes peintes en blanc ou fabriquées avec du sucre de meilleure qualité*

le fioreton et le cipria venue des colonies vénitiennes.

*de femmes, d'hommes,
de quadrupèdes, mollusques, de monstres,
des bateaux, des cales...
Des cales de bateaux aux corps noirs, amers, gisants, enchainés...
De griffons, Des dieux et déesses:
Pallas et Justice,
Saint Marc et David,
Fame,
Hymen,
Pegasuses,
Espérance,
Hercule portant le monde sur son dos,
Mercure,
Jupiter,
Venus,
Saturne,
Des femmes enlacées, dansant, tenant un bouquet de fleurs en soie.
Toutes en sucre dans le seraglio des corps sucrés du Palazzo Ducale,
faites, comme vous le dites, de la main d'artisans exceptionnels! »
Que disais-je: d'artistes exceptionnels!
Jacopo Sansovino,
Danese Cattaneo*

*Une magnifique collection de 300 sculptures en sucre,
œuvre du noble et vertueux Nicolò della cavalliera,
Marchand d'épices et de sucre à l'enseigne de la pomme de pin.
Mais, la valeur des statuettes ne dépendait plus du prix du sucre,
La suprématie vénitienne n'était plus que chimère.
Chypre avait viré aux mains de l'Empire Ottoman, ennemi juré de Venise
Peuples du Mundus Novus,
écumant la canne à sucre de sa semence pourpre.*

*Le roi de France était, certes, un visiteur de marque à Venise,
Et, Venise avait 190 nobles femmes vénitiennes
Et 300 figurines en sucre fioreton, cipria mêlé au pourpre-sang de l'Atlantique*

*Eh! Braves gens!
Mourez donc!
Les survivants resteront
en enfanter d'autres
Seuls 190 femmes, 300 figurines pourpres et le roi de France, étaient admis
dans le doux Seraglio de corps sucrés.
Etalage charnelle des dames toutes prêtes à être goûtée,
comme les desserts qu'elles mangent avec le roi.*

*Héros militaire et pourfendeur de l'hérésie,
H comme Henri-Hercule, fatigué de ses exploits et jetant sa gourme dans
les bras de 190 belles Venus.*

*Sukali! Sukali!
Elengi! Elengi!
Sukali! Sukali!
Elengi! Elengi!
Suka n'ango!
Bololo!*

*Lui, Hercule promet à la Princesse Anna, fille du roi Sigismond,
futur géniteur de l'héritier du trône de France devra dévergonder Venus
dans la salle de vote du Grand Conseil vénitien; la salle des corps
doux-sucre-caramel.
tableau vivant du corps politique vénitien,
Cadeau H-érotique de sa libéralité et de sa richesse.
Il ne restait plus qu'à Henri de déguster chaires et sucre pourpre*

*M'ayant entendu, Mulohò se tut,
Il me brancha un fil cuivré au coeur.
Je me lève de suite,
J'écoute par le fil-cuivre:*

*Que l'infertilité d'Henri III fût imputée à la syphilis de Venise-Venus,
Que le sucre-caramel fût incriminé par les traités médicaux et diététiques
de brûler le sang,
Que Veronica Franco fût attaquée de propager des maladies sucrées
Que les corps voluptueux des courtisanes furent considérées toutes
dangereuses.*

*Au lever du soleil,
Ils remirent le banquet des sculptures sucrées au Mariage de Maria de
Medici et Henri IV de France,
Au coucher du soleil
Ils remirent le banquet sucre-pourpre-atlantique au Mariage de Cosimo de
Medici et Maddalena d'Autriche,*

*Et la renaissance fut!
Et l'art fût!
Désormais, le sucre pourpre était monnaie courante sur l'atlantique*

*Sukali! Sukali!
Elengi! Elengi!
Sukali! Sukali!
Elengi! Elengi!
Suka n'ango!
Bololo!*

*D'où monte le soleil,
 Il ne nous vint point d'affaires;
 Le continent mère saccagé par des siècles de razzia,
 Tous les ennuis nous viennent d'où le soleil alla se coucher;*

*Il en vint Stanley, Bula Matari-casseur de pierres, pour le compte de sa
 Majesté Leopold II, roi des belges,
 Mulohò me brancha un fil de caoutchouc,
 Le reste du fil-caoutchouc, Mulohò s'en servit pour rafistoler les mains
 coupées par Bula Matari dans les champs de Caoutchouc,
 Il en vint le roi Albert, Buana Kitoko
 Muloho me brancha un fil uranium
 J'entendis gronder Hiroshima et Nagasaki
 De plus, Lumumba alla mettre la main sur l'affaire.
 Cette main noire éprise d'euphorie qui arracha l'épée de Buana Kitoko
 L'épée de Damoclès plane sur nos minerais du Katanga
 Les fils cuivres de Mulohù
 L'uranium de Shinkolobwe
 Le lithium de Mask
 Le cobalt vert pour un monde vert-pourpre
 Cette affaire caramel étant sortit se répandit contagieusement sur nous tous;
 Nous creusons terre, ciel et lune pour nous en écarter.*

ENG

Upon hearing me, Mulohò was silent
 he then took the drum and handed it to me;
 By giving me the drum,
 Mulohò strung me up;
 With a thread tied right to the heart.
 Mulohò, rise the thread,
 I rise along,
 And hear through the thread,
 what Mulohò is saying.

From where the sun is rising,
 No issues ever came to bother us;
 All our troubles came from where it goes to sleep.
 The Portuguese arrived on oxen,
 White-clad monks came from the land of the Holy Father.
 It is said they poured 'holy water' on the king of Congo head;
 Then thousands of our people boarded the boats, never to return.

Now people of the Mundus Novus
 spitting the blood-red cotton,
 Clean the sugar cane of its purple seeds.
 "Tell me about the sculpture of purple sugar!"

As soon as Henry III, king of Poland and France entered the Sala dello
Scrutinio,
he saw what choice of dames Palazzo Ducale offers,
Some do not fathom that he preferred alive, natural flesh to artificial,
lifeless statues...
What pleasure must he have felt when he ascended the platform and saw
this long, ordered
line of 190 beautiful women.
Delicate Venetian gentry, all exposed,
With the skin delicate like roses and lilies.
Full-bodied women.
Blessed with blonde hair,
what makes them superior to women of other nations.
Women from the island that gave birth to the goddess Venice-Venus.
Clad in silk more white,
Crowned with pearls, big and small,
diamonds, sapphires,
rubies, amethysts
worn as necklaces, chains, belts and bracelets,
Do you know how rare and fine is Venetian blood,
especially in women?

This nobility admiring the army of so rare sugar figures:
Humanoidal shapes made of fragrant rose sugar,
all painted white or sculpted of finer sort of sweet mass,
like flowery or powdered sugar from Venetian colonies.

men and women,
quadrupeds, molluscs, monsters,
boats, bays...
Cargo holds full of black, bodies, embittered, lying in chains...
Griffons, gods and goddesses:
Pallas and Justice,
Saint Mark and David,
Fame,
Hymen,
Pegasi,
Hope,
Hercules carrying the world on his shoulders,
Mercury,
Jupiter,
Venus,
Saturn,
Women embracing, dancing, holding bouquets of silken flowers.
All made of sugar in the seraglio of sweet bodies in Palazzo Ducale,
made, as you mentioned, by exquisite craftsmen!
What do I say! Exquisite artists!
Jacopo Sansovino,
Danese Cattaneo

Outstanding assembly of 300 sugar sculptures,
made by noble and virtuous Nicolò della Cavalliera,
Spice and sugar merchant under the sing of a pine cone.

By the value of statuettes is no longer tied to sugar price,
Venetian supremacy was no longer a dream.
The Cyprus fell into hands of the Ottomans, Venice's sworn enemy.

People of Mundus Novus,
Clean the sugar cane of its purple seeds.
King of France was certainly a guest of honour in Venice,
Venice had 190 noble Venetian women
And 300 figures of flowery and powdered sugar mixed with the purple
blood of the Atlantic

Hey! Good people!
Die!
Those, who survived, will remain
to give birth to new ones

Just these 190 women, 300 purple characters and the king of France were
allowed into the sweet seraglio of sugary bodies.
Carnal demonstration of women ready for tasting,
like desserts that they eat with the king.
Military hero and vanquisher of heresy,
H like Henry-Hercules, tired of his exploits and throwing himself into the
arms of 190
beautiful Venuses.

Sukali! Sukali!
Elengi! Elengi!
Sukali! Sukali!
Elengi! Elengi!
Suka n'ango!
Bololo!

Hercules proposed to princess Anna, daughter to king Sigismund,
future ancestor of the heir to the throne of France will have to renounce
Venus in the Great
Council of Venice vote counting hall, hall of sweet caramel sugar bodies.
Living image of the Venetian political body,
H-erotic gift of his magnanimity and wealth.
The only thing left for Henry was to enjoy the pleasures of flesh and
purple sugar.

Upon hearing me, Mulohò was silent
And he strung me up with a copper thread, tied right to my heart.

I rise along,
And listen through the copper thread:

That infertility of Henry III was blamed on Venetian-Venusian syphilis,
That medical treatises called the caramel sugar a 'blood-burner',
That Veronica Franco was attacked for disseminating sweet maladies.
That sensuous bodies of courtesans were considered very dangerous.

At sunrise,
A banquet of sweet sculptures was held for the marriage of Maria de
Medici and Henry IV of
France,
At sundown
A sugary-purple-Atlantic banquet was held for the marriage of Cosimo
de Medici and
Magdalene of Austria,

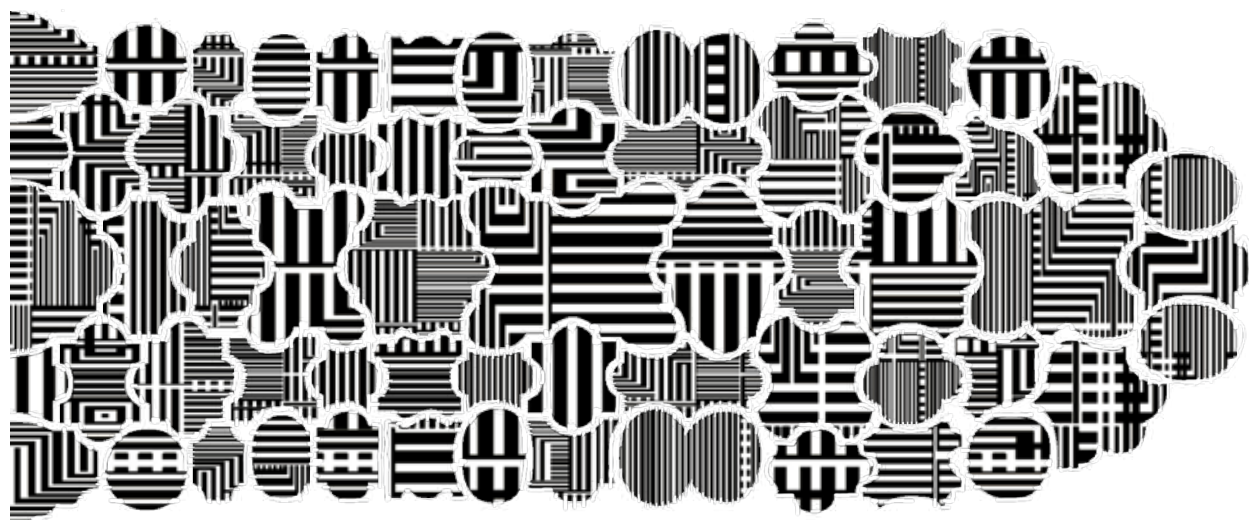
And the Renaissance began
And the art flourished!
Since then, the purple sugar was a common sight on the Atlantic.

Sukali! Sukali!
Elengi! Elengi!
Sukali! Sukali!
Elengi! Elengi!
Suka n'ango!
Bololo!

From where the sun is rising,
No issues ever came to bother us;
Our mother continent was ravaged by centuries of raids
All our troubles came from where the sun goes to sleep.

There was also Stanley, Bula Matari, a stoneworker working for His
Majesty King Leopold II,
king of Belgium,
Mulohò strung me up with a rubber thread,
Mulohò used the remains of the rubber thread to fix the hands cut off by
Bula Matari on the rubber fields,

Then came king Albert, Bwana Kitoko
Mulohò strung me up with uranium thread
I heard the groaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
What more, Lumumba came for his share.
Euphoric black hand that stole Bwana Kitoko's sword
The sword of Damocles hangs over our minerals of Katanga
Copper threads of Mulohù
Uranium of Shinkolobwe
Lithium from Mask
Green cobalt for the green-purple world
This caramel affair spread contagiously on all of us;
We dig deep into soil, sky and moon to escape.



REFERENCES

- Cassidy-Geiger, Maureen. 2007.
'Von Zucker und Silber zum
Porzellan: Die Konditorei
und die öffentliche Tafel in
Dresden unter August III.'
Keramos 198: 31–48.
- Kociszewska, Ewa. 2020.
'Displays of Sugar Sculpture
and the Collection
of Antiquities in Late
Renaissance Venice.'
Renaissance Quarterly 73
(2): 441–88. [https://doi.
org/10.1017/rqx.2020.2](https://doi.org/10.1017/rqx.2020.2).

Text formulated by Minne
De Meyer Engelbeen.
Edited by Henriette Gillerot
and Tom Viaene.

where
And who
And What
We Grew

Saskia Van der Bucht

The following text is a reminiscing of the making of 'the seeds of simili', a short film made by Saskia Van der Gucht and Matthias Kreuzburg in collaboration with all the participants in the tenth edition of Movimento during a two-week residency in Idanha-a-Velha, Portugal in August 2024.

The film portrays a search for the feeling of home in the beginning of a new relationship between two people. In times of ecological anxiety and material scarcity, how do we imagine rooting in place? What are the elements we need to make *home*? What if none of them could be extracted and everything needed to be grown?

The idea of taking part in this residency in the context of my one-year research project 'on sand: unpacking preciousness' at Slarg sprung from conversations with my dear friend Joke Van den Heuvel. She has been attending Movimento for many years and is closely connected to its founders, Carlos Gaspar, Catarina Simões, Ines T. Alves, Patrick Thomas and Sebastião Braga. Movimento is a collaborative cinema lab, open to anyone interested in film experimentation. It takes place in a different region of Portugal every year, with the purpose of making short films developed on the basis of mutual aid, meaning non-competitive work processes, co-creation, collaboration and sharing, guided by principles of self-organization. This residency includes neither teachers nor classes, and is built through mutual support among its participants. At the end of the residency, the works are shown during a public screening.

Moving image and film are fairly new to me. Except for a stop-motion experiment in school — for which I disassembled a jewellery box — and an abstract music video — which I made for a friend's solo bass guitar soundscapes — I had never considered the medium as my own. Did I think that film was better suited for artists interested in depicting moving bodies, whether human or more-than-human? I care for bodies of any kind, my own and those of others, yet I never seem compelled to show them in my artistic work. They often remain unmentioned, hinted at, perceived through their absence.

Photography has long been a part of my artistic practice, a way of collecting ideas, images, light and textures, capturing small details and a certain way of seeing and framing my surroundings. Houses that are no longer there are a recurrent subject. They are often found in cities, visible through traces of materials and shapes left on neighbouring buildings: lines which step by step suggest a staircase, different colours of paint or wallpaper dividing rooms without walls, a diagonal change in surface pointing to a missing roof. Sometimes these images became finished pieces, printed or projected in exhibition spaces; at other times they remained sources of inspiration, archival footage or personal treasures in back-up folders on tucked-away hard disks.

Unlike these hidden remnants that often go unseen, 'the seeds of simili' has been screened in public three times since it was made. I was present on two of those occasions, and each time I tried to watch the film with different eyes to learn something new. In my practice as an object and installation maker, I search for ways to use tangible materials as metaphors to reflect on ideas and perceptions. The outcomes of this process are often quite minimalistic, as if I were trying to capture an essence or make my point without embellishments. Watching this film repeatedly, it occurred to me how a film-maker has many more tools to express something. Not just the light of the Sun, but her slow rising, bells in the distance, a Portuguese song from 1982, a voice-over recorded in a car with the windows up against the heat, the full names of people who played their part.

What follows
is a reflection
on the experience
of the residency
and
a selection of
still images
from the film.

Arriving at Idanha-a-Velha was a peculiar experience. It started with a text message from an unknown number regarding the size of the van Matthias and I had been travelling in for almost four weeks at this point. The two thousand-year-old Roman bridge over the dry Pônsul riverbed seemed to be in good shape, and together with the people who were waiting for us on the other side, we concluded that both bridge and vehicle would manage. We drove onto the dusty road which led up to the house on the land where we could stay for a while.

The land is owned by Fundação Terra Agora, a Portuguese foundation that aims to preserve and restore land in Portugal. They assign long-term land use rights to a guardian with a specific vision. For the 1600 hectares surrounding the old village of Idanha-a-Velha, the guardian is the Idanha-a-Vida project, which co-organized the residency this year. Through their ecological restoration and social programmes, the project wants to create a sanctuary of care for Mother Nature and the inhabitants of this region.

They do this by working with three thematic and inter-related components: water, soil, and plants and animals. Simultaneously, they take care of the village and its people by supporting initiatives from the community and their traditions such as hand-picking olives and mushrooms, baking bread in the communal wood oven, and caring for their vegetable gardens.

After crossing as slowly as possible, being rocked from left to right on the huge cobblestones, we drove down the dirt road and turned left at the wooden sign reading 'Casabela'. Coming from the other direction was an old pick-up truck. Through the windows of both cars, we met Duarte and Sebastião for the first time. They explained there was a spot in the shade for us to park, as we would be sleeping in the van and the day-time temperatures were rising to 38°C. Over the following two weeks, shade became shelter.



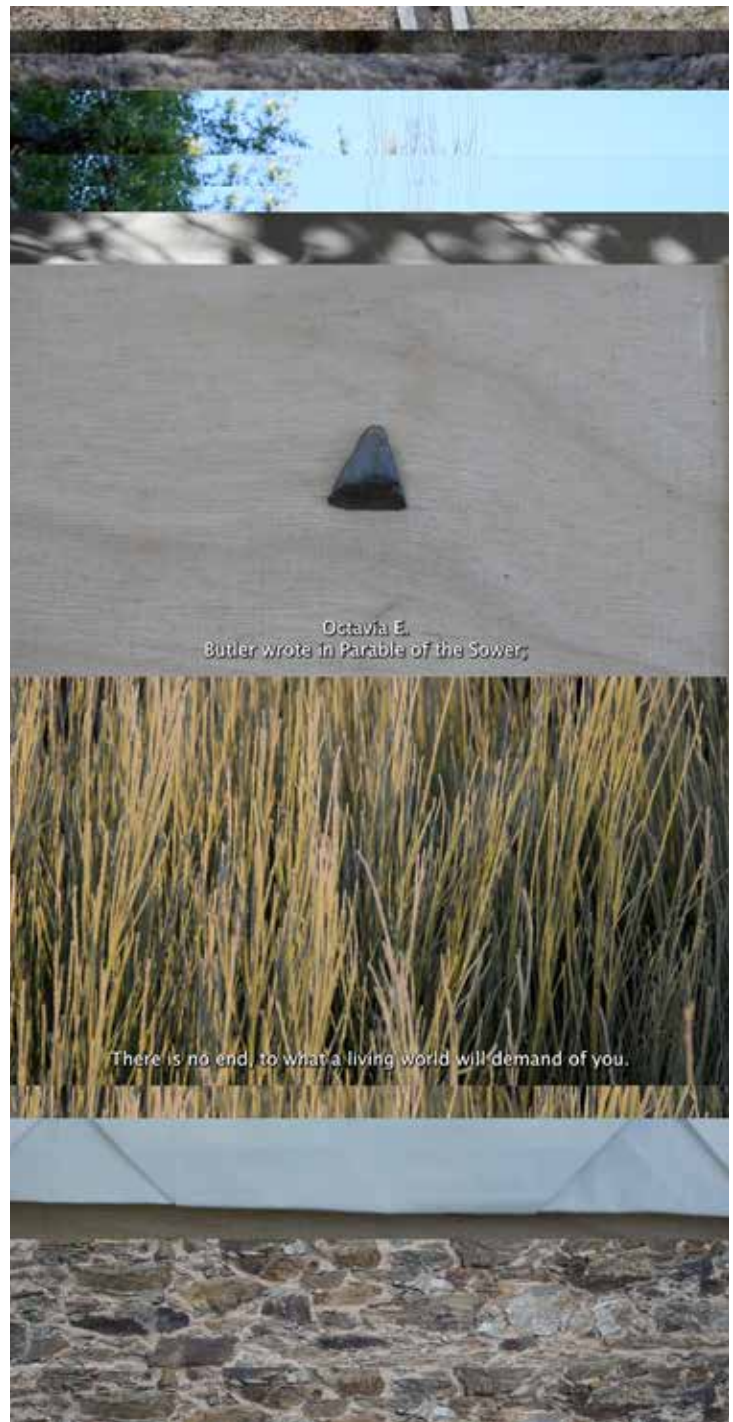
It took a few days before all thirty-five people who were participating arrived. Slowly, more and more names filled the large roll of paper on the wall which divided daily life into different types of care, smaller and bigger tasks and chores, some less romantic than others: refilling the water bottles at the village fountain, cleaning the bathrooms, cooking dinner, trips to the small supermarket in the next village, emptying the compost toilets, letting the water pumped up by the generator at the pond—which was all that was left of the river in summer lately—flow through the land, watering the trees and plants on its way down.

The water flowed through an intricate system of tubes and hoses that went unnoticed at first. Some were connected to showers and sinks in the house, while others ended in a large container on top of the hill. When the container was filled with the necessary amount, a voice would be raised over the growling sound of the generator for the people at the pond to turn it off. Every other day, it was time to let the water run down over the land. Isabel, who had lived here for more than thirty years, had organized each platform, corner and stone to guide the water through the soil, plants and trees, flowing to everything and everyone that needed it. I didn't fully understand whether or not Isabel had at some point owned this land herself, and wondered what her relation with the foundation and guardian project was. Guiding water in this way requires an understanding of the land and of the direction of all life living on it across many seasons—a kind of patience and care that I could sense before I could put it into words.

A process with a different pace unfolded in the collective meetings we held to get to know each other and the things we had brought with us. On the third day, we sat down together after lunch and one by one answered the following questions: 'What's your name, which tools did you bring, what skills do you have, and which of these are you willing to share?' Answers ranged from single-lens reflex cameras to phones with small macro extensions, older versions of expensive software on second-hand computers, an interest in costumes, and professional editing skills. There were bold theatre actors, shy musicians and people who, like us, were here for the first time with little to no experience in collaborative film-making.

The next day, we held another meeting. We all sat on chairs and on the terrace floor while on the wall next to the kitchen door, another large roll of paper was hung. Marker in hand, Gaspar, who took up the role of note taker that day, drew long lines and wrote down four categories which made up the work we were about to start: ‘title of the film’ (if you already had one), ‘idea/description’, ‘needs’, and ‘whoever wants to join’.

Our idea was still small. We had been talking about it on the road in the weeks leading up to this moment, while I was reading Octavia E. Butler’s 1993 speculative fiction novel *Parable of the Sower*. I had read the synopsis about the young Black woman suffering from a condition Butler describes as ‘hyper-empathy’, trying to navigate a post-apocalyptic world heavily affected by climate crises and social inequality. After that, I had put off reading it for six months, as I was afraid it would influence my own first attempts at writing fiction in a time that resembled Butler’s imagination too closely. By chance, I came across the book on a shelf right before we started travelling and, after deciding to take it with me on this journey, another week would pass before I opened the first page. To my surprise—and causing a small shiver to run down my spine—the story, written 30 years ago as if it were a diary from the future, begins on 20 July 2024, the very day I started reading it.



Octavia E.
Butler wrote in *Parable of the Sower*,

There is no end, to what a living world will demand of you.

On the road, Matthias and I talked about the many complexities posed by the distance between us and maintaining a relationship while living in two different countries. Our involvement in ecological thinking through art and science simultaneously connects us and keeps us apart. How site-specific is our work? Is it urgently needed in different places at the same time? What roles do the institutes we individually have contracts with play? What opportunities do they provide and how do they limit us?

How do you imagine a future with someone else? How do we evolve past a romantic, heteronormative idea of a nuclear family? How do we imagine a future with others, one where we've relearned our interdependency with rain and soil? How do we spend a human lifetime taking care of what surrounds us and will outlive us?

*Do you remember what you said about geological time-scales? It made me feel small.
What if sand could grow rocks? And if every grain is a seed,
how do we then care for them?
What do we need to build a home? Should we make a list?*

Meanwhile, Lauren Olamina, the protagonist in Butler's dystopian story, was preparing an emergency pack for when the wall surrounding her small community would eventually be torn down by the people living on the street. One of the things she packs are seeds.

In her story, acorns play an important role, representing hope, new beginnings and rebirth. At the beginning of the book, Lauren's father explains how they make and eat acorn bread because he learned acorns are native to the land and that Indigenous Americans used them to make flour and bread. At the end of the book, they organize a ritual planting of oak trees on the graves of their dead and call their new home Acorn.

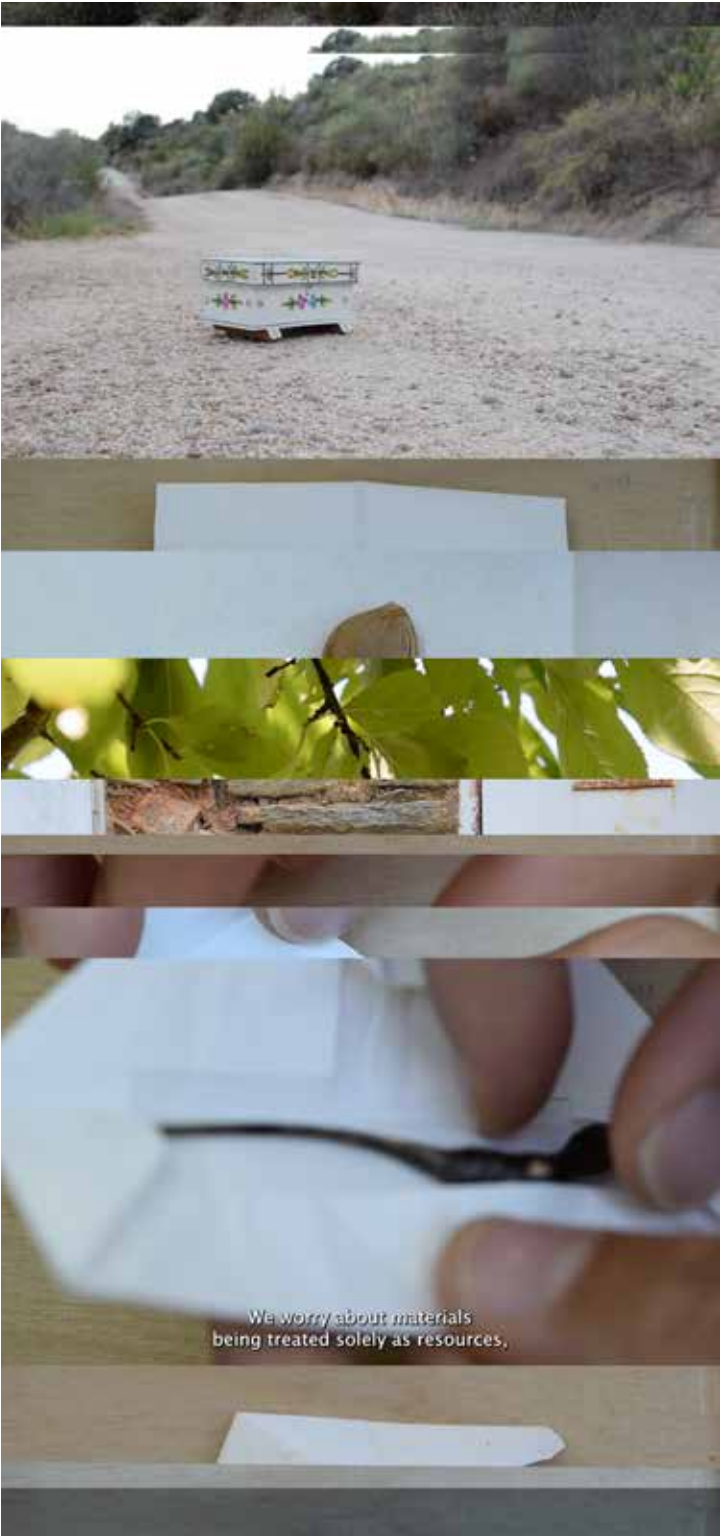
In the afternoon, lying on the bed in one of the rooms of the house with Joke, hiding from the heat behind the thick stone walls, I see a small wooden box painted with colourful flowers. It is the type of box you keep jewellery in, and when I show Matthias, he reimagines it as a character travelling. Could she keep the seeds we would need? Borrowing them from one place to bring life with us to the next? When does a container become a carrier bag? How does she help us to imagine a different story? Maybe before she decides what to carry with her, she needs to know where she wants to go?

On guiding winds

On the sixth day, Isabel read tarot for the group. Two paper boxes were passed around and everybody picked two of the laminated cards by their colourful strings. If the strings got entangled, Isabel explained, it meant they were both meant for you. I ended up with four cards and smiled shyly. I didn't want to seem greedy when it came to her guidance. Pedro, who was sitting next to me on the wooden bench under the fig trees, translated the Portuguese sentences for me. Slightly worried something would inevitably get lost in translation, the words that were spoken stirred something. They all spoke of winds and windows and trusting that these would lead you where you need to go.

*Até bolas de sabao
vao mais longe
quando se adaptam
aos ventos da
mudanca*

Even soap bubbles
go further
when they adapt
to the winds of
change



The next morning, Matthias and I rose before the Sun, I wanted to catch the light when it slowly filled the sky from behind the mountains. Filming instead of photographing meant I did not have to choose at which turn the orange-to-pink ratio caught my eye. Rather, it was the barely noticeable change that heralded the beginning of the day. The soft bells heard in the distance were the grazing sheep and goats of the nearest neighbour.

In the village there were walls made from meticulously stacked old stones, most of them seemingly without mortar. However, one of the walls had curving white lines which I only later realized resembled roads on a map.

When we placed the wooden box on the dirt road, it stood there, and its small feet became small feet. Even though it could not walk on its own, the suggestion of movement emerged when it appeared in a different part of the frame after a cut to a new scene. It was still out of place, but now more as a stranger travelling than an inanimate object deliberately displaced.

The seed carriers are paper envelopes folded by ten of the other participants. We each made one, and by comparing them, we understood that anyone would have a slightly different answer to the same question: 'Will you fold something for us out of this small piece of paper that you could carry a seed in?' Asking Alma, Julie, Leon, Ernst, Mili, Joke, Catarina, John, Ricardo and Elodie meant we would have a series of twelve objects serving the same function but taking different forms.

Fighting the urge to ask only people whom I assumed to have technical or artistic skills in the field of folding, I realized that the differences between the objects were what made them interesting props, not their precise functionality or aesthetic. If it was about inviting in multiple possibilities and the act of asking for help, I would have to give up control and appreciate each contribution for what it was.

After the screening in the village, Julie asked where we had found the house featured in the film. Apparently, people had not recognized Casabela, where we had just been staying for two weeks, from this particular angle. The image was made at eye level, and in order to film it, Matthias had walked in a large circle all the way to the other hill to set up the equipment at the same height as the house. He crossed the valley, waiting for the light to slowly illuminate the walls, the roof and the blanket of trees wrapped around them.

Most of the work was done outside, whether writing, filming, setting up the decor, recording sound or editing. Groups of people scattered around the house worked together, and unless a scene was being filmed, they were often interrupted. There had been attempts to plan in advance when Matthias and I would work on our own film and when there would be time for others, but as the pace picked up as we approached the day of the screening, people needed help of all kinds.

Torn between my eagerness to help others and my inability to accurately time the focus I needed to finish my own work, I was faced with moments of chaotic indecisiveness and compromise. Keeping in mind that what we were doing was an experiment, I redirected my attention to the collaborative aspect and understood that in this place, relations mattered more than results. I could divide my time more fluidly by focusing on energy and momentum instead of spending long hours trying to perfectly align a sequence of images.

So in-between our own filming and editing and bickering over control of the buttons, I was also a mermaid, Matthias a dead man on the rocks. I painted Leon's arm with patterns resembling lichen. We spoke words in reverse into the camera, made wolf masks and howled at the moon. I braided Mili's hair into tree branches, as if they were growing out of her head. I sat at a table by myself, pretended to be surrounded by people and feeling alienated. Matthias recorded a dialogue about the secrets kept by two talking rocks with John, and I nearly drowned in the pond for Juna.



On the thirteenth day, a large outside wall of one of the buildings in the village square was painted white for the screening of the twenty-one short films made by thirty-five people. White plastic chairs filled the open space, and even though the village has only about fifty inhabitants, that evening a hundred people watched the films with us.

In the final days, we had collectively worked towards this moment. Time seemed to simultaneously speed up and slow down as some of us honed in on details and others on entire editing processes in the last hours. We had built a makeshift studio between the wooden shack and the olive tree, and on his way to one of the pick-up trucks to help with preparations in the village, Sebastião walked by. He asked us if we knew the album *Por Este Rio Acima* by Fausto, as it reminded him of the music we were listening to while editing. When I heard the wind blow on the first track, something fell into place.

There was some confusion about what time dinner was being served and what time we were expected in the village. When we finally arrived in the square and rushed to find a seat, we were taking turns between our plates of pasta and the one computer we had brought with us to correct all the small errors in the automated subtitles.

Some of the films were still works in progress, others seemed so finished I could hardly believe they were only ideas two weeks ago. There was no sense of competition or need for comparison; my gut was filled with curiosity and excitement at seeing all these joint efforts play out on screen. Everybody was rooting for everybody else; amid shyness and pride, these films felt like gifts to receive from one another. We lived together through their making, sometimes cast in full roles, at other times assisting where needed—and even if we had only seen fragments along the way, or heard people's initial thoughts, each scene carried a sense of recognition.

Some people left early, others stayed another day, and after many hugs and a lot of waving, a small group of us went swimming in a town nearby. Going back to sharing roads and water with people who hadn't been part of what had transpired over these past two weeks felt strange, and I wondered how they had spent their time.

The next day we woke up early and said goodbye to Mili, who was the only one already awake too. I told her to give our love to Sebastião and Alma, not knowing that six months later, we'd be staying in their house in Lisbon. We packed our clothes from the makeshift washing line tied between the van and the olive tree, and took the garbage bags with plastic and paper waste from the house with us. I wanted to take one last picture of the water between the large rocks and quickly ran down the path. When I got there, my camera told me the SD card was missing, so I looked at the water more intently than I would have through the lens and told myself I would remember.

I would remember how we had arrived, the tasks and the tools we used, the serendipity of putting off reading a story until the exact right moment and what I learned about the winds guiding me. I would remember how we rose before the light did, collected scenes and found seeds, the thickness of the walls and the pile of shoes at the door. I would remember that if you criticized someone's request for Coca Cola, you got reminded of how much damage the coffee industry inflicts. I would remember how many beans you need to make chili sin carne for thirty-five people and that a still image can be carried by moving images.

I would remember the moment I looked at Joke after the first screening, smiling at me with tear-filled eyes. I would remember I could not have done any of this alone. I would remember these people we shared films, food, time and place with so well.

As we slowly drove over the two-thousand-year-old bridge, its stones rocked us gently from side to side again. Not yet knowing precisely what had changed or how we were now different, we filled our water bottles by the fountain in Idanha-a-Velha and drove north.



We think we might have found
12 seeds to build a home.

CONTRIBUTORS

Sammy Baloji

I am an artist from Lubumbashi (b. 1978). In my work I explore the memories and histories of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Since 2005 I have been examining the cultural, architectural and industrial heritage of Katanga and the lasting impact of Belgian colonization. Through archival photography, video and installation, I investigate how identities are shaped and distorted by colonial and contemporary power structures. I live and work between Lubumbashi and Brussels, and am pursuing my PhD project 'Contemporary Kasàlà and Lukasa' at Sint Lucas Antwerpen.

Myrthe Bokelmann

I am a freelance dance maker, dance performer, researcher and occasional production assistant. Currently based in Antwerp, I work mostly in interdisciplinary collaborations, both as a maker and within The Algorithmic Gaze research group at Sint Lucas Antwerpen. I am interested in bodily perception and the expression of sound as well as in finding common languages to create in across disciplines.

Loraine Furter

I am a graphic designer, teacher and researcher interested in hybrid publishing as a potential space in which to develop and share subversive intersectional feminist, decolonial, queer, crip and non-extractive approaches. I work mostly in collaborative constellations. I co-founded the cyberfeminist collective Just For The Record, the gender-bending typography research group Bye Bye Binary, and the research project Intersections of Care, weaving together different approaches to empowerment, interdependence and accessibility. In my PhD research, I develop tools and stories around subversive publishing practices: access-ories, guided fabulations and methodology card decks, among others.

Ruth Razan Loos

I am a postdoctoral researcher, lecturer and supervisor at Sint Lucas Antwerpen. Together with Stadscanvas (Fameus), a space for artistic newcomers in Antwerp, I initiate events

that value participatory practices, multiple artistic canons, storytelling, languages, scripts and solidarity. I teach a course on our 'Multilingual/Multiscript World: Sociopolitical and Artistic' and one on 'Islamic Knowledges and Aesthetic Practices', the latter with Joud Toamah. In my artistic research, I explore the worldly and otherworldly book qualities of the Noble Qur'an.

Shayma Nader

I am Shayma Nader, a Palestinian researcher born in Jerusalem. With a background in literature, cultural studies and visual art, I research, create and organize across various media to look at land, walking, history writing and collective practices as sites of imagining and rehearsing for anticolonial present times and liberated futures. I am currently experimenting with reimagining and visualizing archival material as speculative grounds for return.

Célia Tort Pujol

I am a Catalan oboist, performer and researcher currently working between Antwerp and Amsterdam. I explore new contexts of artistic creation in which to introduce the oboe: contemporary music ensembles, free improvisation settings, international and interdisciplinary collectives, and artistic research around performative AI, among others. I also lead workshops around collaborative creation and improvisation by means of music and theatre tools. I have performed all over Europe as well as in the UK, US and UAE.

askia Van der Rucht

I am a multidisciplinary artist, artistic researcher and teacher at Sint Lucas Antwerpen. My work deals with the complexities surrounding the emotional and economic value of housing and the feeling of home. In recent times I have been working on the ecologies of extraction of scarce materials such as sand. Combining storytelling and references to jewellery and architecture, I translate these subjects into objects, small installations, writing, photography and drawings.

COLOPHON

Publisher:

Sint Lucas Antwerpen
— School of Arts / KdG

Contributors:

Sammy Balaji, Myrthe
Bokelmann, Loraine Furter,
Shayma Nader, Ruth Razan
Loos, Célia Tort Pujol and
Saskia Van der Gucht

Editors:

Joachim Ben Yakoub,
Kim Gorus, Ward
Heirwegh, Wesley Meuris,
Ruth Razan Loos, Marnie
Slater, Petra Van Brabandt
and Tom Viaene

Editor-in-chief:

Kim Gorus

Copy editor:

Patrick Lennon

Graphic designer:

Ward Heirwegh

Printer:

INNI Group, Belgium

Typefaces:

Waldenburg (Kimera),
Mercure (Abyme)

Paper:

Magno gloss 115 gr/m²,
Lessebo natural 1.3
100 gr/m²

Print run:

300 copies

Special thanks to

Antony Hudek and
Kunsthal Extra City

Info & contact:

Sint Lucas Antwerpen
— School of Arts
Karel de Grote Hogeschool
Van Schoonbekestraat 143
B-2018 Antwerp
Belgium
grounds@kdg.be
www.sintlucasantwerpen.be
www.slarg.be

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publisher. Every effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce copyright material. If any proper acknowledgment has not been made, or permission not received, we invite copyright holders to inform us of the oversight.



KdG Karel de Grote
University College

