

# PLOT WORK AS AN ARTISTIK PRAXIS IN TODAY'S CITYSCAPES:



## **An Introduction to the Lectorate Art & Spatial Praxis / The City**



## 1. Introduction

We see a woman, holding a staff in her hand, standing amid a field of waist-high golden wheat. Behind her, the skyscrapers of the Financial District and the twin towers of the World Trade Center are visible. Agnes Denes made Wheatfield — A Confrontation in 1982. The artwork is a two-acre wheat field planted in May of that year on the landfill that is now Battery Park City, a residential area with towering high-end apartment buildings and luxury condos.<sup>1</sup> In 1982 this site was one of the last remaining undeveloped sections of Manhattan, valued at 4,5bn US dollars.

Wheatfield — A Confrontation was a four-month art project commissioned by New York City's Public Art Fund. It saw the area transform from urban desolation into a golden wheat field before it would be developed into an upscale neighbourhood. The wheat field was a block away from the heart of financial capitalism, where grains were traded. By situating it in this location, rubbing shoulders with the phallic pillars of capitalism, the work called into question the way land has been appropriated for profit rather than to address socio-economic and ecological issues. It represented, the artist said, 'misplaced priorities.'<sup>2</sup>

During the Summer of 1982, Denes and her assistants worked 16-hour-long days and received help from volunteers from the neighbourhood. Clearing and preparing the soil for sowing included transporting truckloads of dirt, digging hundreds of furrows by hand, and removing rocks, rubble, and garbage from the site. After that, the grains were hand-sown. Denes and a rotating group of volunteers and workers tended to the site for four months. They cleared wheat smut, weeded, fertilised, and sprayed against mildew fungus.<sup>3</sup> An irrigation system also had to be set up. After the wheat was harvested, the grains travelled to 28 cities across the globe for a travelling art show.<sup>4</sup> The wheat field was removed from the site at the end of Summer.

As we all know, Manhattan is one of the world's most expensive and congested boroughs. To plant, sustain and harvest two acres of wheat on highly valuable real estate was an attempt to obstruct the 'machinery' that the World Trade Centre and Wall Street's Stock Exchange represent, albeit briefly.

It is easy to see why this work struck a chord. Wheat fields, suffice to say, do not just grow in landfills. Denes made and created a place in an unlikely space. In this place, she made room for values other than those of stocks, bonds, and real estate. Collective and collaborative labour, the practice of tending to and caring for common ground, gave shape to a shimmering wheat field.

1. Denes, A. (1982). Wheatfield—A Confrontation, New York, NY. <http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works7.html>

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

This was no easy job. It required gathering support from many people, organisations, and things, as well as plain old manual labour. Through these bundled forces, a plot of land was re-claimed, and reterritorialised. Land was brought to the city – and importantly, not the other way around.

To transform a landscape and shape a world within a world allows different ways of relating to unfold, with all their interdependencies and intimacies. With *Wheatfield*, an alternative – if short-lived – possibility was made and became an iconoclastic intervention.

Indeed, there is enough to critique, but what strikes me here is the expressive power of the wheat field, and what matters here is that the field was there. I consider this a spatial art praxis wherein a site – which has been commodified and reduced to its real estate value – is transformed, and through its transformation, is given a different meaning and function. Wheatfield – A Confrontation designates an art praxis in which a different social order is imagined, formed, and maintained under the feet of a dominant order.

Art practices can take up various positions in relation to the pressures exerted on cityscapes. What do artists do when they keep their ground or create ground within a political order? And how to avoid being instrumentalised by that same order?

This is a pressing question given the increasingly regulated, privatised, surveilled, and diminished forms of public spaces in ever-more neoliberal cities. Political winds and the power relations between the different stakeholders in urban development processes, and their market-centred ideas about the ‘the city’ and its preferred inhabitants, directly shape the demographic composition of cities. Furthermore, the density of real estate, and the financialisation and diminishing of welcoming public spaces, make it impossible for a wheat field on this scale to be installed in the heart of many Western capital cities today.

How can we understand these developments in city arrangements, historically and conceptually? And to carve out space for spatial art practices? These are the two questions I will address in this essay. But to understand what artists such as Denes are up against when they act within a dominant order and attempt to make a place in a cityscape, we first need to return to the enclosure and plantation history.

## 2. The Orderings of Enclosures

In her seminal book Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation (2004),<sup>5</sup> Silvia Federici draws a relationship between rural England's fifteenth- and sixteenth century and the present moment of neoliberal orderings.

She argues that the emergence of capitalism relied on the process of enclosure. Enclosure was the process whereby landowners and wealthy farmers enclosed, expropriated, and appropriated common land in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century rural England. This ended traditional rights to common land, because once land was enclosed, its use was no longer for so-called commoners but reserved for the owner. During the sixteenth century, the lines and fences of enclosures became a common feature of the English landscape.

According to Federici, the process of enclosure affected all aspects of life. She sees enclosure as the spatial principle that interweaves gender, race, and class with capitalism. With enclosures arose not only a specific form of agricultural production but also a new power structure and a new logic of ownership and private property. Modern divisions emerged, such as between humans and nature and between humans: on the one hand, a class of landowners who commercialised agricultural production; and, on the other hand, a group of people who had lost their common lands and livelihoods to this new emerging capitalist class. Enclosure was thus a process of inclusion and exclusion, dominance, and property.

Of course, this disruptive restructuring of the countryside did not happen without a fight. According to Federici, the church, major landowners, and merchants deployed different strategies against the resistance of dispossessed commoners. At the same time, Federici argues that this new mode of agricultural production, in which mechanisation was the main source of accumulation, required a new kind of subject and subjectification that would encourage productivity. Poverty in dispossessed communities became the impetus for waged labour. Dispossessed peasant communities were made productive for and dependent on wage labour. Scarcity made the worker: the host on which capitalism parasitised.<sup>6</sup>

5. Federici, S. (2004). Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation. Autonomedia.

6. Landowners, the state, and the church did not merely parasitise on workers but also on women. Federici presents the rise of capitalist labour in Europe as a development that fundamentally undermined the position of women in society. Surplus value in capitalist economies became possible only because of the forced labour of enslaved workers and the unpaid housework and reproductive labour of women confined to the domestic sphere and excluded from waged work. Such labour fuelled the construction of a new patriarchal order based on women's subordination to men. Finally, and crucially,

it also resulted in the mechanisation of women's bodies as machines to produce new workers, which included the criminalisation of abortion and the decriminalisation of the rape of proletarian women. Women, Federici argues, were to produce labour-power for the farms and workshops and cannon fodder for the imperial wars.

Up to this day, reproductive labour is treated as unpaid labour and is a source of structural inequality. Recently, the US Supreme Court reversed *Roe v Wade* and declared that the constitutional right to abortion no longer exists, curtailing the sexuality of millions of women in the US and dispossessing them of their bodies. Wombs have been made into enclosures, the right to which is now in the hands of the state.

### 3. The Enclosures of Gardens and Plantations

Enclosure can thus be considered a first factory: not only of modes of capitalistic production, but also of being, knowing, and relating. The act of enclosing land is not merely a historical event. It is a 'doing' that can be tracked to the present.

Imagine, if you will, a well-kept, orderly garden. Such a garden is not merely a possession — your garden, their garden — but also a doing. To plant a garden is to draw a line in the earth. To draw a line is to demarcate space. To demarcate space is to enclose it. A garden is an enclosure, and an enclosure is a mark of division. A garden's hedge, picket fence, and gate help mark off territory. Turf, paving, flower beds, borders, and terraces create a system of division. And mowers, hedge shears, rakes, tying wire, tree saws, and leaf blowers are some of the tools used to create order within divisions. These tools represent the force required to impose divisions.

To garden is to occupy territory, which requires the repetitive effort to reimpose a constructed order. Gardening requires 'keeping and dressing,' repeatedly performed, through tending, ploughing, weeding, pruning, curtailing, clipping, removing, repelling, and exterminating. It requires constant effort to curtail uncontrolled growth.<sup>7</sup> Garden work is ordering work, and ordering work involves classification. Classification is a practice of exclusion to maintain what is considered inside and outside; desirable and undesirable; order or disorder. Classifications produce hierarchies and distinctions — in the context of a garden, between, for example, ladybirds and aphids, slugs and budworms, faeces and manure, weeds and plants.<sup>8</sup> Gardening, therefore, is an 'interruptive act' that always involves a quality of force,<sup>9</sup> skewing in arbitrary directions: yes to butterflies and bees; no to vine weevils and caterpillars; yes to hedgehogs; no to moles. No orderly garden exists without the force required to maintain it.

Enclosures are still here. Think of Europe and nation-states, schools, border walls, institutions, detention centres, resorts, and prisons, to name a few. They are among us also in the form of global capitalist extraction and production systems. In the form of exploitation of nature, people, and animals for profit. In the form of hierarchies between people — in which race, gender, class, ability and sexuality continue to be violently reinscribed and curtailed.

Sylvia Wynter — a Jamaican scholar of literature, novelist, playwright, dancer, actress, and one of the most important decolonial thinkers of our time — connects the enclosures of the plantation to today's cities. She argues that enclosures cannot be disconnected from the plantations that shaped them.<sup>10</sup>

7. De Vries, P. (2021). Against Gardening. in Cluitmans, L. (Ed.) On the Necessity of Gardening. An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation. Valiz, 43-48.

9. Derrida, J. (1992). Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority. in Cornell, D. and G.C. Rosenfeld. (Ed.) Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice. Routledge, p. 969.

8. Ibid.

It is on the plantations where the ontological distinction between human and nature emerged and brutally impacted how people understand their relationship to the earth and other people. She writes that this break in thought, attitude, and relation began with the so-called New World: here, ‘the process of the reduction of Man to Labour and of Nature to Land under the impulsion of the market economy’ began its course.<sup>11</sup>

For Wynter, the reduction of Man to Labour and of Nature to Land is intrinsically linked to the political machinations of colonialism and capitalism. Plantations require violently appropriated land made into private property by Man, who sees himself as ‘lord and possessor of Nature.’<sup>12</sup> This appropriated land is then toiled by enslaved people who are robbed of their lands, reduced to machines, and worked to death. Plantations also destroyed local ecologies to produce single croplands for profit on the exchange market.

Engaging with the work of Wynter, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten succinctly argue that at the bottom of the plantation system lies the notion of land as an exploitable possession and the idea of the self as an autonomous and independent owner of the earth. They continue by saying that one cannot produce this ‘self-owning and earth-owning’ individual without producing the figure of Man that belongs to a self-owning, earth-owning group that sets itself apart, with invasion and enclosure, from other groups that are determined not to own either self or earth.<sup>13</sup> In short, the plantation, and all its offspring, need the idea of race to function. It represents divisions and classifications that ultimately demarcate what and whose existence is privileged and what and whose existence is appropriated.

In her work, Wynter has shown how the colonial logic of the plantation underpins today’s racialised global economy. The history of the plantation reveals both the modes of social relations and the forms of domination that were then generalised throughout the world in different modalities. Plantation systems, Wynter argues, were ‘the cause and effect of the emergence of the market economy,’ and we still live ‘in [their] bewitched reality.’<sup>14</sup> In other words, plantations were the core of industrialisation, and cities, she writes, are the ‘commercial expression’ of the plantation.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. The Ongoing Locus of the Plantation

In her essay *Plantation Futures*, Katherine McKittrick – a scholar of Wynter’s work – argues that the idea of the plantation is ‘migratory,’ an ‘ongoing locus.’<sup>16</sup> The plantation, McKittrick writes, is a historical event, a production

10. Wynter, S. (2003). *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-- An Argument*. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (3), 257–337. doi:10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.

11. Wynter, S. (1971). *Novel and History, Plot and Plantation*. *Savacou* (5), p. 99.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Harney, S and Moten, F. (2021). *All Incomplete*. *Minor Compositions*, p. 27.

14. Wynter, 1971, p. 95.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

16. McKittrick, K. (2013). *Plantation Futures*. *Small Axe* 17(3), 1–15.

system, and a model for current economic, social, and geographical arrangements. She considers it a particularly ‘conceptual palimpsest’ of contemporary cityscapes she writes.<sup>17</sup> McKittrick tracks a plantation logic to the ordering of cities, public spaces and neighbourhoods.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to the rhetoric of public-ness, diversity, and inclusivity, cityscapes reflect significant exclusions based on race, gender, class, age, and abilities. As Jeffrey Hou puts it, ‘[b]y delineating what constitutes public and private and by designating membership to specific social groups, the official public space has long been exclusionary.’<sup>19</sup> Aside from being the centre of uneven power relations, and exclusionary and discriminatory practices, public spaces have also been ‘an expression of power and a subject of political control.’<sup>20</sup>

What is more, the centres of some major capital cities are run like exchange markets. Neighbourhoods are relegated to for-profit developers and real estate entrepreneurs who push out the urban poor. Urban renewal projects and profit-driven housing projects further exacerbate inequality and segregation. Ripples of the plantation economy can also be seen in ‘overseeing,’ or using all kinds of militarised digital technologies to control bodies, with the promise of efficiency and ‘smartness.’<sup>21</sup>

It can be seen in the colonialist, positivist, and cartographic rationalities that underpin geographic information systems, which produce a ‘totalising scopic regime passed off as objective knowledge.’<sup>22</sup> In the plethora of digitally networked spatial platforms that ‘continue to render the objects of representation – spaces, cities, people – “knowable” in ways that privilege abstraction and calculability.’<sup>23</sup> In the concomitant rise of the property-tech industry, which sells ‘visions’ for the ‘steering of the city and its citizens; all based around ownership of space, and suggestions of what demographics belong in it.’<sup>24</sup> It also happens through rocketing housing costs; the demolition of social housing; neglect of, and cuts to public services and infrastructure; hostile architecture; and the curbing of informal economies. And we can see it in the repackaging of neoliberal ideals in depoliticised wrapping paper: ‘broedplaatsen’ and ‘pop-up galleries’ often merely raise the property values of the surrounding neighbourhood for tomorrow’s real estate speculators – the pitfall of cooptation.

But this is not the whole story.

17. McKittrick, 2013, p. 5

18. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

19. Hou, J. (2010). *Insurgent Public Space. Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. Routledge, p. 3.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Listen to: KRS-One - Sound of da Police.

22. Ash, J., Kitchin, R., & Leszczynski, A. (2018). Digital turn, digital geographies? *Progress in*

*Human Geography*, 42(1), 25–43.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516664800>, p. 25.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

24. Knott, A. (2022). Stop Making Sense: Refusing the Algorithmic City. *Failed Architecture*. <https://failedarchitecture.com/stop-making-sense-refusing-the-algorithmic-city/>



## 5. Plot-and-Plantation: Concept, Metaphor and Reality

Sylvia Wynter does something fascinating in her essay *Novel and History, Plot and Plantation*, first published in a journal on Caribbean Art. In it, she connects two different literary narratives to the spatial division between the plantation and the provision grounds of the enslaved.

Provision grounds were plots of land enslaved Africans could sustain and cultivate when they were away from the demands of the plantation. On these grounds, often at some distance from villages of the plantation, the enslaved could grow their own food, socialise, and find a common language. Plantation owners made these little plots of land available, often mountainous and of poor quality, to reduce operative costs. These plots were places enslaved people worked, in relation to but also at some distance from the violence of the plantation. For the planters, these places were also suspect — for who knows what the enslaved were ‘plotting’ there. For Wynter, the subsistence farming of the plot system stands for the ‘secretive histories’ of folk culture, regenerative agriculture, indigenous knowledge, and resistance that existed alongside, under, and through the violent and extractive logic of the plantation.<sup>25</sup> Wynter writes that in these plots, a social order with its structure of values existed: one that did not make nature an object that could be appropriated and exploited by Man. Here, ‘the land remained the Earth.’<sup>26</sup>

Wynter does not romanticise these plots; she emphasises that plots did not exist outside of the violent ordering of the plantation. They were not free zones diametrical to the logic of the plantation. Plots were subject to the plantation, a product of a violent colonial and capitalist order and a potential refuge from it. It is not plot versus plantation, but rather plot-and-plantation: they implicate each other. Plot and plantation are at odds with each other but inhabit the same locus. This is to say: the plot exists in a world dominated by market relations.

What does this have to do with the art of the novel form? In her essay, Wynter considers the plot and the plantation as two different but entangled literary-historical value systems. Plot and plantation are two different story worlds, ‘that shape, inform and represent social systems’ and structures of value.<sup>27</sup>

The attitudes and values of the plantation narrative are in an exploitative, parasitical relation to the attitudes and narratives of the plot system. According to Wynter, plantation narratives defend the structure of values and the economic system of the plantation; they justify the history of the plantation, the ‘official history of the superstructure.’<sup>28</sup> The plot narrative, on the other hand, represents the ideology of the plots grounded in the

25. Wynter, 1971, p. 101.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

27. Boyce Davies, C. (2015). *From Masquerade to Maskerade: Caribbean Cultural Resistance*

and the Rehumanising Project. in McKittrick, K. Sylvia Wynter. *On Being Human as Praxis*. Duke University Press, p. 216

28. Wynter, 1971, p. 100.



slave's relation to the earth, culture, and community; they tell the secretive histories of provision grounds. And where the plantation narrative upholds the values and attitudes of the plantation rooted in property and property rights, Wynter argues that the plot narrative challenges this system and maintains other possibilities rooted in use value and 'based on the needs of the people who form the community.'<sup>29</sup> While plantation narratives are embedded in assumptions about individuals taken to be self-contained, independent, and autonomous, plot narratives are structured around co-existence, collaboration and kinship. Plots are thus spaces of fugitivity, and the building blocks of narrative.<sup>30</sup>

If the plantation is an ongoing locus, as McKittrick argues, so too is the plot. Today's cities are also locations 'where new forms of human life and resistance to these orders become possible.'<sup>31</sup> For McKittrick, the plot illustrates a social order that develops within the context of racist, capitalist, sexist, ableist systems. It spatialises what would be considered impossible under those systems: the narratives and cultural practices that foster values that form an alternative to the prevailing order.<sup>32</sup> Inside the orderings of the plantation, there is plot-living going on.

Where the orderings of today's cityscapes stand for the ongoing locus of plantation history, the plot stands for other possibilities that are always present, for other presents rooted in different values. The plot materialises an alternative to the forces — or 'external authors,' as Wynter calls them — of domination, appropriation, exploitation, commodification, gentrification, and quantification. It fosters assemblages between people and things that seek alternative ways of relating — not outside the plantation or off the grid, but in our urban realities. Cityscapes and public spaces are always contingent and contested; they could be otherwise.

## 6. Plot-work as a Transformative Artistic Practice

Wynter's understanding of the plot-and-plantation has travelled. It is used in Black studies, decolonial studies, gender studies, literary studies, social studies, feminist anthropology and geography, environmental humanities, critical and cultural theory, and urban studies, to name but a few. What if the plot migrates further and extends to artistic forms of making, crafting, imagining, thinking, and doing in relation to cityscapes? What if we probe the complicated but transformative idea and practice of the plot in today's cityscapes, which is outside of, but not separated from, the violent contexts in which it originally developed? What if we explore the plot not just as a historical event, a production system, or a model for current city arrangements but also as a form of artistic research?

29. Ibid., p. 102.

30. On the concept of fugitivity see: Harney, S. & Moten, F. (2013). The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning & Black Study. Minor Compositions.

31. McKittrick, 2013, p. 2.

32. Ibid., p. 10

What could plot work as artistic research be?

What constitutes it?

What is the register of practices that belongs to it?

What conditions and sustains plot practices?

What kind of behaviour, ways of seeing, being, knowing, and relating does it encourage?

How do we recognise it in spatial art practices?

In short: what does it mean as a spatial art praxis?

And with praxis, I mean the ways by which the idea of the plot is socially enacted, embodied, narrativised, materialised, and spatialised in art practices. This focus on plotting as art praxis does three things:

- ☪ First, it points to the working method of the lectorate: theory as a transformative practice.
- ☪ Second, it points to the artistic research I am interested in conducting, fostering, and experimenting with.
- ☪ And third, it points to the aim of doing research in closer collaboration with the departments of this Academie, and with the so-called field.

The artistic research I envision based on plotting as a transformative art praxis is not concerned with what makes artistic research ‘research’ – and not just art. This is part of the ongoing debate about whether artists do research, what the future of the artistic profession is, and what students are trained to do and become. In this debate, some argue that artistic research should not impose rules on its practice; it is precisely the absence of methods that characterises artistic research. Emphasis on methods and generality, and reliability would only undermine the artistic autonomy of art. This argument is opposed by critics who claim that without substantiation, justification, generality, and reliability – without a clear method – artistic research cannot make a dent outside the art world. What is at stake is, once again, the future positions of the artist in society. In this discussion, we see different ordering systems with different associated values, status, facilities, and rights vying for limited resources from the same governmental body – the effect of 10+ years of undermining and squeezing the arts and sciences.

The debate will continue for some time, but I don’t want to spend too much time on it. I believe that you cannot set out your own course from a defensive position or caught up in an oppositional debate. With this lectorate, I want to put the interdisciplinary and collaborative work of

plotting at the heart of artistic research. For me, the notion of the plot offers a loose frame for exploring what artistic research could be as spatial art praxis.

I consider the plot a transformative art praxis because it interlaces ‘the material and the metaphoric,’ past, present and future, earth and earthlings.<sup>34</sup> It is a conceptual tool and historic reality. It is figurative language and a challenge to current spatial arrangements. It is a verb and a narrative device. It shows us how art is ensnared in market logic and reminds us of other possibilities. The plot signifies practices in which other values are acted upon, constituted, grounded in space, and where dominant social orders and values are challenged and evaded.

What are artists that plot up against? Simply put, the story of the self-owning and earth-owning Man. This narrow understanding of Man is not something of the past. Still, it is perpetuated in urban arrangements and inextricably tied to the continuation of inter-species and inter-ecological crises we face today. Wynter sees as a central struggle ‘the over-representation of Man’, with which she means an understanding of ‘Man’ which has developed since the enlightenment and projects a narrow Western ideal, which is fundamentally racist, inherently violent, and constitutive of extraction and exploitation of the earth.

How to undo Western conceptions of the self-owning and earth-owning individual? This is no small task. We need to dismantle the enclosures we inhabit and reveal their violent ordering principles. What is required is to unmake the orderings by which land, bodies, histories, and ways of knowing are truncated. We must plough up the constituents of the rights-bearing, autonomous, possessive, and accumulating Individual. Upset the possessive, proprietary, extractive, and exploitative relations to land. Break up the host-parasite relationship of the market system and market values. And drown out the official histories of the dominant order.

Put differently, to plot is not about distributive justice; it is not about the distribution of the sensible, the redistribution space, nor about sharing more evenly or commoning. It is also not about rights to the city. To plot is to reject the ‘structure of dominance itself,’ the institutional contexts, social relations, and processes replicating dominance.<sup>35</sup>

You may wonder, given all the historical limitations and contemporary setbacks, where to begin and how without making plotting instrumental to politics?

34. McKittrick, K. (2021). Dear science and other stories. Duke University Press, p. 9.

35. Young, I. M. (1990). Justice and the Politics of Difference. Princeton University Press, p. 18.

## 7. Stories that Make Places that Manifest in Spatial Art Praxis

Back to Denes and her wheat field. Surely, there is enough to criticise. Denes may have shown the failure of the current system; yet at the same time, her intervention was made possible with the help of an army of unpaid workers, only to give way for the building of expensive condos a few months later. Furthermore, the harvested grain was flown to 28 different cities across the globe. If this piece was made today, it might be considered a smidge tone-deaf. Is this plotting, you may ask? I, for one, would not consider it plotting in today's contexts. But that is not the point. This is not about finding best practices or the purest form of plotting. Denes' work is one example of redrawing our relationship to the natural world with two acres of natural bounty accessible for anyone at the site, tickling the feet of capitalist greed. And she does so in an unlikely place, with wheat.

This is not 1982, and we are undoubtedly not in Manhattan. Still, the notion of the plot offers a conceptual tool to work in these times and places. Wynter and McKittrick sketch the plot work that might help us get started. They emphasise the need for new stories because the grand narratives of yore have brought us to the point we are at now. We can take into our own hands the stories we tell about our being in the world. 'Stories make place,' McKittrick writes.<sup>36</sup> Stories that make places are told within existing orders and imagine and give shape to 'new geographies of liberation.'<sup>37</sup>

This is what makes the concept of plot-and-plantation so rich. It indicates how the imposition of a model of self-ownership — the I, me, my, mine of the accumulating and excluding subject, the idea of possession, private property, and individual rights as the paradigm of social being and social relations — is inextricably tied to our exhausted, scorched, and plundered earth, knotted with the commodified and segregated cityscapes in which we find ourselves, and points to other possibilities, other geographies.

Importantly, stories have no specific object of inquiry or research question. They 'do not offer lucid tales or answers' and solve no problems; instead, they open the door to curiosity, signal ways of living,' or 'livingness.'<sup>38</sup> Stories that make places 'tell the world differently, with creative precision.'<sup>39</sup> They invite us to 'feel, respond and be moved.'<sup>40</sup> They invite 'engagement, curiosity, collaboration,' speculation, fabulation and foster 'relationality, rebellion, conversation, interdisciplinarity, and disobedience,' McKittrick writes.<sup>41</sup> For McKittrick, stories that make places are 'theoretical, dance, poem, sound, song, geography, affect, photograph, painting, sculpture, and more.'<sup>42</sup> And I would like to add new geographies manifest in art practices, including but not limited to interior architecture, architectural design, fine arts, design, digital media, critical studies, AI, graphic design, fashion, ceramics, moving images, glass, textiles, and more.

36. McKittrick, 2021, p. 9.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., p. 7.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., p. 8.

41. Ibid., p. 9; 51.

42. Ibid., p. 8.

## 8. The Lectorate of Art & Spatial Praxis (LASP) at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie

What does plot work look like?

How can we tell it is a form of a plot?

Does it have any critical effect?

Should it have any critical effect?

The answer to these questions is: I don't know; I can't say. What I know is that I want to seek them out, give them investigative attention, and learn what constitutes them. This seeking is one of the foundations of this lectorate.

I am not looking for definitions, checklists, best practices, or common ground; I have no intention of ordering, clustering, or programming plot practices. I do not mean to homogenise various levels of practice or make a connection between them under one flag.<sup>43</sup> I imagine they are continually reinvented and defy usefulness, simplicity, or clear-cut answers, solutions, programs, or definitions.

What I'm interested in is what constitutes plot work. What are the conditions for making and remaking places, for experimentation with other forms of being situated, embedded, in place? I'm interested in giving attention to plotting as a transformative art praxis; not to comprehend or to grasp plots, but to be gripped by and learn from these pluralist force fields. More than an object of research, the plot is a method, an attitude, and an outlook on the spaces we inhabit and co-habit — 'always n-1 (the only way the one belongs to the multiple: always subtracted).'<sup>44</sup>

The plot encourages us to seek out, excavate, and help make sites where a different order is possible: other spaces, alternative spaces, and in-between spaces within today's conditions and in today's cityscapes. It is a framework to rethink possible antidotes to domination, exploitation, commodification, gentrification, and quantification, as messy, disorganised, contradictory, temporary, issue-specific, and located as they may be. Plot work as a spatial praxis makes room for different ways of crafting connections and relations, of life and living, of making places, places of difference, of contradiction, and muddle. Plot work calls for an imaginative mind willing to find – or rather, to create – something different, something other in the endless repetition of the same, to make stories that make different places, to seek them out. The plot, in McKittrick's words, is both 'living and resisting.'<sup>45</sup>

The challenge ahead is to find ways to foster help constitute such plotting activities, which is increasingly difficult amid the current socio-economic conditions of today's cityscapes. We should also be careful not to

43. Guattari, F. (1989/2014). The Three Ecologies. Bloomsbury Academic, p. 34.

44. Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987). A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and

Schizophrenia. Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, p. 7.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

romanticise the plot and to avoid it becoming another of those ‘optimistic fantasies’ we use to deal with the oxidising of social relations.<sup>46</sup> Plot work is not a practice whereby shiny, happy people sing ‘Kumbaya!’ and make art in blissful co-existence under the radar of the slow collapse of social and ecological structures. Instead, it comes when optimistic fantasies of ‘upward mobility, job security, political and social equality’ are fraying.<sup>47</sup> Plotting comes closer to what Ashton T. Crawley calls ‘the nevertheless and in spite of condition’: that though one may feel enclosed, contained, circumscribed, ‘that—nevertheless, and in spite of—there is an excessive force that sustains.’<sup>48</sup> The word ‘nevertheless’ and the phrase ‘in spite of’ ‘mark the always available and plural otherwise possibility.’<sup>49</sup> But plot work comes with no guarantee of success. Plot work is vulnerable, variable, fragile. Often from the margins, against the mainstream, and more often than not without the desired outcome – projects fail, people clash, and tides turn. A plot is always under construction and always falling apart.<sup>50</sup> They form patchy spatial praxes that (re)compose and (re)group around different values, imaginings, and scenarios ‘for how to best live on, considering.’<sup>51</sup>

You may ask what plot work as an art practice means in the context of this Academie. Supporting its conditions at this Academie could mean fostering career paths in alternative, fragile and experimental spaces. It could mean creating new fields of practice and new ways of presentation – outside of white cubes, public spaces, or fairs. It could mean opening space for artworks that have nothing necessarily new or original to bring but that recognise what was always already present. It could mean decentring the timeworn Romantic chestnut of the artistic genius (m), evading the collapse of capitalist civilisation. It could mean helping collaborative, collective ways of artistic research, expression, and production flourish. It could mean artworks that are not merely ‘objects,’ ‘pieces,’ or ‘performances,’ but also ‘practices’ and ‘processes’ that function in alternative contexts. It means to hold one’s ground within the prevailing economic logic. And it will also mean an ongoing and uphill struggle against precarity and for recognition in the form of means and resources. To plot, in other words, raises the question of how to imagine plot futures without deeming it hopeless and impossible or romanticising it a priori.

This, too, requires vigilance to prevent plotting practices from being relegated to the status of mere ornaments in the ruinous residual spaces of global capitalism. Plot-and-plantation also means we must be careful not to disconnect art from its production; this includes the contexts in which it is taught.

46. Berlant, L. (2011). Cruel Optimism. Duke University Press.

47. *Ibid.*, p.3.

48. Crawley, A.T. (2017). Blackpentecostal Breath: the Aesthetics of Possibility. Fordham University Press, p. 8.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

50. Tsing Lowenhaupt, A. (2015). The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life on Capitalist Ruins. Princeton University Press, p. 152.

51. Berlant, 2011, p. 3.



This Academie is an independent art school known for its socially critical mindset. There are few core courses, few key textbooks, no grades, and no rubrics. Departments work, to a great extent, autonomously. Students have a say in their education, choose their own paths, and state they experience a strong sense of community.

Additionally, we have initiatives like ‘Unsetting Rietveld/Sandberg’ working towards radically inclusive structures. We have ‘Urgent Ecologies,’ a working group invested in sustainable education. We have ‘Hear! Here,’ a platform focused on critical pedagogy. We have a Student Council, and Student Unions. We have temporary Master’s programs that are always on point. We have the Garden Department. We have the Library, and 23 Workshops. All this is great! And there is obviously so much plotting going on. Like in all institutions, plotting goes on independently from these structures, under them.

But we also see a predominantly white body of staff and students, conditions of flexibility and insecurity, scarcity of resources, temporary contracts, and burnout. We see teachers and students juggling multiple jobs in the gig economy to make ends meet. And we see the effects of government entrenchment, austerity, financialisation, and marketisation. This is to say, this Academie, too, is enmeshed in a market system. Indeed, plot-and-plantation cannot be separated.

How can we propagate and nurture spaces to extend, diversify, multiply and exchange plotting imaginaries, plotting concepts, plotting practices, plotting materials, and plotting ideas?

I am here to work with and learn from you, from the departments and the workshops. What forms does plotting take in Architectural Design, Interior Architecture, TXT (Textile), Graphic Design, Jewellery - Linking Bodies, VAV Moving Image, Unstable Media, Critical Studies, or Fine Arts? How to plot with wood, glass, clay, weaving or a press? What plot work do you see in your practice, in your classes and workshops? And what does this tell us about the limitations and possibilities of plotting? What can we learn from these praxes to support the conditions for making places and new geographies?

I look forward to doing this research in the research group of the lectorate, in collaboration with fellows and artists-researchers, and in the different research projects we set out to do in collaboration with departments.

The first project we will start with is the NWA-supported Climate Imaginaries at Sea. This is a collaboration between the research groups of



three schools: the Academy of Theatre and Dance — headed by Laura Cull — and the Visual Methodologies Collective at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, led by Sabine Niederer. This project is also a starting point for the collaboration of this lectorate with the Departments of Architectural Design and Textile (TXT). We will host artistic research studios, workshops, and events around rising sea levels. Rising sea levels and changing shores re-order urban life, and form a crisis of materiality. Instead of understanding water as an enemy to keep at bay, we explore ways to rethink, re-design, and re-do our relationship to water through, via, and with the materials we live our lives. Addressing rising sea levels requires changing our relationship with water. In this project, we invite artist-researchers to re-imagine and reconceptualise the relationship between cityscapes and seascapes as one of co-shaping. Rising sea levels ask us to rethink our relationship to land and the human-centered design of our environment.

To close, the task ahead is to rethink our relationship with the earth and earthlings. The task ahead is to think indeterminacy and determination together. Each 'I' is a 'we' that is always grounded and situated in some place that is made and remade.

And that remaking happens here.

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