

a project by An Kramer

THE SYMBIOTIC  
BURGEONRY  
REILLAMINATE

# Summer Research School

Discovering the Symbiocene

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**inholland**  
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# SYMBIOCENE

"A landscape is viewed from the outside, a place is experienced from the inside." (Catrien Poissonnier)

I am spending a week on Terschelling, my favourite Wadden Island. I am there often; to write, to grieve, to vacation, to enjoy the theatre at Oerol. Usually I am there outside the high season. In winter, it is quieter. Restaurants and shops are closed, the islanders themselves are on holiday or they are renovating. I am less of a tourist there, they are not so concerned with me. I do sometimes go there for a haircut and hear the latest news. The owner of one of my favourite coffee spots greets me when I pass him on the beach. *Now I belong*, I think.

I have set routine and habits there: I prefer to stay in a cottage on the Wadden dyke and rent my bike from the same rental company. You leave your bag behind, they take it to your cottage for you. I mount my bike, feeling light; all the books are in my suitcase. I leave the village of West immediately. Too many shops and houses. The empty Wadden dyke is my first destination. When I leave the inhabited world behind me, after the second big bend in the road, a special feeling always overwhelms me, sometimes exuberant, sometimes hushed; this is where I am at home. While cycling, I call out: *hello Terschelling, I'm here again!* The last time, I thought I heard a response of recognition. Why not? Could it be that the island also recognises me? Why not?

On Terschelling, I experience the feeling of being in and with nature as a gift. The wind and sun in my face, the horizon all around me, the call of oystercatchers and geese. And in the evening, a sky full of stars and silence. Here I am sure again: *we are nature*. I wrote that on the sign for the last climate march I participated in.

I don't live on Terschelling but in Amsterdam, in the hustle and bustle. And I love that too. The rich culture of the city; often I go to the cinema or theatre. All those people who move around, the swarm of bicycles. In the city, it's not so simple to feel 'we are nature'. Yet I get annoyed by people who decide to break away from the city and disappear to some faraway place to live off-grid in a tiny house or distant community. Why, that's beautiful, isn't it? But I think; this is not possible for everyone: this is a party exclusively for white highly educated people. And what does it mean for all those people, living in a flat or tiny house or suburb, working hard — if they have work at all. They can't afford to leave for the wilderness. How can they experience nature? So within me, the question arose: how can you experience nature in the city? Would it be possible to have as intense an experience of nature in the city as you do on Terschelling on the Wadden dyke?





## *Going into nature*

We usually tend to think of 'nature' as something outside ourselves. 'We're going to a natural area'. Then you go to the forest, the sea, or preferably the 'real, wild, untouched' nature. For the latter, you have to go far away. To a foreign country, the distant mountains, into the inhospitable desert. There are few, if any, people. People do not belong to nature, it seems.

In Western origin stories, such as the biblical story of Adam and Eve, nature is dangerous for humans. The snake as a symbol of evil tempts Eve. She eats the forbidden apple, and then Adam and Eve are driven out of paradise — which is a symbol of nature. So the split between us and nature is in our Christian origin myth. I don't think we realise how deep such stories are in us, even if you were not brought up with this biblical story. Socially, the assumption still prevails that we should control nature, and that nature is outside us.

In other cultures, this premise is less obvious. For example, in the origin myth of the Indian Mohawk people. There, a woman, skywoman, falls from heaven. She is caught by the birds in her fall and lands on the turtle's shell. Around her is only water. The shell is too small for her. The animals around her dive underwater, looking for earth. Rat can stay underwater the longest and brings her mud. The woman smears this over the shell and earth is created. She plants seeds she brought as gifts and the animals and humans have food. Here, humans are welcomed and helped by the animals. They work together.



I was reminded of this story when I watched *Symbiocene*, a TV programme on *Tegenlicht*, a Dutch series from the broadcaster VPRO. Glenn Albrecht, an Australian environmental philosopher, developed the concept of the Symbiocene. His story and way of thinking gives me a new perspective. He does not offer solutions, but a concept that opens up possibilities. It makes my heart happy. My head gets it.

### *Symbiocene*

The Anthropocene is a term coined by Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen in 2000, who argued that since the industrial revolution, humans have had such a negative ecological impact that we have become a geophysical force, ushering in a new geological epoch. Man is depleting the earth. From a dominant position versus other living organisms, man exploits nature. We find it obvious that we are above nature; it exists for our sake.

Glenn Albrecht developed a new concept in reaction to the anthropocene that fits what I was looking for: the *symbiocene*. In the symbiocene, relationships and connection between life are central. He suggests that all living organisms, whether human, animal, plant, bacteria, fungi, micro-organisms form one integrated whole. "This is more than an 'entanglement' of different but independent beings; it is the sharing of a common property, called life," he writes.

These different parts play a vital role in each other's lives. The boundaries between them are much less solid than we usually think. In ecology, this is called a holobiont; a unit of organisms living in symbiosis, dependent on each other. Therefore, there is no separated environment outside of us. Connections that shape the symbiosis are central. How to maintain and sustain these symbiotic connections is what needs our attention.

Albrecht sees symbiosis not as a utopian concept, but as a 'radical anticipation', a way of shaping reality completely differently; he calls this eu-topia, a good place.

We take it for granted to see nature as a great struggle for existence, *the struggle for life*. But when you look at nature from a perspective of symbiosis, you see the opposite of destruction: you see cooperation and sacrifice in the service of the whole, in the service of living processes. The whole world consists of coherent living processes. Therefore, the greatest value is: 'shared life'. It is another picture of development. The symbiocene gives the invitation to rethink the world. A free conceptual space, that is the possibility the symbiocene invites to think, act and live from.

1. Kimmerer, R.W. (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass. Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions.
2. VPRO Tegenlicht  
<https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2022-2023/welkom-in-het-symbioceen.html>
3. Albrecht, G.A. (2019) *Earth emotions. New Words for a New World*. London, Cornell University Press.
4. Albrecht, G.A. (2019) *Earth emotions. New Words for a New World*. London, Cornell University Press.





*Nature does not exist. The living is key.*

"You city dwellers call it nature. It is so abstract in your minds that even the word is abstract. Here, we say 'forest', 'meadow', 'river', 'rock': things you can point to," says Bruno the mountain dweller on his visit from the city, protagonist in the book and film of the same name *The Eight Mountains* by Paolo Cognetti.

French philosopher Baptiste Morizot, in his book *Rekindling life: a common front*, deconstructs some persistent and unconscious assumptions in our relationship to nature. This helps to think through and live through symbiosis more powerfully.

For instance, he unpacks the concept of nature conservation. In our Western society, we see nature as 'wild' and imperfect. It gains value when we manage this nature. In his view, the idea of stewardship is therefore a dominant, capitalist concept. Nature does not need to be protected, it is not vulnerable. She is stronger than we are. We emerge from her. We exist because of her.

He therefore speaks of *the living* rather than of nature. Our relationship to the living is now based mainly on production and extraction. We have constructed and maintain a myth in which we argue that we have made the earth habitable, with agriculture or land management and development. He calls this myth a *metaphysics of production*. He then argues for a transformation to a *metaphysics of alliance*: a world-view that acknowledges non-human life forms and the wild dynamics they create, as irreplaceable producers of the earth's habitability for all life forms, of which we are a part:



"It is fundamentally a crisis of our relations to the living. It is these relationships that must be rethought and transformed: this calls for imagining politics of interdependence, supported by locally-based concrete alliances, which work for the good of the mutualistic and constitutive relationship between humans and the rest of life on Earth."

### *Regeneration*

As Daniel Christian Wahl, a biologist and author of *Designing Regenerative Cultures* puts it, regeneration is not simply about avoiding harm (such as the word 'sustainable' implies), but rather: "How can we move creatively into the future actually healing the damage of the past?"

Wahl goes on to explain that there's a shift away from focusing on outcome to a focus on the process, because there is no fixed end point when it comes to regeneration. "We can only do our best to create regenerative systems and then re-address them when we arrive in that future that we've created."

This was essential for the Summer Research School in its design and process: we are (re)searching together what this regeneration in the sense of a sybiocene could be on Zeeburgereiland. And creating together is one of the pillars in this. The other is the aim to give something to the island and her inhabitants, instead of the common research attitude of coming to 'get' knowledge from a place or situation.

5. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/12/16/op-bezoek-in-het-dorp-van-paolo-cognetti-de-acht-bergen-is-ook-een-documentaire-over-ons-dorp-a4151306>

6. Morizot, B. (2022) *Rekindling life: a common front*. Cambridge, Polity.

7. Morizot, B. (2023). *Who Makes the Earth Habitable? From a Metaphysics of Production to a Metaphysics of Alliance*.

<https://shc.stanford.edu/stanford-humanities-center/events/baptiste-morizot-who-makes-earth-habitable-metaphysics-production>





## *Zeeburgereiland*

One half is already built and inhabited, the other half consists of a barren plain with a few construction huts, and lots of fences around it. Concrete slabs form the roads across the barren plain. You would think that there is nothing there.

Nothing could be further from the truth! Everything is already filled in. The municipality's website lists what is to come, in pretty words and beautiful 3D drawings. In the drawings, the sun shines, there are green trees, people cycle down the street. Everyone will be happy here, the website eagerly conveys, if you move into one of the 5,500 houses that will be built. It makes me sad. The imagination they use is so far from reality. There is no bike with a flat tyre, no car parked wrongly, no bus shelter daubed with graffiti.

The island is much more than this. It has an impressive history. The island was formed in the early 20th century by dredging silt from the IJ and the Eastern Docklands. It then served as a military training ground and was occupied by the Sewage Treatment Plant until 2006. Meanwhile, from 1974, Camping Zeeburg was set up by the municipality for the impoverished foreign hippies who were no longer allowed to sleep for free on Dam Square and in the Vondelpark. The campsite was moved in 1997, but businesses, self-built houses and studios remained on the West side in a 'fringe society' that now includes student housing in a former asylum seekers' centre.

## *Summer Research School Symbiocene*

What does it look like when you put the living at the centre?  
What can it mean to make the symbiocene 'live'?

Thirty people formed the temporary research school to investigate this question for three days on Zeeburgereiland. Residents, artists, experts, researchers formed an equal group. Everyone's expertise was worthwhile. Some inspired with their knowledge of nature, others offered investigative methods, and others their expertise in creative making. The group worked to create an exhibition and a shared experience for the island and its inhabitants.

In small groups, they chose a theme and something that fascinated them on the island. They deepened this theme and their 'fascination' with creative and art-based research methods, and ended in making visible, making audible, making experienced.

As researchers, we came to give, to be regenerative.

- An Kramer, Amsterdam, September 2023

This is what we discovered: Stories of the Symbiocene

This is who took part: Nature Portraits.





# STORIES OF THE SYMBIOCENE

## Introduction

Thirty people formed a research group for three days on Zeeburgereiland. They were residents, artists, experts, and researchers. Regardless of their profession or background, everyone was an equal member and everyone's expertise was considered valuable and worthwhile. Some inspired with their knowledge about nature, others knew some good methods of investigating, others in creative making. The group worked towards to an exhibition and shared experience for the island and her inhabitants at the end of the three days. We formed small groups; each chose a theme and a "fascination". Deepening this theme with creative and art-based research methods, we made it visible, audible, experienceable. As researchers we came to give, not merely to extract knowledge. They experienced, discovered and created these themes:

1. Protection
2. Boundaries
3. Communication
4. Connection
5. Regeneration



# 1. Protection

How can humans and nature live together?  
Who needs protection?

Compared to most of Amsterdam, the island is quieter, cooler, and is home to more greenery and animals, with horses and chickens. Cycling over the bridge, you can feel the air temperature drop as you leave the heat of the city behind you. Many of those who live there chose to move there for the peace and quiet and to be surrounded by nature.

And yet, much of the island has become a site for intensive development. More and more apartment blocks are being built, with new tunnels and transport links being laid down. What was a tranquil sandpit has become a noisy building site: during the summer school, we sat outside Nautilus and struggled to hear each other over the sound of an excavator digging up the road.

Many participants felt like the island was exhausted, groaning under the weight of construction and development. Where is the space for nature now?

*"Today, I felt like when we were talking to the water or listening to the sounds, I felt like the island was exhausted. Because it used to be super calm and peaceful here and just a few people. And now it has to deal with all of these building sites and noise and stuff going on. And we also feel like this, while we just want to be in our peaceful little world in the corner of the island. It's sad that there's this exhaustion happening. But it makes you more connected to a place if you actually have to take care of it, fight for it and protect it." - Jana*





## **Bio-philía**

It's proven that being in nature is vital for our health. Wandering in a forest reduces the levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, and increases serotonin, which increases feelings of joy and wellbeing. It makes us feel happy.

What a pity, then, for the people living in a city, like on Zeeburgereiland, far from a forest. And yet, in the Summer Research School we noticed the natural human impulse to gravitate towards nature; most groups were directly attracted to the most green part of the island. We experienced 'bio-philía', a state of loving nature.

## **Grief about the wild island being tamed**

When one of the inhabitants first started coming to the island, she was drawn by its wildness, the untamed chaos of the artists' colony, the feeling of freedom. Now, that community is under threat, and she is mourning for what they are about to lose. She's sad about the way the island is being developed, how it's being drilled through to build tunnels, suffocated under miles of pipes and electricity line. She feels like it's creaking under the weight of all the human activity on it.

She told the story of how she one day woke up to hear the trees being cut down. She felt despondent. And she was also angry. But just as she was losing hope, she saw a Passiflora: a beautiful blue flower that blooms only during the day, and closes at night. Seeing it bloom again the next day, she began to think: What can I do?





*"It makes me really sad... if I talk to Maxim [who's lived on the island for more than 10 years] about the island and nature, then he says 'Yes, before we had these animals' and 'Before we had these plants'. So I'm a bit stuck between grief and a desire to fight. Because I don't want to just mourn what we've lost, but focus on what we do have." - Berber*

Until now, she saw the Sportheldenbuurt as 'soulless', but after spending some time on it for the research school, she realised that there's more growing there than she realised. Even in what looks like a soulless desert of concrete and glass, there are flora and fauna, often growing through the cracks or surviving in spite of the human-imposed environment: "We looked at everything that does grow here — not only nature but also people. There's also a multitude of things here. So perhaps I should think in a less binary way about the sides of the island." - Berber

## **Nature springs back**

What kind of force is nature? Is it hard, insistent, or soft and yielding? Can it be both?

Nature springs back when it's suppressed. Weeds poke through pavements, birds make nests of human rubbish, and any patch of land left to the elements eventually breaks out in a rush of greenery. Climbing plants can be so strong that they break through brick and concrete. Birds make nests out of material humans discard; seeds fly where the wind takes them, and mice survive wherever.

*“Nature just thrives, it just pushes through.” - Donagh*

Although participants are sad that the island is currently being aggressively developed, they're also confident that at some point, things will settle. The island will have rest again; nature will flow back in and do its thing.

*“The next step would be that people and the human world also respond to what nature is doing. For example: all these plants respond to the wind. They are resilient, they bend, move forward with the wind, but they keep their position. Whereas when we saw a radar, it was just this industrial thing. It didn't respond to the wind, it just kept its own pace, as if there is no wind, no world, no nothing. If we want to create the Symbiocene, we should adapt more and become more aware and respond a bit as well.” - Guido*

The group explained that during the day they had visited “One Peaceful World”, an artists' colony on the island founded by artists in the 1960s. There, the Symbiocene is alive and well. The corner of one woman's house — which she built herself — is covered in grapevines. That used to be the hottest room in the house, but now it's the coolest, thanks to the shade provided by the vines.

Somewhere else, in a neglected building, a participant opened a wooden drawer and found it full of plants. Nature always wins!





## A liberated island

Although the island is under pressure from external incursions and development, nature is still very present. Human structures try to take over, but nature is always coming back. One group asked themselves: "How can we find a balance and live in symbiosis with each other? And how do we give the island back to itself? How can we appreciate its borders?"

To celebrate the resistance movement of the artists living on the island, and to reclaim it from the pressures of development, they decided to anoint the island as 'Bevrijland', or 'Liberated island'. They made a huge sign with this name and hung it at a major intersection, so that people in cars and trams arriving through a tunnel onto the island would immediately see it.

*"Because we had someone from the squatter community in our group, it reminded me that I long for that radicalism in my own life. I realised I'm actually becoming very normative. It also reminded me that living in a gentle way with a green space is more important than maybe having constant electricity because you're not dependent on solar power. What are the choices you make, and what do you give in on to gain something else?" - Janna*

## Protecting nature: "Eigen Terrein"

In the Sportheldenbuurt you see lots of fences and signs saying "Eigen Terrein", (Private property), a phrase used in the Netherlands by land owners to show that others are not allowed to enter.



And yet we value human lives, and enterprise, and property. So this group had the idea to make little signs saying “Eigen Terrein”, but for nature. On the last day, all participants were given handfuls of these signs and encouraged to stick them into patches of greenery that they thought should be protected. By the end of the afternoon, the island was covered in them: little patches of weeds and greenery were now proudly protected with an “Eigen Terrein” sign.

### **Wilderness and chaos versus order and development**

Each culture has its own idea of nature, which is often formed by the landscape that culture is rooted in.

One participant from Iran talked about the vast expanse of wilderness she grew up in, spending her time outside, making fires in the mountains and cooking food over it. She was surprised and disappointed when she came to the Netherlands and encountered all kinds of rules around what you can and can't do in public space. Fires are banned, private property is sacrosanct, every bit of land is cleaned up and scrubbed and ordered.

That's partly because the Netherlands is so densely populated, and doesn't have vast tracts of wilderness that are found in Iran and other larger, less populated nations. Most of the natural landscape in the Netherlands has been cultivated or planted. Even in the Dutch countryside, every patch of land has been touched, manipulated or affected by humans. Weeds are pulled, bushes and trees are trimmed; almost nothing is left to grow wild.



That's another reason why every scrap of nature needs to be protected, as with an "Eigen Terrein" sign — which might hopefully engender more respect for scrappy, untidy wilderness rather than a neatly trimmed version of nature.

*"In Iran, it was really free to be outside and free to make fire anywhere we liked. But not here — here there's lots of rules." - Sahar*

*"A pragmatic nihilism even spreads to the multitudes of urban deserts all over the Netherlands, where gardens are paved over, just for self-centred convenience and constipated cleanliness. That this "garden" was the home and foraging grounds for many fellow creatures doesn't even appear in many people's minds." - Roger*

## **The beauty of decay**

Although we often associate natural beauty with growth — green leaves and sprouting plants, for example — its natural associate is decay. Nature works in cycles; everything that grows must also decay. Leaves mulch down into compost, necessary for the next cycle of growth.

But development rarely appreciates this. And often, particularly in the Netherlands, but also all across the world, the aesthetic of decay is disdained. How could we relearn to appreciate natural decay, of the organised chaos of nature?

*“Why can't the natural wear-and-tear and decay be accepted as a fact of time and being? Some of the greatest beauty lies in decay... the minimum would be to preserve the time-given beauty. Many people have a negative view of the improvised... they think all has to shine in toxic newness, ordered soulless and uniform ugliness... nature bound by metal rings and concrete slabs, chlorine- scrubbed pavements! No!” - Roger*

## **2. Crossing boundaries**

### **Swinging over borders**

Being on an island means first making a crossing. One must traverse the sea, either by ferry or tram, or by going over a bridge. A transition happens: first you were on the mainland, and now you are on an island. What does that shift feel like?

You might be forgiven for not noticing that you're on an island at all. Zeeburgereiland can feel like it's part of the city, connected as it is by tramlines, tunnels and roads. Arriving by tram, you're dunked underground in a tunnel before being spat out on the island — so you can be unaware that you've just crossed the sea. In Amsterdam, the city is full of bridges over waterways, and you might not notice that you've arrived on an island rather than just the other side of a river or canal.





*"Oddly enough I had never before thought of the island as a proper island, with a clearly defined edge where it met the water. That's changed now. I can both see and feel that it's an island. That gives it a more defined and independent character with its own story.*

*It also means that all the different life-forms and lifestyles are more clearly contained and belong together. An island has romance too. Maybe this comes from the idea that it's been cut off from the comfortable mainland and has had to manage on its own with the resources available." - Philippa*

What's more, we often think of islands as the edge of society: they are by definition separate, and things need to be intentionally transported to them. Zeeburgereiland is a manmade island, but it has gone through many evolutions and phases in its short existence.

Perhaps because of those evolutions, and because it is an island, Zeeburgereiland itself is made up of very different neighbourhoods, each an island unto itself. There's the 'fringe' artist community and the self-built homes and ateliers that sprang up around it. There's the horses, vestiges of a time when the island was home to fewer humans and more animals. There's the student housing, temporary wooden structures surrounded by overgrown greenery, with chickens pecking around. And then there's the new apartment buildings that are springing up in the Sportheldenbuurt, next to the slick architect-designed homes on the Zuiderzeeweg side of the island.





Although the communities in some of these areas are very tight and close, they barely communicate or interact with those outside of them. There are not many linkages between the disperse parts of the island. Perhaps each of them have more linkages with the outside world, and the rest of Amsterdam, than they do with each other. And yet they all co-habit this small island together. How might they be brought together? Who will be brave enough to cross the frontiers to make contact with the other side?

During the three-day school, several different 'types' of island residents came together and met each other for the first time, even though they only live a few dozen metres away from each other.

*"The three days made a connection between people who actually only live 25 metres away from one another, who seem to live with similar values and who are facing a similar challenge: a forced re-housing. They evidently needed something to discover all of that — a catalyser." - Guido*

What might symbolise crossing a boundary? A bridge, some form of flight, or... a swing?

One group chose to make a collection of swings to symbolise the crossing of boundaries. A swing moves between two areas, a dynamic pendulum shifting between the two.





And because the assignment was that they had to give something back to nature, they had the bright idea of attaching a pot of seeds to the swing, so that they would scatter as it went back and forth. They attached one swing over a fence by the student housing, that literally crossed between wild greenery and the walkway. And, most ambitiously, they also affixed a mega swing to the bridge between two enormous silos in the Sportheldenbuurt. The silos have long been out of use, and loom rather menacingly over the Sportheldenbuurt, juxtaposing the industrial with the residential.

One of the group scaled a ladder on one of the silos, and then looped an enormous length of rope from the top. Others had made the seat of the swing from a broad slab of wood salvaged from the island. Almost immediately after they had set it up, schoolchildren ran to have a go. When we finished at the swing after our circuit of the island, we found them queuing up to sit in pairs on the swing. It was a reminder of how important play is, how almost everyone loves swinging — the feeling of weightlessness, free of gravity! — and how we can create the city ourselves.

*"As for the outcome of the three days, I was extremely happy with the huge swing, which — apart from the great story behind it — is a fantastic example of a 'social prototype'; the makers had barely finished putting it up before it was already being used." - Guido*





### 3. Communication

#### **If nature could speak, what would it tell us?**

We're often so caught up in our human world that we rarely slow down and try to tune into other frequencies. We hear the wind blowing, but are frequently annoyed by it; sometimes we listen to the birds singing, but rarely stop to think about what they might be trying to communicate. We swat away wasps and bees as they buzz near us. But what if we stopped to listen to what they have to say? What stories they have to tell, what messages they have for us and the rest of mankind?

We imagine ourselves to be the centre of the universe, the kings of the earth. In this anthropocentric vision, nature is just a mute backdrop, the background scenery for human activity.

Maybe in the future, this will finally be reversed, and nature will dominate again. Or: we finally start to live symbiotically with nature, listening closely to what it has to tell us.

How can we learn to listen and read the animals, the plants? How might we understand their consciousness, how they perceive the world and everything they experience? We have complex algorithms and machines to break the hardest of codes, so how come we still haven't decoded nature?

One group devised futuristic communication devices for this speculative future, imagining that with their use we might be able to decipher what the grasses, the horses, the insects are telling us. Little unripe figs became 'earbuds'; two circular blocks of wood joined by saplings became earphones; and a wreath of pine twigs, leaves and rosemary all became earphones that helped us tune into hitherto unheard frequencies.

### **Nature is already communicating with us**

On the first day, the groups went out to search for something they were 'fascinated' by on the island. One group began talking about non-verbal communication in nature. Like when a dog pees somewhere, and leaves, and another dog comes along later, takes a sniff, and pees there in turn. They're marking their territory, but they're also communicating with one another.

That made them think of how nature seems to communicate with us, through plants. For example, plantain or dock leaves always grow near stinging nettles. The nettles can hurt us, but the solution is nearby: just rub some plantain or dock leaves on the red bumps, and the pain is gone. That's a beautiful metaphor for how nature functions: for every problem there's a solution nearby - just like this island. We have problems and conflicts but maybe a solution is nearby.





*"Our group thought of a ritual we could share at the group campfire. I volunteered to be stung, and then someone else in the group would come offering the solution. I don't mind undergoing some pain; a ritual has to involve a bit of pain! It's catharsis! Group bonding! A liminal experience!" - Juan*

### **If you could ask the island something, what would you ask?**

We asked several of the participants what they would say to the island if they could have a conversation with it.

*"Is it okay, the way things are going? Is this it? Is this where we are going?" - Maxim*

*"How does it feel about all of this development happening? Also: how did it feel in the past, what was your favourite chapter of being the island? And do you want all of this? What part of the island feels most healthy for you? Where do you feel most authentic as you, the island? What part represents you the most? I would love to ask the island about the past." - Jana*

*"I would ask how it feels . Because I see the island as a calm place where you can relax. But maybe it doesn't feel that way. Maybe it doesn't feel that way." - Genesis*

*"What can we do for you? So that you survive longer. We'll die eventually, but what can we do for you so that you're around for the next generation, our children, our grandchildren? Thank you, you're so good for our health. We really enjoy you. We get tasty food from you. I wish you all the best." - Sahar*



"What do you need? The thing is, it's a bit like, "I see you" is missing in the relationship between us and the nature, the island. I don't know which culture it is, but there is a culture in which rather than saying 'hello', they say 'I see you', which is really important for human beings. I think it's really important for nature and for human beings that we see it and are aware of it. Even when you almost can't hear it in between the sounds that we are producing." - Guido

### **Do you have something to tell the island?**

"I don't think so actually. I don't think I have so many to say. I think the island knows enough itself." - Maxim

"I'd like to say sorry. And say that I'd like to put myself forward for the maintenance of the wild on the island. You feel the transport arteries and tunnels that are being bored through the island, all the cars that are being pushed through it. And all those cranes and concrete. It's just a lot." - Berber

"I would like to make sure that it knows how much it means to people. And also say thank you for being my home for two years now and for giving me all these ideas and inspiration and people and opportunities. I feel like it's such a special place and this will always be such a big part of my life. Like a turning point actually, in a lot of ways. And i will be forever grateful to have been part of this island story, whether we have to leave or not. Either way, it's taken up a lot of space in my life and has been very important." - Jana

"I would tell it that I'm happy to be here, it's a really different vibe from elsewhere. I'm enjoying it here. Thank you so much." - Genesis



## **Balance between humans and nature**

On the first day, we were told to find a place we felt comfortable in, and to lay down and listen. We stayed lying for fifteen minutes, sinking into our environment, listening to what we could hear. When we came back, we recorded what we had experienced, in text, images, and even bits of grass and flowers we had found where we were lying down.

## **Tuning into our surroundings**

On the second day, we started with a classic “trust” exercise: closing our eyes and letting ourselves be led by someone else. But in this case, although we explored our relationship to trust and how much we trusted our partner with our safety as we walked along the pavement, it was also about tuning into the island, relying on senses other than sight. We could smell the sea as we approached, even though we didn’t know where we were. We could hear the gulls, the boats on the water. We felt the way the ground was uneven under our feet, how we stepped onto something and felt the wind in our hair.

*“Sound of cars on a highway like a heartbeat.” [from a slide someone wrote after the first exercise]*

*“We wonder why we’re not taking care, why we’re not in oneness with nature. When we’re not even aware of oneness between each other.”*

*"I enjoyed the sound of the sea. I felt peaceful when I heard it. I thought a couple of minutes ago that I was surrounded by mountains."*

*"People make things that they don't understand."*

*"There are many noises and feelings around. From birds singing to waves smacking and sucking against the shore. Our cars rolling their way to bring humans to their destinations, followed by boats sailing by and creating new waves within the water around me. The attention goes from the outside to the inside. How does my body feel on the hard human-made floor? Isn't it a bit painful and hard to lie down? At the same time I feel the sun and the wind on my body, giving me a lot of energy and taking away the pain with every other breath I take. The non-belonging sounds and feelings, start to now had all their time, a second of awareness. Now they seem to become all part of our symphony, slowly marching together. Compensating each other. Become one. Create something. The breathing continues while the sounds and feelings pass by. Almost like the waves around me. I hear them. I follow them. I love them. The rhythm of nature in the middle of a stone bridge in Amsterdam. Somewhere by water and nature in the middle of the city."*

It was noticeable that it was difficult to find a place on the island where you couldn't hear any human sounds. By the sea, we could hear the tanker boats as they went past, louder than the the birds. Elsewhere, the tweeting of birds was soundtracked by cars and mopeds zooming past, or children shrieking. We co-exist with nature, but sometimes we drown it out.

One group decided to make a soundscape to allow people to mix these sounds and determine which ones they wanted to zone in on. Else, a sound artist taped eight tracks at different places and set them up in an app with slides. Listeners could decide how high they wanted each of them in the mix; they could just listen to one, or all eight at once, at varying volumes. We heard what our environment often sounds like: human sounds with nature as a backdrop — and experienced how calming and refreshing it was to just listen to the wind, the birds, or the sea.

## 4. Connection

### Bonded to nature forever

Have you ever had a special relationship with a particular tree, or a lake where you always go swimming? Maybe you have a 'happy place' where you visit, in reality or in your mind, when you feel tired, stressed, or in need of nourishment.

*"I feel like I never have enough of nature. If I'm in the city or in a cafe or something, I often think: 'Ugh, I've had enough of this, I'm going to go somewhere else'. Whereas in nature that doesn't happen. It's never enough. It's never **not** right. It's always completely perfect. Because there's nothing in between me and it. The calmness it gives me is really special... I have a very strong emotional connection to this island. It's like a family member." - Jana*





What if we could 'wed' people to an element of the island, so that they would be forever bonded? What if you could marry a tree, a bridge, the wind?

That was the idea behind "Love Island", a blind date show devised by one group for their final presentation, with a hint of cheeky fun. One brave volunteer was invited to sit in a chair and be blindfolded, before the four elements of the island were invited onto the stage behind her.

Can you guess the four elements from their idea of a perfect first date?

- A) "I will comfort and nurture you"
- B) A snack at a place you want to go
- C) A walk in the park
- D) A long drive along the water

What about their idea of a personal hell?

- A) Pollution
- B) Tourists and people who pay with cash
- C) People who cut me off during my development
- D) People coming from all sides and I don't know who to pay attention to

So, who were they?

A: Soil

B: Eiburgh Snacks (a snackbar)

C: Hogweed (berenklauw)

D: The red bridge on Zeeburgereiland

Based on the answers, the volunteer chose the bridge, and was wedded to it in a special ceremony. The officiant said:

*"As in any good partnership, friendship, or marriage, you must take care of each other. In the good times, but also in the bad ones. Because your survival as a species depends on your cooperation. So, every time you see a bridge around the island, you should make sure its structure is going well, it's clean and accessible for everyone. And in return, the bridge will bring you connectivity. It will bring new people from other places. And it will call you to get out there, gather knowledge, and come back to the island. So I declare you and the bridges of the island bonded forever." - Juan*

After the ceremony, all the participants and visitors were then asked to think back to their experiences on the island the past three days and everything they visited and experienced. They were asked to think about part of the island that they felt closest to, and most enamoured with: a part they wanted to wed.

Then, they were given a piece of string that was wrapped around their wrist and tied to represent their bond with this part of the island.





## What's your relationship to nature?

In 'Love Island', we imagined parts of the island as a lover or romantic partner: someone you could marry. But how do we usually relate to nature? Is it like a lover, or is it more like a friend? Perhaps it feels like a parent. Or perhaps we feel out of touch with it and bored by it, and see it as a distant aunt.

Many participants said they saw nature as a family member. They felt love for it and felt that it was strongly familiar. They felt cared for by it, and wanted to care for it. One said that the environment is sometimes represented as being like a grandparent, although that seemed inaccurate and unfair —

*"Someone you should respect and love just because you're of it. It can be represented as something very fuddy-duddy and a bit old-school. An archaic entity that isn't up to date. But that's not true really, it's constantly evolving... it innovates inherently on its own."*

Many of the participants said they felt happier and more at peace in nature than in urban or indoor environments. Others felt that they wanted to be closer to it, but lived in cities and would continue to do so, and so felt that they lived somewhat at a distance from nature. During the three-day workshop they felt they had become closer to it and felt refreshed from having lived outside for several days.

*"Sometimes I get tired of the city. When you come from a place like Curacao where there's always nature around you, then it gets old and boring to always be in the city." - Genesis*







*"In the Netherlands I have less time outside. I find it a shame that we have less time in nature. That's because of the busy lifestyle here. It's not always possible to be outside." - Sahar*

Even for inhabitants of the island, the three days enabled them to see the island in a different way. They noticed that they saw far more greenery and more natural diversity than they had imagined, especially in the Sportheldenbuurt, which they had previously seen as over-developed and dominated by apartment buildings. Through exercises that encouraged them to close their eyes and listen, to smell, and to imagine, they found themselves slowing down and noticing more.

*"My encounters with the island during these days has been different than normal. Definitely in the way that I look and listen, and what I do. We've done different things than I otherwise would, and that means I've been looking at the island as if I have totally different glasses on. I do have to say that I still see a lot of negative things in the way the island is changing, but I've also seen a lot of positive things over the past few days. There's more nature than I thought. More nature and greenery. And I've also noticed how people, both those who live here and who live elsewhere, look at the island and its current situation." - Maxim*



**A moment when you really felt connected to the island over the past few days? What do you love about the island? What did you learn about it?**

*"For me the island is more, also the part where we live, the more wild part or more alternative side of it... and that's what fascinates me about it. I'm aware of the other side and I engage with it a lot, but... I do kind of equally love it and accept it. But I identify with the other part and that's my place to be." - Jana*

*"The sea!" - Sahar*

*"The jetty on the sea. And the forest where the student housing is." - Donagh*

*"When we were in the front garden of an artist... it was the only time that it was quite silent and we could actually hear the birds." - Guido*

**If the island was a person, what type of person would it be?**

*"Someone with open arms, someone who doesn't care who you are. As long as you leave everything else in peace." - Maxim*

*"I think a broad, wild woman. With strong legs, a big belly. Someone who's really lived, who has muscles, who's strong." - Berber*



*"A very open tolerant person that has gone through a lot of stages in their life and really developed into different forms of themselves. I think they had a more wild time, and then started to be more influenced by society and norms that it felt it had to adapt to. There was this time where people were squatting and it was wild and crazy and chaotic. And now there are all these perfectly built buildings. Now I think there's a tension between... one part of it thinks it has to join this new phase, but the other part of it is still "No, I don't want this, I'm wild and chaotic, I have ideas and want to create things." - Jana*

## **5. Regeneration: give and take**

In the Anthropocene, in which humans are separated from nature, we have ended up in a one-sided relationship, in which the environment is simply a 'resource' that we can draw upon. In modern society, we have lost previous cultural and social traditions that ensured a reciprocal relationship. Before, it was clearer to see that if you took something from the land, you had to give something back. And not a bag of un-decomposable rubbish, but compost or seeds: something regenerative that would keep the natural cycle going.

*"I think consumerism plays a part in our relationship with nature. Because we consume a lot. Our surroundings, but also food and everything that nature gives us. So giving back to nature, that's really important. And to feel that connection, and not see it as a separate thing that you can just take from all the time as if it's endless, because it's not. We have to take care of it. It also takes care of us." - Laura*

Now, we live in a linear system: we extract resources, process them, consume them, and then throw them away. How could we return to a circular system and learn not just to take, but also give back?

*"Nature is abundant, it can feed us with some to spare. But it's not good to simply see it in a one-sided way; that nature feeds us, but we give nothing back." - Mieke*

With this in mind, one group created a small booklet with images and descriptions of plants that people might see along the walk. Participants were encouraged to keep an eye out for plants such as brambles, camomile and black mustard and cross them off as they spotted them. And — as the booklet was called 'Give and Take', they were also asked to give something back to that little part of nature. That could be cleaning up rubbish, spreading seeds (from special pencils they were given that contain seeds), sprinkling water, being still and appreciative, or spreading ideas and knowledge.

*"In terms of its own resources; I knew there were plenty of blackberries but had no idea there was so much to forage. I was tripping over abundance!" - Philippa*

## **A menu of abundance**

Living in cities and towns, we're almost totally estranged from where our food comes from. We go to the supermarket and buy food wrapped in plastic that has been shipped from elsewhere. It's possible to forget that our environment is full of edible things. If we walk through the town, and even the forest, we see trees and plants, but we don't see them as food. And yet, if we know what to look for, there's so much to eat.

Just exploring on the island, we found a cornucopia of things to eat. From the more obvious blackberries and walnuts, we also saw yarrow, which has a light bitter taste and which can be used in salads or soups, and stinging nettles which are in fact edible, losing their sting as soon as they are heated. The same group that made the "Give and Take" booklet made a menu that incorporated all the edible plants they had highlighted in the booklet, including all of the above, as well as dandelions, camomile and black mustard leaves.

## **And from here, where to?**

Over three days, we made an intense creative journey through protection, boundaries, communication, connection and regeneration.

The process was supportive, thought-provoking, and fun. And the results were deeply thought through, carefully made, and conceptually strong. The end presentation brought the themes together beautifully and communicated them clearly to the visitors.





# NATURE PORTRAITS

**During the introduction at the start of the Summer Research School everyone told their most impressive nature experience.**

I once traveled through Tibet. We had walked all day in the grasslands. Sitting next to my tent, I saw a black spot in the distance — a man on a horse. I knew I really was not able to see so clearly at such a distance. When the spot came closer, it appeared to be a man on a horse. I felt the surrounding space, light, and clarity in every cell of my body.

-An





I went to a tree climbing course, where I relearned what I did as a kid. I felt the texture of the tree and learned to trust. I could rely on the tree to hold my weight. I felt one with the tree.

-Sophie





I started to swim in the ocean. It's always different. The sea was calm; I was floating on my back. I looked at the blue sky, and it was... perfect.

-Mirjam



In Rotterdam Centrum, they are making a beach. I call it heroin-beach. I'm very suspicious, because it seems so artificial, a man-made beach. But yesterday I saw lots of seagulls resting on the beach, eating worms. Then I realised the closeness of nature, even in the centre of Rotterdam.

-Donagh





I remember riding my horse when I was a teenager and feeling her breath in my neck and getting goosebumps all over. We interacted as beings. I felt like seeing the world through her eyes.

-Janna





Ten years ago, after graduation, I wanted to cross the Atlantic Ocean. In the harbour, I found a German captain who said: "You can come with me if you do the night shifts." Every night from 4am to 8am, I was all alone with the wind, stars, and sun coming up. When there was no wind, we went swimming in the 4000-meter-deep Ocean. After 21 days, I felt deeply connected.

-Berber



I traveled a lot in Africa as a guide, once with camels in the desert in Libya. One night we slept outside our tents because it was a beautiful night. I woke up and felt something next to me. I was scared when I realised it was a gigantic camel. It was not one of our camels. I did not know what to do. He looked at me, and he was just chewing. I felt really connected.

-Rosalie





Recently, I started growing vegetables and herbs. Taking care of plants and harvesting made me feel more connected.

-Augusta





I grew up in a new urban development. We played outside, and when I got a little cut, I did not go to my mother but rubbed some sand in it, and it cured me. Somehow I knew that this would heal. It was an inner knowing, no one told me.

Karel



In autumn as a child, I collected leaves, mushrooms, and pinecones and put them in a shoebox. I liked the collecting and the smell of autumn. I still like collecting stones and leaves.

-Hannie



In my country, we have lots of mountains. I spent a lot of time in the mountains with my friends and family. In the Netherlands, I miss them; in some way, I need the mountains.

-Sahar





I feel the natural source of pure energy when I look into the fire at a fire camp. I can look at it for hours.

-Ilya



I always had a fear of deep water. A year ago, I went to a diving course. I was deeply touched by the beauty of the underwater world. I felt very small and connected in this amazing, big world.

-Sia





As a family, we had a small cabin in Norway where we went every summer. We left with a boat from Holland. I remember the horrible smell of IJmuiden. When we entered Norway, I could smell the woods, and it felt like coming home.

-Guido





I grew up in a city, and I'm a city person. In Holland, we have only man-made nature, except for the sea. I can stare at it for hours. I love it, and I'm also terrified of it. This duality of the comforting quality of nature and the fact that it can also kill you is my connection to nature.

-Mieke



I made wine with my grandfather. We put the ripe grapes in a big bucket. I stamped the grapes with my bare feet, feeling their skin breaking. I was also thinking about my ancestors, who did the same for ages.

-Juan





I grew up next to a forest where I played every day. One day in spring, I disturbed a wild pig with her piglets. It chased me. I climbed into a tree. I was terrified. It made me aware of the power of nature.

-Roger





When I was a kid, I went camping with a friend who taught me that nettles were edible. We decided to make nettle soup. We mixed water with nettles, boiled it, and ate it. It felt like we were hunters and gatherers.

-Maxim



Stephan

I was once in Shanghai. There was almost no green.  
So coming home, I realized that I should appreciate the green  
we have in Holland more; I went to the woods and loved it.





Jana

I was swimming in a lake in France with a friend. I have done that a thousand times before. We were swimming naked, so there was no separation between me and the water. It was such a powerful experience to be one with the water. Everything is right at this moment.





## Philippa

Every time I think, "Hmm, maybe I should shave my legs," I realise I!m just a little hairy mammal. I grew up in Cornwall, South England. I was walking a lot outside when I suddenly felt that the membrane between me and the plants, the earth, etcetera suddenly disappeared.



Amaliá

I was cycling home at 4 p.m. after a party. I felt very lost, as if nothing made sense. I stopped and laid down in the weeds, and my hands took the grass; that calmed me. At certain moments, nothing makes sense; but nature makes sense.





Else

As a kid, I was obsessed with animals of all kinds. I felt very close to these animals, although I did not understand anything about them.

I felt their energy. Nature is impressive to me and, at the same time, very small and close to me.





Marijn

I was on vacation with two friends. We were walking from the camp to the village. There was a small river next to the road. I suggested following the riverbed. In following the water, I looked at society at the backside of the houses, and I felt like I was not one of the humans, but rather part of this river.



Laura

I grew up in Amsterdam, and three years ago I moved to Zeeburger Island. I started noticing the seasons. Diverse spring plants, seeing the young ducks. That connected me to nature..





## Genesis

As a kid, I lived in Curacao. With the whole family, we used to go hiking very early, from 5 in the morning until 7 when we reached the beach and went swimming. That was a connecting experience for me.





Valentina

When I grew up in Curacao, I went with my little sister to the beach. We looked for weird seashells — things we hadn't seen before. We were so surprised every time we found something we hadn't seen before. The ocean scares me with her power but she's also beautiful at the same time, as you can always find new things.



Mara

In high school, I went with my friends to the ocean to see the sun rise. It was so calm and peaceful being there together. I felt so much freedom and happiness; it remained my special place.





Emamul

I lived in Bangladesh, close to the forest. One day, I went with my brother to another region with mountains. We climbed to the top of a hill. It was very steep and dangerous. When I was at the top and looking all around, I felt very close to nature.





# RESULTS













Geven



Nemen

**Braam**  
*Rubus fruticosus*

**Gespot?** ☐

**BESCHRIJVING** Een bladverliezende struik die 1,5 m hoog wordt, met gestekelde, vaak gebogen stengels die wortelen waar ze de grond raken. Bladeren zijn geveerd en bloemen worden tot 2 cm breed met vijf witte of roze kroonbladen. Vruchten zijn eerst groen, voordat ze rood en later blauwzwart worden.

**VERSPREIDING** Algemeen en wijdverbreid in heel Europa.

**TOEPASSINGEN** Vroege vruchten zijn het zoetst en kunnen direct van de tak worden gegeten, terwijl minder smakelijke bessen kunnen worden gebruikt in taart, jam, siroop, wijn en als smaakmaker in azijn. Ze zijn uitstekend te combineren met peren, appels of pruimen op vlaaien, of gebruik ze als smaakmakers voor zelfgemaakte mede met honing, water en kruiden.























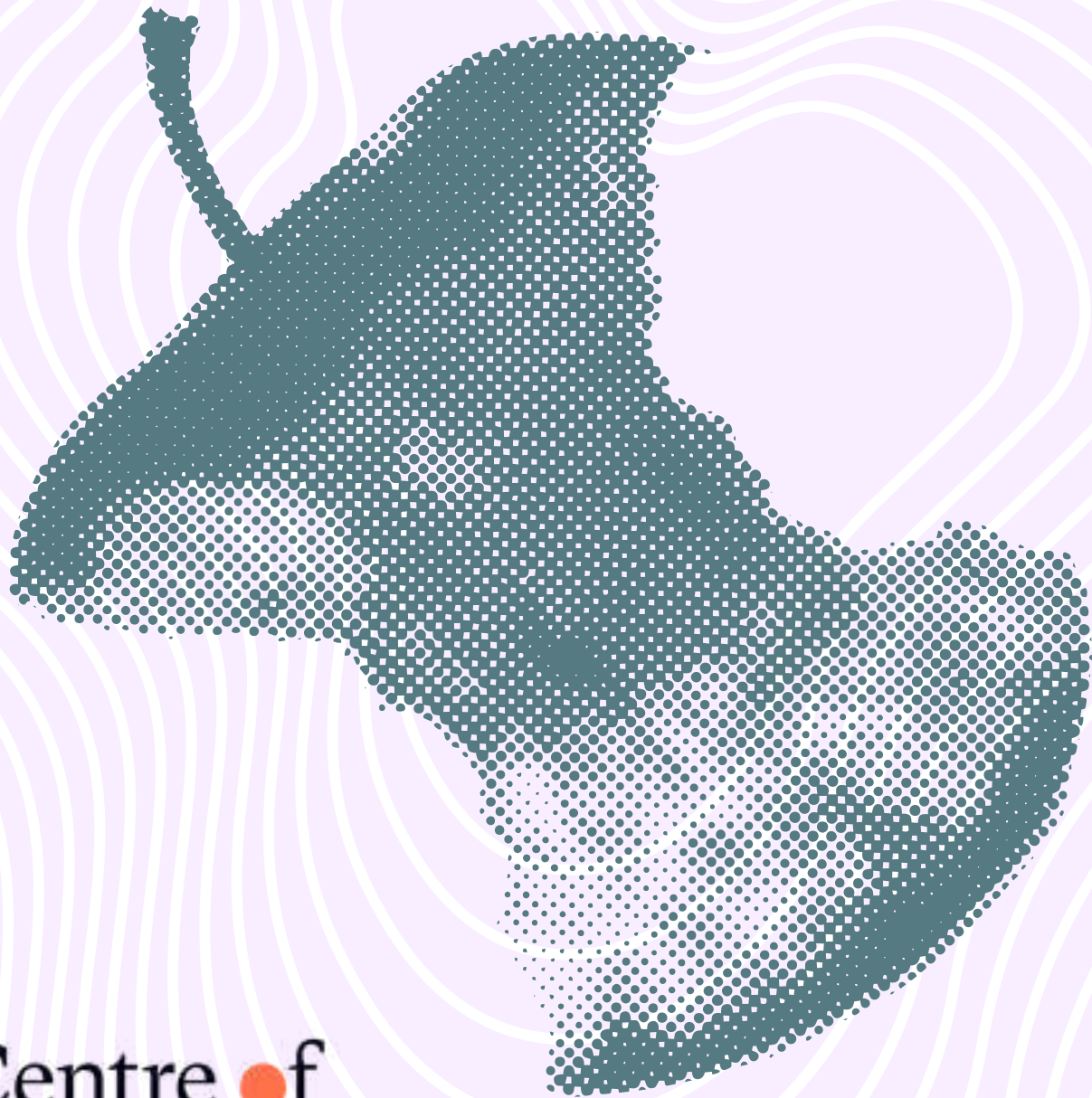
We will continue. This summer research school was a start of a movement to make the philosophical concept symbiocene a living reality.

Want to know more? <http://deepisland.squarespace.com>

Want to connect or join? [info@ankramer.nl](mailto:info@ankramer.nl)



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