

# What is the landscape you're working in?

A bright morning in early October 2024. We've been invited for a conversation with Jeroen Peeters in his workspace in the Quartier Maritime in Brussels. We want to talk about his forthcoming publication and the questions, themes, research and companions surrounding it: *Conceptual Landscapes: Readership in the Expanded Field*. The outcome of a long-term research project in the arts, it promises to take on a hybrid form, each chapter having its own mind and materiality. Don't call it a book, perhaps rather a collection of individual publications, some of them already out there in the world. They come with a paper body, but also manifest themselves in performance or a spatial setting. If it doesn't quite fit on a shelf, it seems to reflect the broad curiosity of the author and researcher animating all this. Peeters is a writer, dramaturg and performer who, like an essayist, moves back and forth between various fields and media.

While he prepares tea, we seize the chance to look around. Two walls lined with bookshelves crammed up to the ceiling, here and there some trinkets – sandalwood, a sage bundle, crocodile figurines. A table with an arrangement of books, images, newspaper clippings and slips of paper with notes. Near the window, a reading corner with an armchair and a small table with more books. Nothing much on the walls, but lots of houseplants worthy of a winter garden, the purple and burgundy shades of various *Tradescantia* and *Begonia maculata* shining in the sunlight amid the green. On a grey woollen carpet in

the middle, an empty writing desk with a couple of wooden chairs. A prosaic note in the corner, where a bucket and rags protect the floorboards from water trickling in through the ceiling.

'It's been a recurring nuisance. The roofing contractor had to pass by again the other day', says Peeters as he returns from the kitchen. 'But you know', he adds with a smile, 'not all processes can be contained so easily'.

'How about that one?', I inquire, pointing at a cartoon pinned against a bookcase. It shows a man sitting on a table in an empty room and smoking a cigarette, with a caption that reads, 'I'm working on a PhD in doing nothing.'

'Ah, let's not talk about that. I'm afraid I fail to live up to that image!'

– As we sit here at a table in your workroom, with all these books and plants around, I'm reminded of a question by Kate Zambreno I'd like to ask you. It's from her book *Drifts*. What is the landscape you're working in?

– Great question, but it promises to be a serious walk ... How much time have we got?

– I'm in no hurry.

– Let's start right here with this table. It's a regular wooden table, nothing special. It has a scarred surface, some traces of wear. Mostly I use it for writing. Right now, we're using it for our conversation.

In a sense, it facilitates our conversation, mediates it. The other table over there has another function. It's where I arrange and map out materials when I'm working on an essay or a performance. Stuff can linger there and get rearranged once in a while.

– I wanted to ask you about that ...

– Not so quick, we'll get to that later. Some ten years ago, I had a residency in the studio of Roland Rauschmeier in Vienna. He's an artist who works in multiple media, so his work environment was arranged to support that, with different corners and workstations. Along one wall, five large tables were lined up, each with a computer. This was before flat screens, so imagine those unwieldy beige boxes. It's a large studio, but the computers took up a ridiculous amount of space, a bit like a staged classroom. Then Roland explained to me that each computer had its own purpose and that they needed to be separate for him to work. One was set up for video-editing, another for writing, a third for emails and admin, and so on. I still work on a single computer, but it made me think about organizing my own work environment and what particular practices need. And I never stopped fantasizing about tables.

– Fantasizing?

– Yes, there's more to it than the practicality of a table as a tool for writing or making collages or so. Hold on. (*Gets up to fetch a couple of books.*)



Charlotte Mutsaers, *Mijn planten* (gouache, 70 x 90 cm, 1980)

Here, look at this painting by Charlotte Mutsaers, who has arranged all her houseplants on a table. Isn't that wonderful? Or take this, a sculpture by Kristof Van Gestel, *Carpet on pedestal on castor wheels*. Not exactly a table at first sight, but who's to tell?



Kristof Van Gestel, *Tapijt op sokkel met wielen* (studio view, 2002)

– So, the carpet and all these plants around here deserve a table too?

– They do. Well, I mean, they're somehow part of my worktable. Everything in this room is my direct work environment, it supports me in my daily practice and research. The furniture, the things, plants, books, artworks – they all come with a history and personal attachments, but they also contain fantasies and possibilities. Hold on a minute. (*Gets up again to fetch a small scrapbook.*) Here, a clipping from March 2017. A.L. Snijders writes that as a student he became friends with a sculptor 'who lived in a colossal house. It had nine large rooms that were totally empty'. He suggests that he failed as an art student because he couldn't quite imagine such wayward working conditions that resist common habits.

Crafting conditions in which the work can emerge is a daily exercise for me. I'm still learning how to do that, every day again. When I moved here, the other room actually stayed empty for two years. I didn't have enough furniture. I didn't yet know what to do with the room. I didn't really know how to live or work in a large apartment. So, I imagined that room full of tables, each for a different activity. Or for different projects, because I like to work on several things in parallel.

– Can I see that room?

– Well, that fantasy is an ongoing negotiation. I do value some spillover between work and life, but I don't want to live in an exhibition. When a particular table has gained shape through practice, it gets integrated into the work itself or elsewhere. We'll get to that.

– Okay, but how about the plants?

– You asked what landscape I'm working in. A mere table won't do for me. I need several tables and perhaps a garden with plants as a minimum setting. From there I can imagine other gardens and bigger, heterogeneous landscapes to walk in, to discover new things or get lost. The tables support me, the books and images open up perspectives. The plants remind me that all of this is my *milieu*, quite literally an environment. The landscape is not just a metaphor. This workroom is my extended body. It's the milieu that I inhabit and that in turn produces me, a version of me. A version of me that can do the work in the way I'd like to work. This environment affords ways of doing, imagining, thinking, and that includes corporeal and material ways of thinking. Later we can enter some specific landscapes of work, because they're particular each time.

– Are those the 'conceptual landscapes' of your title?

– That term is indeed one component of the dramaturgical method I discuss in the chapter *And then it got legs*.<sup>1</sup> When I'm preparing an essay or performance, I often have a few questions in mind. But what actually guides me is an image – it could be a picture, but also a text fragment or a gesture. Something that seems to bring conceptual clarity to a problem. At the same time, it's intriguing because it also speaks to me as an image, with its poetry and material qualities. Now, when you start to explore such a guiding image, it takes on volume and gravity, it becomes a scene or landscape with all kinds of features. You can walk around in it, discover other aspects of this conceptual landscape. And you discover how you would behave in there, for instance how you would move or speak. Different kinds of imagination are activated, but it's not a space of free association. Concepts are constraining and offer specific viewpoints. But by inhabiting them, they come alive differently.

– How does all this relate to the workspace then?

– When you're at work, it's all intertwined, but I find it helpful to identify the different components to analyse the method. One aspect is organizing the workspace, with its furniture and practicalities and daily rituals. Another aspect is the conceptual landscape of a specific problem. It's like a map or stand-in for the essay or performance you're working on. There's always some friction between these material and imaginary components, but this keeps the process alive and enables a reflexive attitude towards it. Creating conditions for the work to emerge involves staging your process. And on the way you're articulating what you're doing so it becomes a conscious method. In a sense, that's your walk.

– Research through doing, as it's called?

– Yes, I'd like to discover through experience what it's all about, to better formulate my questions through the research. Experimenting with method matters and leads to a different outcome. Not necessarily a better or clearer outcome, but a specific one, one that you own. This goes against the grain of our bureaucratic zeitgeist with its elevator pitches and applications and master plans and what have you. Everyone seems to know the outcome of their research in advance already! That may be an efficient approach, but to me it lacks curiosity and fails to value the

process. Research involves more than applying familiar methods and accumulating knowledge. What is your research about? Ah! Admittedly, I fail at the elevator pitch each time again. Kate Zambreno's question is certainly a better one: What is the landscape you're working in?

(*Gets up quickly and clears the other table, then lays out the books and scrapbook so they show the images discussed earlier.*) Don't worry about the other material, that was only a draft. I'll reassemble it when needed – if I remember. For now, I'll put these books here, so we have a map of our conversation. If we get lost, we can backtrack. And at the end of our walk, we'll discover whether an interesting constellation has emerged. Or not. We'll see.

\*

– Some months ago I saw your lecture-performance *A Table* in Leuven.<sup>2</sup> If I remember well, one of the images you showed was of a table with images arranged on it.

– In that performance I do indeed show several worktables of other artists and writers. The one you refer to is the editorial team of *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1950s. They're gathered round a desk, but there's too much material, so they're also looking at prints laid out on the floor.



*Harper's Bazaar's* editor Carmel Snow, designer Alexey Brodovitch and team (Walter Sanders, 1952)

– Is it related to your mapping method?

– Not entirely. It shows the table as a tool in editorial practice. Composing a longer work requires overview. Think of a book or an entire magazine, which will often combine various kinds of texts and images. Place a printout on the floor and you notice different things than on the screen. How are the elements distributed? What do balance, rhythm and flow feel like? Maybe the overview reveals elements or unintended connections that could be taken into the composition and enhanced. When the overall order needs revision, things are quickly shifted around. If it needs to happen on the level of the paragraph, I use scissors and a stapler to reorganize. There's joy in this rather messy method, it's a process of *making*. Sitting and moving amid the scraps is a particular way of imagining a book. I've learned it from graphic designers, but it's now fully part of my practice as a writer and editor as well. So yes, you're right, in both cases the table has a similar function. It's a medium for spatializing thought and creating mobile cartographies.

– I'm imagining the floor here now, full of paper too. I suppose that's how you structured your publication *Conceptual Landscapes*?

– Yes, in the other room. I have enough space there to work on six tables at the same time. A table for each chapter, each with its own questions, conceptual landscape and material appeal. Each chapter has its own individual form, like an essay, artist's book or zine. The chapter *A Table* is a performance that doesn't exist as text printed on a page – apart from my own script. To complicate things, those chapters also have a history that went through multiple forms or parallel manifestations: for instance, a daydream, notebook, script, lecture, essay. As you can imagine, this involved yet more tables! Different ways of writing or composing are different ways of thinking. I'm inspired here by authors such as Moyra Davey and Annie Ernaux, who draw different kinds of work from the same source. And then, working on the floor, there was some inevitable spillover between the tables. Or better: unexpected cross-pollination, which I happily embrace as I go. Are you still with me?

– Text appears to be alive and mutable for you, not something that can be constrained to a single form. How do you present this textual sprawl? Is it held together by a traditional cover or by an elastic band? Or does the publication come with a small folding table to lay it all out?

– You're giving me ideas!

– Perhaps we can now move into some specific landscapes. Landscapes, tables, chapters – whatever they are.

– Tables of content. (*Smiles.*)

– To return to *A Table*, how did you get to that work?

– Francis Ponge's *Le carnet du bois de pins* has long intrigued me. It was written in the summer of 1940 when he was hiding in the French countryside. After a year spent working as a clerk for the military, he was reunited with his family, but he only had a small notebook and pencil and nothing to read. For several weeks he wrote about the pine-woods, drafting variation upon variation of a poem. In-between he added notes on the process, its aims, struggles and conceptual problems. And he listed words to look up later in the dictionary. This notebook got published after the war and is a unique account of a creative process. Ponge would return time and again to the notebook as a form. He had an increasing preference for rough drafts and unfinished work. Some thirty years later, *La table* was the last of his notebook publications, this time inspired by the table he wrote upon.

I like the connection between these two works, partly because it's somewhat similar to my own trajectory. Ponge calls the pinewoods a 'slow wood factory'. In a sense, the woods create the conditions for growing wood, sawing them into boards and fashioning a table out of them. That his last notebook would be *La table* doesn't come as a surprise then: the table creates the material conditions for his writing and reading. But Ponge also explores in writing how he *inhabits* his workspace, with particular attention for his corporeal attitude. Each time I read this notebook, I get confused and wonder, What exactly is he doing at his table? So, I wanted to try it out – here, at this very table. It appeared the text is all about *leaning*.

– Reading became doing?

– Exactly. My reading of Ponge is a literal and physical reading of his text. I follow his words as if they were a score. It's a particular way of reading and inhabiting a text. I follow his words, but also retrace his labour and daily rituals. I move in someone else's traces of labour, imagining and reactivating them. Again, it says something about the workspace as that which you lean on – also literally, with your body. It produces you ...

– I remember this funny moment in the performance when you first swing your legs onto the table.

– That came as a surprise to me. It's not uncommon to imagine other bodies when you're reading, but performing them makes this tangible or legible in a different way. Swinging my legs onto the table felt awkward. Suddenly I felt myself inhabiting a 'historical body', I was launched into another era. During the preparations I happened to see a film on TV about *The Washington Post* in 1971. The male editor had his legs up on his desk in all his meetings with his colleagues!

– I'd like to talk more about your presence as a researcher.

– In lecture-performances, apart from a table I often use a document camera that projects live whatever is placed under it – images, small objects, a book. What you then see laid out on the table is not just the text of the lecture, but a performance score. It gives the audience a hint of what's to come. In *A Table* this is the annotated book, the images, a pencil and a conch. But it could be a line of books or a map of file cards or any combination with images, clippings, notebooks, small objects.



Jeroen Peeters, *A Table* (performance props, 2024)

Sometimes I use an hourglass to constrain my drift when I'm improvising or thinking out loud. At other times, everything is scripted or precisely choreographed, like in *A Table*. So, it can be precise and detailed or rather open, but I've considered and rehearsed it. My handling and narrating of these things is then a translation of my handling them while doing research. This performance approach shows that research is situated, material and concrete.

– Why does this situatedness matter to you?

– The ecological crisis has made abundantly clear how we're entangled with a complex environment that both eludes our control and requires our care. I believe we need to develop ways of reading and writing that acknowledge, articulate and narrate our situatedness. This is a matter of preserving and recovering a varied and resilient cultural ecology

of languages and practices – and also of cultivating a ground for emergent, speculative languages and practices on a par with today's challenges.

Although I'm just saying it like that, it actually took me a long time to understand where my artistic and ecological interests meet and how they could inform each other.

– Can you give an example?

– For years now I've been experimenting with various kinds of embedded writing, so perhaps I can say something about what I call my 'garden writings'. In the garden writings I set up residence in a project or art installation as if it were a garden. I write on-site, from the midst of things, with a particular attention for the ecology of that 'garden', meaning its relations and processes and my own place in them.

An early example is *Reseeding the library, gleaning readership*, written by hand during a residency in Mette Edvardsen's *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, which revolves around a library of living books.<sup>3</sup> The essay explores the dispersion of literature through wind, water and animals, and biodiversity at the heart of readership. More recently I wrote reflections on Sabina Holzer's *which dances*, a choreographic assemblage related to the mining and production of aluminium. Covid made me reconsider what it actually means to write *in situ* and reflect on distance and gaps, on the weakness of our sensorium and on material literacy.<sup>4</sup>

– Have any of those garden writings made it into the new publication?

– Yes. Let's move into a specific landscape. In June 2021, Sara Manente hosted the collective installation *ROT Garden* during four days at BUDA in Kortrijk.<sup>5</sup> Various artists contributed works based on fermentation practices. There were sculptures, a small library, audio works, etc. Visitors were invited to hang out, browse and discover things at a slow pace. I set up a table and photocopier there with the aim of making a publication in and on that very environment through fermentation. How could I approach writing as part of an ecosystem and material process?



Les femmes salient leurs maris, pour du doux les rendre guéris (anonymous, 1557)

I had found an inspiring image that provided me with a conceptual scene. (*Pulls a print from a folder.*) It's an anonymous engraving from the sixteenth century. Four women can be seen salting their husbands in a large barrel. These men are literally being brined to increase their sexual appetite. We could also imagine one of them as a writer being

✱

prepared for writing. Add more liquid and spices to it and you could ferment a text in that brew. And maybe later on, the women could also end up in the barrel, reading the text they've been co-producing. It became an eco-materialist fable. The work is called *A Pickled Community*.

– Did you have yourself pickled in order to write? I guess I'll take that with a pinch of salt ... What exactly did you do?

– The rotunda in Kortrijk that hosted *ROT Garden* looks like a large glass jar, so I looked for a fermentation recipe and a starter. I used the works and books at hand to reflect on themes such as fermentation practices in art, cultural rewilding, bacterial life. This was during Covid, so I also addressed what's in the air but eludes the human sensorium. I was reading, taking notes, cutting and pasting, arranging all these materials on a table. Every afternoon I did a lecture-performance with a reading of the emergent state of the publication. Afterwards I printed a zine for the people attending.

– Ah, you immersed yourself in books and artworks, not quite in brine! Where's the fermentation part?

– It's a translation, to be sure, but I closely followed the recipe as a constraint for writing. Fermentation happens in a sealed environment that is opened once in a while to release pressure. It's also an irreversible process, so there was no editing or going back. You can't fully control it, there's always the risk of growing mould. What do you do with bad material? You can compare it to making a collage, but this text was alive, constantly transforming and distributed. For me, it also provoked questions of authorship, because I appropriated material from others.



Jeroen Peeters, *ROT Garden Readings* (performance view, 2021)

In *ROT Garden*, writer, text, readers and listeners were all part of the same environment – like the men and women in that barrel of brine. They were present in the installation, attended the lecture-performance and then took the zine home. These different manifestations of the text were intertwined, and so were the modes of reading, of attending to them. It was an experiment in local publishing.

– There's the experience and memory of the local readers. But does this 'text' live on beyond that?

– Maybe there are pirate copies of the zine circulating on the internet, who knows. Two years later I opened up the jar to get to the fermented goodies. I tried to read and transcribe those bits of text to the best of my ability. That became the fifth state of the text, published in *ROT magazine* and included in the new publication.<sup>6</sup> Later on, I read this text out loud

as a performance at the Eindorf gallery in Vienna.<sup>7</sup> I wanted to know how that foreign material would live on my tongue and travel through my body. Maybe make it my own again in a different way.

Today I imagine inviting another performer to do a reading, someone who isn't familiar with the source materials. The audio recording will then be the seventh state of *A Pickled Community*. Listeners will be immersed in the text, in the somewhat abstract and haphazard flow of words. We'll see how it turns out.

This is them, this is you, this is us.  
An innumerable multitude seen to exhibit a marvellous activity, changing their forms with great rapidity, drawing in and thrusting out prolongations of their substance, and creeping about as if they were independent organisms. They're just tiny bits of stuff.  
Atomic particles.  
Subatomic particles.  
Look deeper and deeper and eventually there's nothing. They're mostly empty space.  
They're mostly nothing. *Tra-la-la*. Nightmares about drowning. Oh no, wait. Sugar, corn syrup, hydrogenated palm kernel oil, citric acid, tapioca dextrin, modified corn starch, natural and artificial flavours, colours, sodium citrate, carnauba wax. It is believed to work centrally via interactions with voltage-gated sodium channels inhibiting repetitive firing of action potentials. It is a kind of pathology, a sickness in the sense of a virus being inserted in the system. Can they learn to live as monstrous beings? They think wellness and change are measured by comparison to potential for extremes of illness or death. They desperately cling to things because metal plastic glass ceramic wooden objects miscellaneous last longer than human flesh.

Their relatively slow rate of decay presents the reassuring illusion that at least something doesn't die. They listen to sounds, tones and timbres that stimulate bacterial cultures. Black fungi and cyanobacteria are the living paint. They become microscopic in focus and scale, abstract, blown out of proportion. Archipelagic. Pixelated. Untitled.

A hundred and fifty squares of silk, each of them hand dyed, a gown for living sculptures. Pale amaranth carnation illusion magenta pastel pink abanakee anemone bandicoot bitter chiffon goldenrod gorkha old techno green lemon alto cloud concrete double flotsam rakaia silver snow spray surf grey cosmic china liseran thulian pink purple dark cerise mulberry rose bellbottom juan rhino san shipshape blue plum spice strikemaster sugar dark clouds cobalt cove digital dotcom galactica gulf midnight oil true vortex blue grey ash corduroy latitude limed sirocco stack triple bottle burnham english everglade holly palm phthalo sherwood green slate astronaut cerulean guru teal wanaka blue blumine chathams drift orient sapphire aztec celtic daintree evergreen holly ivy moroccan palm petanque raglan woodsmoke green burst cadet cello cloud sapphire space vogue zodiac azure blue green bay exponent kookaburra manatee neutral roman rugged santas silver suit grey lavender comet covert dolphin smoky camouflage hibernate moss olive pasifika punga style thatch waiouru green grey deep buccaneer dusty ferra memory russett taupe rose masquerade.

Excerpt from *A Pickled Community* (2023)

\*

– *A Table* evokes the loneliness of a writer at his desk, while *A Pickled Community* is a frivolous work about an emergent community. That's a big leap. They're both experiments with textual forms, where writer and readers alike are part of a staging. I'm trying to see how it sits together, but you keep talking about process and method. What's at stake for you?

– Okay, let's back up. *Conceptual Landscapes: Readership in the Expanded Field* is indeed a publication on method, so it may sound a little abstract. It's partly the outcome of my long-term interest in the 'languages of making'. I noticed that in newspapers, artists are interviewed about their world view, in weekend magazines about their lives, in art journals about their poetics. But they're seldom addressed as *makers*, so their ways of doing and speaking in the studio remain a mystery to most people. Twenty years ago I started to observe artists such as Vera Mantero, Philipp Gehmacher and Meg Stuart in the studio, curious about their ways of working. This developed into an anthropological interest in documenting the languages of making, a central strand of my work to this day. Artists may not be the best placed to interpret their own work, but I do believe they're the prime witnesses of their own methods. That's where my focus lies.

How do artists work? How do they speak about their ways of doing? How could I develop discourse from practice? How to account for aspects that resist verbalization, like embodied knowledge, oral culture,

material thinking? Those questions concern me in developing a conceptual vocabulary around artistic research methods. The zeitgeist wants lofty statements and unequivocal messages, but when it comes to issues like community or world-making, I believe that the practices themselves matter. Experimenting with alternative ways of doing and sense-making requires imagination, and artistic research can contribute to this.

– Could you outline the central questions of your publication?

– For years I used the notion of 'conceptual landscape' in both my writing and my dramaturgical work, but I wanted to analyse it as a specific method. In a collaborative situation, you need conversation to get started. Conversation here also means that you're inventing a language together, seeking to create a common ground, a shared imagination. As I said before, both a conceptual landscape and the work environment mediate this conversation that extends well beyond verbal language. Together with your collaborators, you're creating conditions for the work to emerge: you're crafting method by articulating the process as you go. Many elements come into play, conditions you can't always fully control but have to take into account and negotiate with. Think of materials, technologies, a budgetary framework, a deadline, expectations ... Doing research or making art is a material form of thinking that each time navigates and appropriates a complex environment. In *And then it got legs* I mobilized my experience within dance and performance dramaturgy

to articulate all this and make these methods and reflections available to others.

– Do you think these methods are valuable beyond the field of dance and performance?

– I hope so. Dance dramaturgy opens up perspectives that may not be obvious in other disciplines. It has developed over the past fifty years in a field with a great appetite for experimentation and collaboration. The experiential and corporeal focus of dance also creates a particular attention for embodied knowledge and non-verbal languages and literacies. The idea that creating conditions is a matter of *staging* the process would perhaps only occur in a performing arts context. So, there's a rich history to draw from.

That being said, I don't want everyone to work dramaturgically, nor do I believe that methods can be simply applied elsewhere. Practices always require translation and adaptation to other contexts. I hope their documentation could provide inspiration and facilitate exchange. 'How do you work?' is not only a question I ask artists or writers. I'm also curious about practices of translation, ethnographic field observation, participatory design and nature conservation. What connects these approaches is their observing and thinking from the midst of things. In turn, those practices and attitudes can inspire my ways of doing.

– I attended a public presentation of *And then it got legs* with two artists, Jonathan Burrows and Sara Manente, engaging in conversation with you ...

– That was part of an ongoing series of conversations in which I always invite two people to present 'oral annotations' to my book. Since oral culture and commoning are central to dance dramaturgy, I wanted to make this explicit in the presentations too.<sup>8</sup>

– One of those annotations led to a lively discussion about 'witnessing' as a particular mode of attention. Do you have further thoughts on this?

– Ah, you're ahead of me! Conversation with peers is an important part of research, so I'm happy when it opens up new directions of thinking. In *And then it got legs*, I discuss some classic questions of dramaturgy: How do you move from studio to stage? How do you prepare your work to share it with an audience? How does the compositional work relate to conventions? How do you prime the spectators for reading your work in a specific way? And so on.

But then, my interlocutors were much more interested in the question of 'first spectators' in the studio, the dramaturg being one of them. The discourse on dance dramaturgy has been rather preoccupied with debunking the dramaturg as a figure of knowledge and overview, while failing to acknowledge the particular kinds of spectatorship involved. I used 'witnessing' to describe a wide range of attentional modes in the studio, such as observing and listening, but also an active stance of holding back. The work is emergent, in constant flux and not yet public, so the notion of 'spectatorship' doesn't quite cover this range. I realized there's little vocabulary around this. In another conversation, Kristof Van Gestel suggested that the 'reading of practices' is central to what I do.

All this prompted me to shift my research focus from composition and readership to the creation process as an ecology of attention. Readership in the expanded field, as my subtitle has it, is situated there.

I formulated a new set of research questions: How do artists or writers read their own work as it emerges in the studio? How do they prime their bodies, attune their senses, hone skilled practices, foster alternative literacies? If we look at the creation process as an ecology of attention, what does it mean to inhabit such an environment? These questions are central to *Bandergewilden*.

– Bandergewilden?!

– What a great word, isn't it. I don't know exactly what it means, nor how to pronounce it. The internet remains curiously silent when you search for clues, which makes it all the more intriguing ... I read this word in a novel by Renee Gladman, *The Ravickians*. Two writers are discussing a particular translation problem. Ravickian is mostly a gestural language, so it's structured rather differently than English. These languages have a different approach to the moment where thought becomes speech so it can be shared with others. It's hard to capture this elusive moment or movement in any language, let alone translate it. In Ravickian, it's called *bandergewilden*. The gestural, the untranslatable, the desire to share our idiosyncrasies so they may become a shared language, the vulnerability and risk to be misunderstood – many things resonate in this word. *Bandergewilden*. There's a winged rebel in it and a wild garden.

It's a landscape I could work in. It became a guiding image for exploring the reading of practices.

– How did you go about it?

– As I said, there's little vocabulary available, so I had to figure out an approach to get started. *And then it got legs* already contains an ethnographic observation of the dance studio, so I wanted to widen my scope. I imagined a collection of glances and attitudes from various writers and artists, but then I also found clues in other professions such as anthropology and translation. It's a diverse and somewhat elusive repertoire of embodied knowledge. I browsed my notebooks and shelves, gleaned concepts, words and images from a variety of sources. In the realm of practice, not everything is already identified or conceptualized, so simply listing specific verbs and looking closely at them was important. After a while, I saw patterns emerge. Earlier I spoke of *following* the words of Francis Ponge, which means *reading* and *tracing* them, *retracing* his labour and daily rituals. We can now expand that vocabulary and speculative reading with more nuances: attending to, witnessing, practising alongside, being with, writing with. But also skirting, leaning, gleaned, holding, drifting, drawing, doodling, procrastinating. In a sense, they're all forms of reading. *Bandergewilden* is a tentative glossary of composing one's attention in a creation process. A library of practices.

### What do her hands know? (3)

A dreamt explosion wakes her up in the middle of the night. These auditory hallucinations have been disturbing her sleep and baffle her during daytime too. Hoping to unravel the mysterious origin of this noise she, Jessica – Tilda Swinton's character in *Memoria* (2021) by Apichatpong Weerasethakul – sets out on a personal quest for calm. On the way to a sound technician at the conservatoire, she peers into a door and sees an instrument builder lecturing on the absorbent qualities of hygroscopic materials such as wood, on durable gluing methods and avoiding cracks. She encounters more people, a doctor diagnosing illnesses, an actress embodying members of a so-called 'invisible tribe' in the Amazonian jungle, archaeologists cleaning and analysing skulls, a poet discussing a Spanish-to-English translation problem. Like an anthropologist, she gleaned insights from their practices and ways of reading various material bodies. She listens to stories of things that get to them.

Off in the Colombian countryside Jessica meets Hernán, a man who senses the vibrations in stones and reads the stories they carry. He has never left his village, prefers to stay in one place and stick to simple activities such as scaling fish so as not to be overwhelmed by experience, which would 'unleash the storm of his memories'. Later on in his house, there is no random touching of stones or other objects – each of them an individual material witness, each of them potentially explosive. Seated at a wooden table, Jessica places Hernán's hand on her forearm and puts her hand on top of his, interlocking their bodies. What exactly gets transmitted through this mutual touch is left to the imagination. Do her memories for a moment become transparent to her? Her hand an antenna, sensitized to the vibrations in her mind? Confused, she appears to be reading Hernán's memory, or perhaps the collective memory he embodies. As other sounds, noise and static take over, the dreamt explosions are no longer hers only.

– Why do you call this an ecology of attention?  
 – These reading practices operate from the midst of things. They consider processes, relations, material conditions, one’s own place in them. The scale and context are important here. I’m looking into the creation process as an ecology of attention. Once you actively set up conditions for your work, you inhabit that environment in a reflexive manner: Which practices of reading and modes of attention do they host? How do you recognize them? How do you care for them? How do you experiment with them?

\*

– I’d like to talk more about readership, but first I have a question about writing. How do dramaturgical methods play a role in your writing?  
 – Good question. In collaborations you start from conversation, as you have to figure out together how you are going to work and discuss your methods and themes. By contrast, as a writer you’re mostly working on your own, so you can just *do* things, so to speak. I consider things such as tone, form and structure when I write. I try to look at my own work with a critical, editorial eye. But as long as there’s no reader in view, I can lean on habit and don’t have to account for anything, not even to myself. Or so I thought.

In 2018 I suffered from severe writer’s block. I had been writing easily for twenty years when suddenly I lost all appetite and sense of urgency. This was a new, rather dramatic experience for me. For two years I didn’t write at all.

– That’s quite dramatic indeed. What did you do?  
 – I had to change my approach if I was to ever write again. That’s where dramaturgy came in. Just as I would work on a performance, I realized I had to stage my process of writing. Or better: I needed other *fictions* to get me going – you know, create another version of myself that could do the work. I became interested in the arts of ‘not-writing’ and began to explore activities that are not quite writing but live in its vicinity, such as reading, copying, translating, pencil sharpening and loafing. I imagined myself as a clerk working on a library catalogue, ordering and annotating books. I would take notes, type up a report or transcribe a conversation – activities that produce writing without me having to be the writer. *A Pickled Community* is an example of this: I followed a procedure and transcribed the outcome.

– This sounds like conceptual writing.  
 – Indeed, I didn’t invent the wheel, I just wanted to find a way back to writing. But in the process, I began to look into various traditions and practices of *not-writing* more closely. The constrained writing of Oulipo and other modernists, the uncreative writing of conceptual artists, the politics of banality in today’s feminist writers. I had worked a lot with collecting and collage, so it didn’t arrive from nowhere. Even my ethnographic interest in documenting the languages of making could now be considered a form of not-writing.

– This brings us closer to reading – in the sense of reading text printed on the page. These approaches to not-writing involve you as a reader and also invite particular kinds of readership.

– Oh yes, I love reading! I’m currently reading

*My Lesbian Novel*, Renee Gladman’s latest book. (*Gets up and sorts through the pile of material cleared off the other table earlier on before returning with the book.*) I admire how Gladman writes about inhabiting language and space, about the failure of writing. Earlier on, we spoke about thinking from the midst and narrating one’s own place in the research. Here, Gladman has a beautiful passage about her being drawn to unreliable narrators: ‘I like to think they’re unreliable not because they’re dishonest but rather because they are paying attention to or, at worst, are afflicted by gaps in the memory of experience. These are characters that are most affected by the commotion in the field.’

– Now I’m curious to know what else is in that pile of things you had on your table earlier on.

– Let’s see. (*Gets up again and puts some things back on the table.*) An image of a topinambur. A newspaper clipping about the floodings in Poland and Donald Tusk saying, ‘The beaver did it!’ An interview with Sigrid Nunez. A collection of squirrel stamps. And an intriguing book of essays by Danielle Dutton on ekphrasis and not-writing. I can’t offer much. It all has to linger and simmer longer.

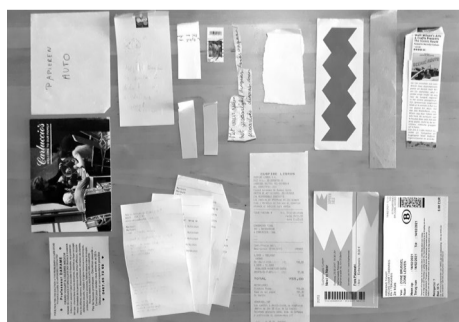


Jeroen Peeters, studio view (2024)

– Anything else you’re currently reading?  
 – Don’t get me started! Hold on. (*Fetches a small scrapbook.*) You may find this amusing. A quote from Marcin Wicha’s *Things I Didn’t Throw Out*: ‘Our bookshelves are a record of our failures as readers. How few are the books that we really liked. Even fewer are the ones we like on rereading. Most of them are souvenirs of the people we wanted to be. We pretended to be. We thought we were.’

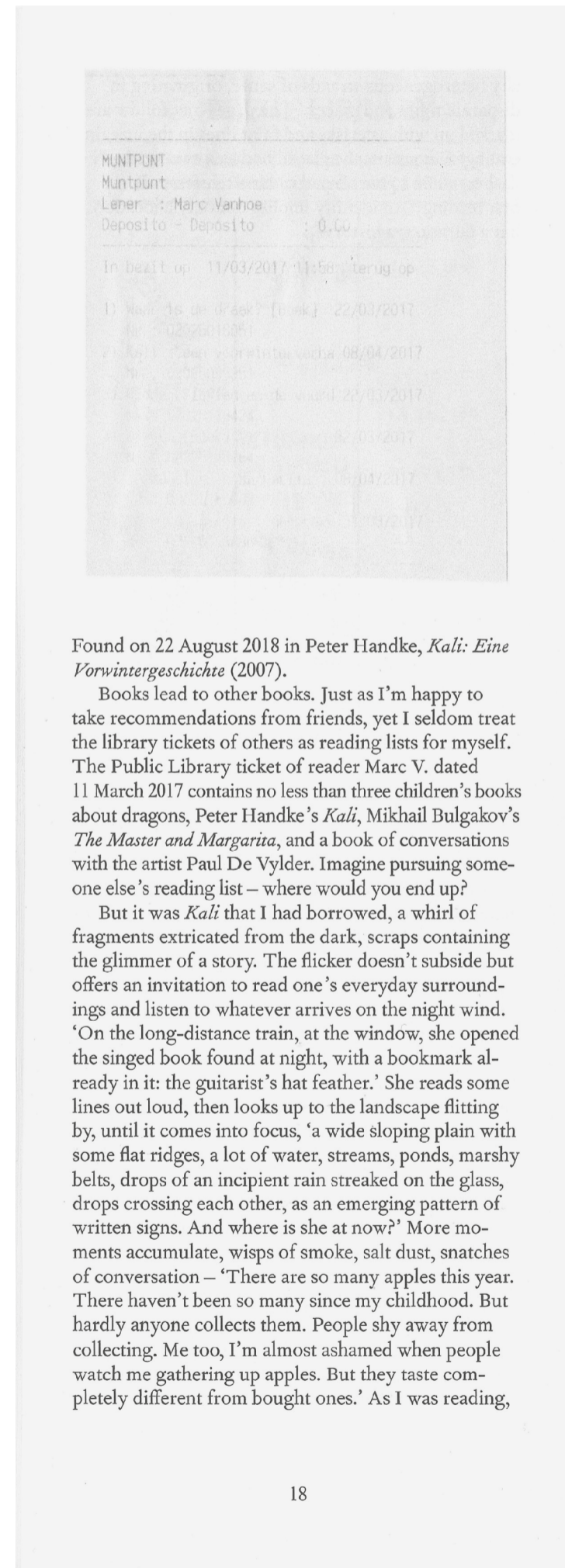
Where were we?

– Now I’ve lost my thread ... Readership?  
 – Let me say a few words about *Bookmarks of sorts*, an artist’s book I made within the research we’re talking about.<sup>9</sup> Over the years I’ve collected notes left behind by readers in library and second-hand books. Faded loan receipts, scraps with notes, a shopping list, train tickets and other little papers used as bookmarks.



Jeroen Peeters, *Bookmarks of sorts* (studio view, 2021)

Each time I noted the date and the book in which they were found. It all happened spontaneously, I didn’t actively look for these things, they just fascinated me. At some point I wanted to know what this collection is and spread it all out on a table. Like a clerk, I began to transcribe all these bits as if they were a ready-made text, here and there adding annotations to the material. It’s again through doing that it became an object of research. Questions about readership appeared gradually. In the publication, there’s



Found on 22 August 2018 in Peter Handke, *Kali: Eine Vorwintergeschichte* (2007).

Books lead to other books. Just as I’m happy to take recommendations from friends, yet I seldom treat the library tickets of others as reading lists for myself. The Public Library ticket of reader Marc V. dated 11 March 2017 contains no less than three children’s books about dragons, Peter Handke’s *Kali*, Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, and a book of conversations with the artist Paul De Vylder. Imagine pursuing someone else’s reading list – where would you end up?

But it was *Kali* that I had borrowed, a whirl of fragments extricated from the dark, scraps containing the glimmer of a story. The flicker doesn’t subside but offers an invitation to read one’s everyday surroundings and listen to whatever arrives on the night wind. ‘On the long-distance train, at the window, she opened the singed book found at night, with a bookmark already in it: the guitarist’s hat feather.’ She reads some lines out loud, then looks up to the landscape flitting by, until it comes into focus, ‘a wide sloping plain with some flat ridges, a lot of water, streams, ponds, marshy belts, drops of an incipient rain streaked on the glass, drops crossing each other, as an emerging pattern of written signs. And where is she at now?’ More moments accumulate, wisps of smoke, salt dust, snatches of conversation – ‘There are so many apples this year. There haven’t been so many since my childhood. But hardly anyone collects them. People shy away from collecting. Me too, I’m almost ashamed when people watch me gathering up apples. But they taste completely different from bought ones.’ As I was reading,

always an image of the bookmark, with an annotation underneath. I've kept the order in which I've found and transcribed the bookmarks, so the reader discovers these questions piecemeal.

It's intriguing how readers unwittingly leave parts of their lives behind in books, how marginalia and scribbles contain an unsuspected world. These accidental bookmarks suggest an exchange between readers and the imaginary community lingering in all those library books.

yet other impressions and snippets of reality added themselves to the pages, the steps of my above neighbour, bird sounds, a nearby construction site, then a startling silence when the fridge paused its hum – they were all returned to the library in exchange for reader Marc V.'s ticket. 'At last the reader closes the book after she's put the feather between its pages and walks over to the others.'

– Before you began collecting and transcribing them, weren't those bookmarks already a form of not-writing?

– Interesting. I think you need a compositional frame to bring attention to these things. But I would go so far as to call them a form of not-reading. I mean, when you read, you're immersed in the text, or so it seems. You have associations, maybe you're distracted by something that happens outside, or indeed, you stumble upon underlining or a scrap of paper from another reader. Your attention wanders, you slip in and out of the book. Reading is intertwined with moments of not-reading – Virginia Woolf writes eloquently about this. As a reader, I like to approach this oscillation with a reflexive attitude, as a way of composing one's attention. And as a writer, I like to prepare other readers for this too. Not-writing as a deliberate preparation and embrace of not-reading, something like that.

– It sounds good, but isn't our world already full of not-reading? Today's attention economy capitalizes on our susceptibility to distraction and produces ever more of it.

– You have a point. My intention is not to celebrate distraction, rather to reclaim it, to a certain extent – to consider it as another mode of attention. Where it enables you to shift focus, to take a lateral approach, it has potential too. This matters to artistic creation or experimental writing, but also to how we read or look at things in daily life. What's going on in the margins? What remains unnoticed or unaccounted for? I like to think that reading practices could be recalcitrant or speculative too.

– How do experimental practices of reading relate to the reading of practices?

– I don't have a clear answer to this. When you approach practices in a reflexive manner, they can be discerned, used and adapted as methods, they can be mobilized in another context. Reading practices such as phantasmal archaeology, or literal and physical reading, are based on dramaturgy and performance practices – on reading bodies, activating and embodying texts, testing thoughts in space, and so on. Conversely, this repertoire has honed my attention and resonates when I read books. In *Bandergewilden* this enabled me to glean and list verbs as a specific reading strategy. Or as a specific way of not-reading, because I'm actively making choices when I'm reading and drifting, scanning and skimming, or scribbling in the margins. As I embrace certain distractions and inhibit others, I compose my attention in various ways. It's a negotiation and an ongoing learning process, to be sure. Again, it's a practical affair, it all happens in and through doing, but I believe speculative practices matter to developing other, resilient literacies in today's complex world.

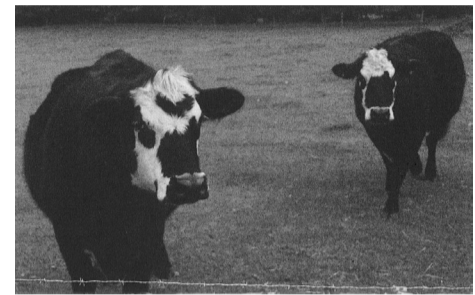
– Ah, a grand closing statement – cheers to that! We've covered some ground. Have we worked our way through the table of contents?

– Almost. There's still *Epigraphy*, a zine I made based on the many literary mottos that punctuate *And then it got legs*.<sup>10</sup> What appeals to me in mottos is their density and suggestive power. They point at other contexts while maintaining a gravity of their own. I was curious to see how these mottos would function as a separate collection. A zine felt appropriate

to make a sketch, a quick thought experiment made with a photocopier. Xeroxing allows you to lift text fragments from a book and embed them elsewhere by cutting and pasting. Like that, these migratory quotes I've been carrying with me for years can form new constellations. It struck me as a compositional model for the *Conceptual Landscapes* publication as a whole. (*Hands me the zine.*)

– It opens with the cow picture from *A Table*.

– That's the view from Lydia Davis's workspace. Or from the *stable* ...



Lydia Davis, *The Cows* (2011)

– Oh, Kate Zambreno's question is in here, too!

– Come on, you knew that, right? I've been using it in every lecture I've given these past three years. It's certainly a node in the constellation of my research. Now it appears in three chapters of the publication. Well, in four actually, since we're talking about it.

– Is this conversation part of the publication?

– We've been walking from table to table for you to get an idea of things. The map we're making here is a potential access, so I'd like to include it too. Let's move it to the other room. What do you think, does it make sense as a trail?

1 Jeroen Peeters, *And then it got legs: Notes on dance dramaturgy* (Brussels/Oslo: Varamo Press, 2022).

2 *A Table* was first presented on 27 April 2024 at Cas-co, Leuven as part of *Back-to-back: Perspectives on artists' writing and publishing*, curated by Alicja Melzacka.

3 Jeroen Peeters, *Reseeding the library, gleaning readership* (Oslo: Afternoon Editions, 2018).

4 Jeroen Peeters, 'All over the place, but not quite there. Notes on choreographic assemblages and expanded writing as material literacy', in Sabina Holzer and Elisabeth Schäfer (eds.), *which dances – which writes. Aluminium Assemblagen* (Vienna: Sonderzahl Verlag, 2023), 35-48.

5 *ROT Garden* took place 11–14 June 2021 at BUDA, Kortrijk. Curated by Sara Manente, it hosted contributions by Jeroen Peeters, Sofie Durnez, Deborah Robbiano, Christophe Albertijn, Eriks Ashmanis, Ferran Mesa Turo, Sina Seifee, Kristien Van den Brande and Paz Rojo.

6 Jeroen Peeters, 'A Pickled Community. Fermented Notes from *ROT Garden*', Sara Manente (ed.), *ROT Issue One 2023: Immunity* (Brussels/Oslo: Varamo Press, 2023), 16–19.

7 *A Pickled Community. State VI* was performed on 18 July 2023 at Eindhoven, Vienna as part of *Salon(g)ing with books and friends*, curated by Sabina Holzer and Jeroen Peeters.

8 The public presentations of *And then it got legs* with oral annotations are an ongoing series. Here is an overview: with Heike Langsdorf and Kristof Van Baarle, 29 September 2022 at Campo Victoria, Ghent as part of *Cliniques Dramaturgiques*; with Tuomas Laitinen and Maria F. Scaroni, 5 November 2022 at Kiasma, Helsinki as part of *Moving in November*; with Izabella Borzecka and Benjamin Pohl, 11 November 2022 at MDT, Stockholm as part of *Reading Edge*; with Mette Edvardsen and Jon Refsdal Moe, 14 November 2022 at Norma T, Oslo; with Jonathan Burrows and Sara Manente, 24 November 2022 at P.A.R.T.S., Brussels; with Anneleen Swillen and Kristof Van Gestel, 15 February 2023 at PXL-MAD, Hasselt; with Noha Ramadan, 6 June 2023 at DAS, Amsterdam; with Bojana Cvejic and Guy Cools, 15 July 2023 at Rote Bar, Volkstheater, Vienna as part of *ImPulsTanz*; with Kristin Bjørn and Sunniva Vikør, 30 May 2024 at Velferden, Stamsund as part of *Stamsund Teaterfestival*.

9 Jeroen Peeters, *Bookmarks of sorts* (Oslo: Afternoon Editions, 2021).

10 Jeroen Peeters, *Epigraphy* (Stockholm: MDT, 2022).

# Conceptual Landscapes Readership in the Expanded Field

Jeroen Peeters

## Table of Contents

PhD in the arts with seven chapters, published individually

**What is the landscape you're working in?**  
Booklet

**And then it got legs. Notes on dance dramaturgy**  
Book

**Bookmarks of sorts**  
Artist's book

**A pickled community. State V, 26 April 2023**  
Artist's publication

**Epigraphy**  
Artist's book

**A Table**  
Lecture-performance

**Bandergewilden. Notes on the reading of practices**  
Book

## Tables of Content

Research presentation at De Kooi, Hasselt, 25-28 March 2025

**What is the landscape you're working in?**  
Table display with images and clippings (1)

**And then it got legs. Oral annotations**  
Podcast, realized in collaboration with Eylül Fidan Akıncı (2)

**Bookmarks of sorts**  
Table display with found papers (3)

**A pickled community. State VII, 17 February 2025**  
Audio publication, read by Caroline Daish. *Silk Landscape* (2021) by Sofie Durnez (4)

**Epigraphy**  
Installation with texts (5)

**A Table**  
Table display and lecture-performance. 27 March 2025, 5 p.m. (6)

**Bandergewilden. On the reading of practices**  
Lecture. 27 March 2025, 2 p.m. (7)

*Conceptual Landscapes*  
*Readership in the Expanded Field*

Doctoral dissertation submitted to obtain the degree of  
Doctor in the Arts, to be defended by Jeroen Peeters

Supervisor: Prof. Dr Vlad Ionescu  
Co-supervisor: Prof. Dr Nadia Sels

Published and supported by  
Hasselt University, Faculty of Architecture and Arts  
MAD-Research, PXL-MAD School of Arts, Hasselt  
2025

D/2025/2451/29

Copy-editing: Patrick Lennon  
Graphic design: Thomas Van Herck

