## drk m tters x a chaotic happening



### presented by



### **NOCTURNAL UNREST.**

# A feminist festival for theory, performance and radical flâneuserie. 20–24 May 2021.

Nocturnal Unrest (nOu) is a queer-feminist festival that (re)claims the night as a space of dreams, utopias, solidarity and care. nOu centres around the themes of night and darkness which have played a central role for the intersecting groups of BIPoC, women and queer people in the organization of their everyday/-night lives as well as in their art works, theories and political practices.

The festival delves into feminist archives, establishing a dialogue with current artistic, scholarly and activist practices. A range of workshops and (audio-)walks, installations and open spaces both online and offline invite everyone to interact and share their experiences, to experiment with their bodies and imaginaries and to take up space in the analogue and digital public sphere. Performances and lectures/talks/Q+A's provide opportunities for learning, for sharing and creating new knowledge.

#### d rk m tters x a chaotic happening

is part of our teaser programme — six single events open up their very distinct night-scapes in exciting, hybrid, corona-safe formats while giving you a taste of what Nocturnal Unrest might be.

Find out more about nOu on www.nocturnal-unrest.de.

d rk m tters im dunklen raum des ungewissen

Ein Projekt von Helen Heß, Malin Nagel, Yana Prinsloo & Annika Wehrle





"Hätten wir einen scharfen Blick
und ein waches Gefühl
für alles gewöhnliche Menschenleben,
wir hörten gleichsam das Gras wachsen
und das Herz des Eichkätzchens schlagen,
und wir kämen um in diesem Brausen,
das sich jenseits der Stille erhebt.
Noch die Lebendigsten von uns
gehen fest eingemummt
in ihrer Stumpfheit umher."

George Eliot

"It matters what stories
we tell to tell other stories with;
it matters what knots knot knots,
what thoughts think thoughts,
what descriptions describe descriptions,
what ties tie ties."

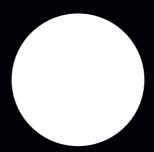
Donna J. Haraway



#### 95 Prozent -

Unser Kosmos besteht zu 95 Prozent aus Dunkler Materie und Dunkler Energie. Diese Kräfte halten unser Universum zusammen, ohne dass Menschen ihre Wirkung vollständig verstehen würden – geschweige denn diese Kräfte sehen könnten. Wir müssen einsehen: Wir begreifen gerade mal 5 Prozent unserer Galaxie. Begreifen wir so viel mehr von den Kräften, die unseren Alltag bestimmen? Dunkelheit, verborgene Kräfte aus der Natur, aus nicht-menschlichen Sphären, Kräfte aus Vergangenheit und Zukunft – sie wirken auf uns ein.

Können wir sie im Kollektiv zum Klingen bringen?



#### 95 percent -

Our cosmos is made up of 95 percent dark matter and dark energy. These forces stabilize our universe – while humans are neither able to understand nor to perceive their effects and forces. We must realize: We only understand 5 percent of our galaxy. Do we understand so much more of the forces that affect our daily lives? Darkness, hidden forces from nature, non-human spheres, forces from past and future – they affect us.

Can we make them sound collectively?

"Language has been granted too much power.

The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn,
the interpretative turn, the cultural turn:
it seems that at every turn lately every ,thing'

– even materiality – is turned into a matter of language
or some other form of cultural representation."

Karen Barad



d rk m tters lässt Euch in Klangsphären eintauchen, die sich im Spannungsfeld von Chaos und Klarheit bewegen. Wir nehmen Euch mit auf eine Reise ins Ungewisse, wo sich Sprache, Alltagsgeräusche und befremdliche Klänge in überwältigenden Klangclustern mischen und komplexe dunkle Atmosphären entstehen.



d rk m tters lets you dive into sound spheres that move between chaos and clarity. We take you on a journey into the unknown, where language, everyday noises and strange sounds mix in overwhelming sound clusters and complex dark atmospheres emerge.

#### Über d rk m tters

Das Projekt d rk m tters lädt seit 2017 in unterschiedlichen Konstellationen dazu ein, den Kräften und Phänomenen nachzugehen, die neben den menschlichen Handlungen das Zusammenleben bestimmen. Wir lauschen den unerhörten urbanen Schichten und Atmosphären und dem vielstimmigen Gewimmel jenseits des Menschlichen. In Filmreihen, Soundinstallationen, Festivals, Hörgängen, interdisziplinären Recherchen und Interviews, Ausstellungen, Lesungen und Vorträgen suchen wir nach ständig neuen künstlerischen und gesellschaftspolitischen Rahmungen und vielgestaltigen Kooperationen.

Das Festival Nocturnal Unrest, das sich die Nacht und die Dunkelheit emanzipatorisch aneignet, bietet für unsere Arbeit und uns als Kollektiv den idealen Kontext.

#### www.darkmatters-mainz.de

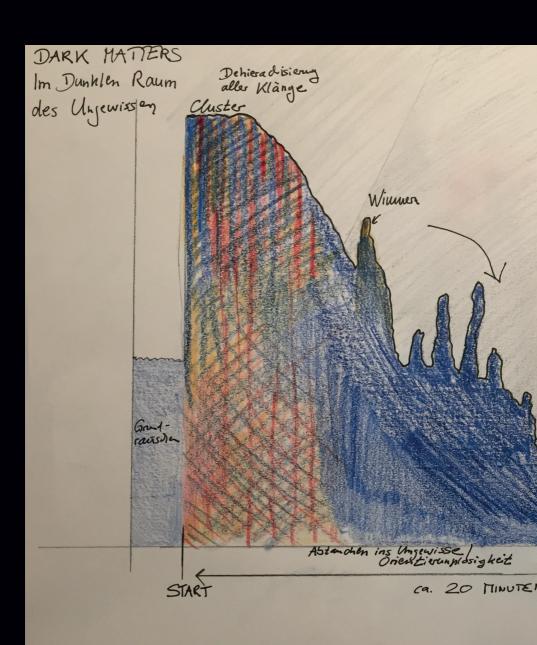


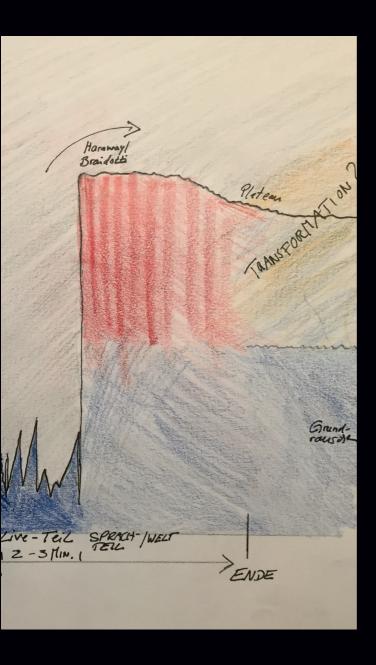
#### about d rk m tters

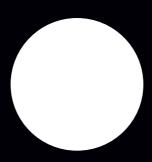
Since 2017, the collective d rk m tters investigates the forces and phenomena that coexist with human actions. We listen to the unheard urban layers and atmospheres and the polyphonic teeming beyond the human. In film series, sound installations, festivals, listening tours, interdisciplinary research and interviews, exhibitions, readings and lectures, we are constantly searching for new artistic and socio-political framings and multifaceted collaborations.

The Festival Nocturnal Unrest, which takes back the night and darkness in an emancipatory way, provides the ideal context for our work and ourselves as a collective.

www.darkmatters-mainz.de







"Technology is not neutral. We're inside of what we make, and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections — and it matters which ones get made and unmade."

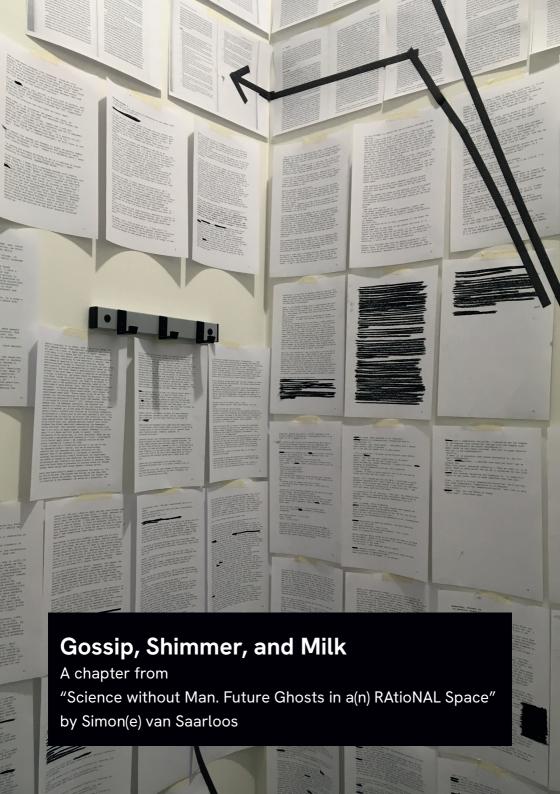
Donna J. Haraway

#### Hörübung

Stell Dich an eine möglichst turbulente Stelle in der Stadt. Was ist das entfernteste Geräusch, das Du noch hören kannst? Welcher Klang ist der dominanteste? Welcher der subtilste? Welche Klänge kommen von oben? Welche von unten? Welche Klänge kannst Du hören, ohne die Schallquelle wahrzunehmen? Welche Klänge kannst Du nicht einordnen? Gibt es einen Klang, der nicht da ist, den Du jetzt gerne hören würdest?

Position yourself at a most turbulent location in the city. What is the sound farthest away that you can still hear? Which sound is the most dominant? Which is the most subtle? Which sounds come from above? Which ones originate below you? Can you hear any sounds without perceivingthe source of the sound? Which sounds can you not classify? Is there a sound that is not there, but that you would like to hear right now?







Imagine an email not sent. Imagine the many emails not sent, expressing complaints of physical discomfort. Employees say it is 'something' in the building. The building is new, and after the scientists moved in, the headaches, nausea, memory loss, and vision problems started. The ,something' remains just vague enough to ignore. The building is new and shiny and expensive. The employees addressing ,something' are all women. Maybe it is a female thing. Something female is happening.

The BioNano department moved from the old building to the fresh, automatized, new one. It has a smooth and clean exterior, glass doors and offices. Shortly after the move in 2016, however, the first complaints are raised. When the complaints became harder to ignore, the pressure to keep the complaints informal increases. Technician Iris was told to come by the office and share her pain in person, rather than by email. Emails become data, traceable complaints.<sup>1</sup>

I heard about 'something' on my first visit at The Institute and, during the three months that I was there as an artist-in-residence, the stories kept circulating. Often ,something' would be introduced as "Have you heard about the building?" Some people quieted their voice, others spoke with ridicule about sensitive people, some were frustrated and angry. The ghosts I hoped to find sounded like gossip.

'Something' was haunting the building. Supposedly ten people had broken their ankle falling down the hallway stairs. The stairs were made of a spotty grey stone, which made it difficult to see depth and differentiate each step. I couldn't find anyone who had actually broken their ankle. There were headaches from a too abrupt change of light between the lab and the corridor, there were nose bleeds caused by unusually low levels of humidity, people had fainted ecause the windows didn't open.

A subcontractor failed to notice a gas leak in the lab.

The 'something' was the most difficult to narrate. Eventually, after more than two years of negligence or continuous testing – depending whose perspective you hear – a potential cause was found and, most importantly in this scientific context, proven: an expert measured the hertz level, and low frequency noise was detected. The effects of low frequency noise are debated, but supposedly ten percent of the total population is physically affected by this absent/present soundwave.

Communication was hushed. Emails were not sent. There was an explicit effort to frame the complaints as a problem experienced by the female staff, especially older female staff.

The women who had complained were all over forty, so one safety officer had reassured younger female staff that they wouldn't be having any problems — it was probably a menopause thing. The people I met who had experienced bodily discomforts were not experiencing menopause. Few were over fifty.

One young scientist who had recently started working at The Institute told me that she felt it, too. She was not going to raise a complaint, because then she would be placed in the weak and feeble category. "No way," she expressed. Gossip circulated. Someone had suggested that the low frequency noise, or the ,something' in the building, was causing miscarriages.

Technician Iris started to keep a daily logbook to track her headaches and discomforts. She included the daily weather,<sup>2</sup> because wind seemed to increase the sensation of pressure in the building. Iris started an Excel sheet and sent it around, asking colleagues to fill in their symptoms. Those who did wanted to remain anonymous.

The more I encountered this secretive speech – never used for topics other than health complaints – the more interested I became in it. I was intrigued by the rapid and emotional circulation of this information, because it was also portrayed as a problem of the few and feeble. Iris felt comforted by the minority statistic of ten percent, because for her it explained why it was so difficult to raise awareness and incite improvements. To say something exists for only ten percent of the population, is to state something is rare. If forty percent of people in the building experienced the low frequency noise, would you wish to hear it too?

In the nineties, researchers found neurological proof that ten percent of the general population is born gay (see Swaab and Hofman 1990, 141 –148). It refers to the same biocentrism that Sylvia Wynter criticizes in *On Being Human as Praxis*; normality can be acquired by normalizing one's behavior as natural. Because biology makes you gay, it is okay.

Unfortunately, using a biological marker as a tool for liberation is meant to keep the ninety percent intact, safekeeping the majority from a clearly classifiable minority. The proven minority of ten percent tells us not to expect more. Instead of seeing queer as an ever-growing disruption of the norm and potentially contagious, you accept queer as a contained rarity. If I don't hear low frequencies, I just don't belong to the ten percent. The biocentric story makes distinctions static. Within this narrative, the only way to create change is by topping nature.



In *Objectivity*, authors Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison describe a switch from artistic representations of perfected species to the ideology of realism that demanded the depiction of an "average" (Daston and Galison 2017, 69). So instead of finding the most blossoming, extravagant, and characteristic nettle for an atlas on plants, you'd collect many nettles and extract what an average nettle looks like. Average, not perfection, became a measure for truth. Scientific research needs to be falsified and repeated in order to produce truth. This means that an average is much more likely than a deviance to become truth. An average outcome is considered "law-likely", while an exception obstructs certainty.

Thinking from absence and ghosts, these deviances are of interest. In the refusal of a reiterated and reproduced sameness, ghosts can appear.

I joined a lab meeting in which Sophie presented her last few weeks of research. "Unexpected low trapping happened, but only two times out of thirty," she said, implying that the value of the unexpected should not be overestimated (The Institute, In conversation (personal appendix), 63). From a scientific perspective, two out of thirty is nothing. Most likely it is a mistake in the set-up of an experiment or measurement. From a ghostly perspective, a glimpse is enough – often the only thing you get – to imagine presence.

The ghost appears once more in the lab meeting with Sophie. The Principal Investigator (PI) of her lab group, who is also the founder of The Institute, introduces me to his group using another name: Sabina. I try to correct him, but he doesn't hear it.

Just a minute later I realize Sabina is the name of a ghost Avery Gordon introduces in *Ghostly Matters*.

Sabina Spielrein was a scholar, and a patient of Freud and colleagues. She saw spirits. She did not attend the 1911 Weimar conference of Psychoanalysis, but she was mentioned as if she had been and praised as the scholar who "changed the early history of psychoanalysis" (Gordon 2008, 32). She changed history but wasn't included in it. Despite her influence on Freud's writing, she is hardly ever mentioned. *Ghostly Matters* starts with what Gordon calls a "detour". The detours bring us to ghosts and the detours bring us close to narratives and histories that are otherwise not mentioned for the sake of clarity.

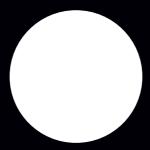
Detours bring us in touch with the ghosts and glimpses that show a potential beyond binary thinking. Something fleeing the grasp of gender and coloniality. Noise, avoiding imaging technologies. Film scholar Eliza Steinbock analyzes trans cinema through the concept of "shimmer". Steinbock looks at shimmer from a material perspective – the use of glitches and flickering in film – as well as from a content perspective, where transgender bodies shimmer between boundaries. Steinbock cites Roland Barthes on shimmer as an in-between space, "an amorphous third term," breaking the binary and dialectical system (Steinbock 2019, 9). What shimmers has no boundary or bordering lines, it is in flux, representing change without presenting it.

The ghost isn't just what is lost from the past, haunting the present. The ghost and the shimmer meet, and the shimmering ghost can be a vision from the future, a queer utopian presence.

Steinbock (2019, 17) writes:

"The radical antistatic status of shimmering suggests a suspension of being either really there or not there, of being fully graspable. [...] [I]n the shimmering of these boundaries opens up another way of knowing that does not rely on visual certainty. Shimmering suspends epistemological disbelief."

That which isn't taken seriously starts to shimmer.



The presence of gossip in the building caught my interest even more when one of The Institute's directors expressed his disappointment; he had hoped I'd be occupied with more interesting things than the headaches. He had hoped that my presence would have provoked him more. His agitation with my lack – my not – flared when he expressed that he had invested time and money in my presence. What definition would grasp a person's provoked reaction to not being provoked enough? What negative is that?

He said he expected me to build bridges between my own interests and The Institute, but responding to their daily practice with "eh... Black feminism" made no sense.

Admittedly, I, too, wondered whether it made sense.

The walls of The Institute made me doubt everything.<sup>4</sup>

But how else to disrupt the sensical? How else to rewrite knowledge as I know it, if not by allowing the unknown? I printed all of the notes that documented my first month at The Institute. Each person who appeared in the notes received the pages on which they were mentioned. If there was something in the notes that they didn't want public, they could retract.<sup>5</sup>

I displayed the notes, with the black(ened) markings, in the BioNano building's lactation room. The lactation room was one square meter in size: a closet space on the ground floor. On the door, an "occupied" or "free" switch ensured the user's privacy. Inside, next to a comfy chair, sat a small fridge for milk. On the wall hung a white board with names and email addresses of those who used the space; inviting the users to exchange information.

The lactation room felt like a secretive place, though formally provided.

In the Netherlands, an employer must offer a "private" and "hygienic" space for lactation. In the first nine months after labor, an employee can use maximally one quarter of "her" work hours on lactation. I felt drawn towards this legally enforced closet space.<sup>7</sup> I hoped to question and highlight how information flows at The Institute. Why are aspects of body, urgency, and fluidity rarely discussed during work? What's the flow of gossip? As Silvia Federici points out in her book Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women, gossip used to be just another word for important oral communication. In agricultural times, women would gather and share "gossip" to inform each other without the corrective gaze of husbands and landowners. Gossip wasn't shared beyond their circle and it couldn't be documented. With the increasing control of landowners and the introduction of industrialization, gossip became negatively marked, it became known as backstabbing and idle "women's talk" (Federici 2018, 38). Federici shows how the revolutionary quality of gossip, and women's access to embodied knowledge and illegible communication was suppressed by marking gossip as irrelevant, quotidian, insignificant, capricious (ibd. 2018, 40). Like milk, gossip should not spill.8

After one day, the exhibition was taken down. The women who used the lactation room on a daily basis had complained to the building's safety department. Before planning the exhibition, I had tried to reach out to the women who use the space, but it was recommended that I communicate through the safety office.

When they gave their OK, I had assumed that the users of the space had given their consent. I was mistaken. I would usually have just contacted the email addresses on the white board in the lactation room to discuss and see whether the idea of a short exhibition would be welcomed. Instead, I followed The Institute's adminis- trative infrastructure. I was trying to do the right thing according to the rules, and this, I learned, meant neglecting the users. Only after the exhibition was taken down, I realized that the administrative powers' remark that "no one really uses that room" should have been a sign of disconnection, not of fact.

What was painful about the rushed disassembling of the exhibition was the rhetoric that accompanied it. One person wrote me that she didn't want to be "outed" as a user of the room: "Yesterday I was [name], the scientist at work. Now I'm the whining mom," reduced again to a body, chaos, excess, spilling.

In Becoming Human, Zakiyyah I. Jackson writes that "in order to become human without qualification, you must already be Man in its idealized form." (2020, 33). The scientist who is also a mother can lose the qualification "scientist". The scientist who is a father will not be less scientist when revealing signs of parenthood. If the male scientist misbehaves, he might lose his job, but he won't be less scientist-like. While the mother fears a lack of access due to gender, whiteness makes her expect that rules are in place for her benefit. Hence, it is no surprise that the safety officer was called to take the exhibition down: whiteness creates the believe that rules and order are for protection.



Instead of radically contending with the structures in place, you believe that one day, soon enough, you acquire a computed safe position at the plus side of all binary oppositions.

If only the ghosts and shimmers didn't exist.

#### **Endnotes**

- 1. "Making a complaint also requires becoming an institutional mechanic: you have to work out how to get a complaint through the system." For more on complaints in institutional environments see Ahmed 2020, 156.
- 2. Weather is an important term in Christina Sharpe's In The Wake: On Blackness and Being (2016, 111), as she describes how the weather is not a singular, passing event. It is continuous and inescapable, just like antiblackness, affecting everything.
- 3. "But then I got distracted by a photograph and had to take a detour in order to follow the traces of a woman ghost." (Gordon 2008, 32)
- 4. Sara Ahmed writes about institutional walls in *Living a Feminist Life*: "I show how diversity workers come up against brick walls and ask what these walls teach us about the materiality of power. I describe brick walls as ,the hardenings of history', the building materials of power." (Ahmed 2017, 91)
- 5. I've chosen to use the word ,retract' here, because I do not believe that my gossip work at The Institute engaged explicitly enough with Christina Sharpe's work on redaction to call it ,redact'. However, I do want to credit Sharpe's thinking on Black annotation and Black redaction "toward seeing and reading otherwise; toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame; toward seeing something beyond a visuality that is," and she imagines "a counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see." (Sharpe 2016, 116—117).
- 6. It is worth noting that the Ministry uses gendered language concerning lactation, referring to she/her pronouns only. Though I have tried to avoid gendered language in my approach of the lactation room, to include non-binary people and trans men, I also realized that using a more inclusive gender language is a false representation of the daily reality at The Institute. "Kolven op werk: dit zijn de richtlijnen" [last modified January 16, 2018]. https://www.arboportaal.nl/actueel/nieuws/2018/01/16/kolven-op-het-werk-dit-zijn-de-richtlijnen.
- 7. Lactation milk has a long political history. One interesting aspect to mention here is Ann Laura Stoler's research on the wet nurses in the Dutch-Indies. Stoler describes how indigenous women in the colonized 'Dutch-Indies' were paid to nurse Dutch children,

until the colonizer's imaginary changed, and it was decided that indigenous women were not 'pure' enough to feed white children. Stoler cites several sources on the colonial policies on education and child rearing: "In the Netherlands Indies, it was the ,duty' of the hedendaagsche blanke moeder (modern white mother) to take the physical and spiritual upbringing of her offspring away from the babu (native nursemaid) and into her own hands." And, "there they will acquire the characteristics of their race, not only from mother's milk but also from the influence of the light, sun and water, of playmates, of life, in a word, in the sphere of the fatherland. This is not racism." (Stoler 1989).

8. "Spill" refers to Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity, in which Alexis Pauline Gumbs engages with Hortense Spillers' writing, weaving theory and poetry. I cite Gumbs, who has also written poetry books to engage with M. Jacqui Alexander and Sylvia Wynter's work, because she writes love letters as a form of critical engagement. This attached thinking opposes the distant objectivity that science proposes. Gumbs writes about space that doesn't invite occupation, it simply invites more space: "When the chance came all she could see with her skin was space space space space space." (Gumbs 2016, 48)



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Simon(e) van Saarloos is a writer and artist. They published several books, one of which is titled *Playing Monogamy*. Their most recent book in Dutch, *Herdenken herdacht*, is a non-fiction work about queer forgetfulness, whiteness and embodied commemoration. Together with Kübra Uzun, Simon(e) recently created an audio installation work called *Cruising Gezi Park* (Amsterdam Museum). From May to October 2021, they are the guest curator of an ABUNDANCE themed exhibition at Het Hem, Zaandam. Simon(e) van Saarloos currently teaches a theory research seminar at the Ecology Futures MA at AKV|St. Joost and curates collaborations between artists, activists and scholars and regularly appears on stage as a lecturer, interviewer and performer.

Simon(e) van Saarloos ist Schriftsteller:in und Künstler:in.
Simon(e) veröffentlichte mehrere Bücher, u.a. *Playing Monogamy*. Das jüngste Buch, *Herdenken herdacht*, erschienen auf Niederländisch, ist eine Reflektion über queeres Vergessen, *weiß*-Sein und verkörpertes Gedenken. Zusammen mit Kübra Uzun hat Simon(e) kürzlich eine Audio-Installationsarbeit mit dem Titel *Cruising Gezi Park* (Amsterdam Museum) geschaffen. Von Mai bis Oktober 2021 ist Simon(e) Gastkurator:in einer Ausstellung zum Thema ABUNDANCE in Het Hem, Zaandam. Simon(e) van Saarloos unterrichtet derzeit ein Theorie-Forschungsseminar im Rahmen des M.A. Ecology Futures MA am AKV|St. Joost, kuratiert Kollaborationen zwischen Künstler:innen, Aktivist:innen und Wissenschaftler:innen und tritt regelmäßig als Dozent:in, Interviewer:in und Performer:in auf.



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