

**Three Reports** by **Andriana Theofilou** of events during the project:

**The Right to Groningen – Circuit of Commons.**

By Libia Castro & Ólafur Ólafsson

October 25 – December 20 , 2025

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*Andriana Theofilou is an Art History undergraduate student at the University of Groningen. Her research often explores contemporary art and its interplay with the notions of memory, identity and socially engaged and curatorial practices.*

***“My village is my community and therefore also my kin”*: A report on  
Alternative Groningen Tour – Groningen's commons**

Ranging from queer, squatting and graffiti history, Fiona van den Bergh, known for her Alternative Groningen city tours, in conjunction with the exhibition and project “The Right of Groningen - Circuit of Commons” by Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson currently exhibited at SIGN, organized a city tour about Groningen Commons— from the past and present, from buildings to pieces of land.

**De Toekomst:**

The city tour started with the historical common, De Toekomst (“The Future”), which came into existence in 1888, to facilitate a meeting space, marking it as a cooperative basis for socialist ideas, political collectives and workers associations and movements. De Toekomst solidified its place in the city as it became a meeting ground for youth associations and socialist democrat movements and groups. The profit that came within this common, went directly into the worker’s movement, making De Toekomst, more than often, a place of solidarity to railroad workers and knitters by providing bread to the strikers. Fiona also noted



that another collective bakery, during the Second World War, hid under the bread basket towels, “illegal” communication and news, spreading them within and outside of the city.

### **Street art by Concrete Zoo:**

Near the Groninger Museum, the street art by Concrete Zoo is hidden in plain sight, advocating for the right to occupy public space with no restrictions. In this second stop, Fiona, underscored the change within the center of the city and the rise of people seen as consumers rather than inhabitants. Where can we truly be as humans and not consumers? Who has the right to the city, one might ask? The people, *us*, who make the city and are part of the city, Fiona stated. We have the right to be here and carry out interventions and non-commercial collectives; like the demonstration on the 27th of September by De Groningse Onderstroom, where the first intervention of the project “The Right of Groningen - Circuit of Commons” by Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson was present.



### **Oude RKZ:**

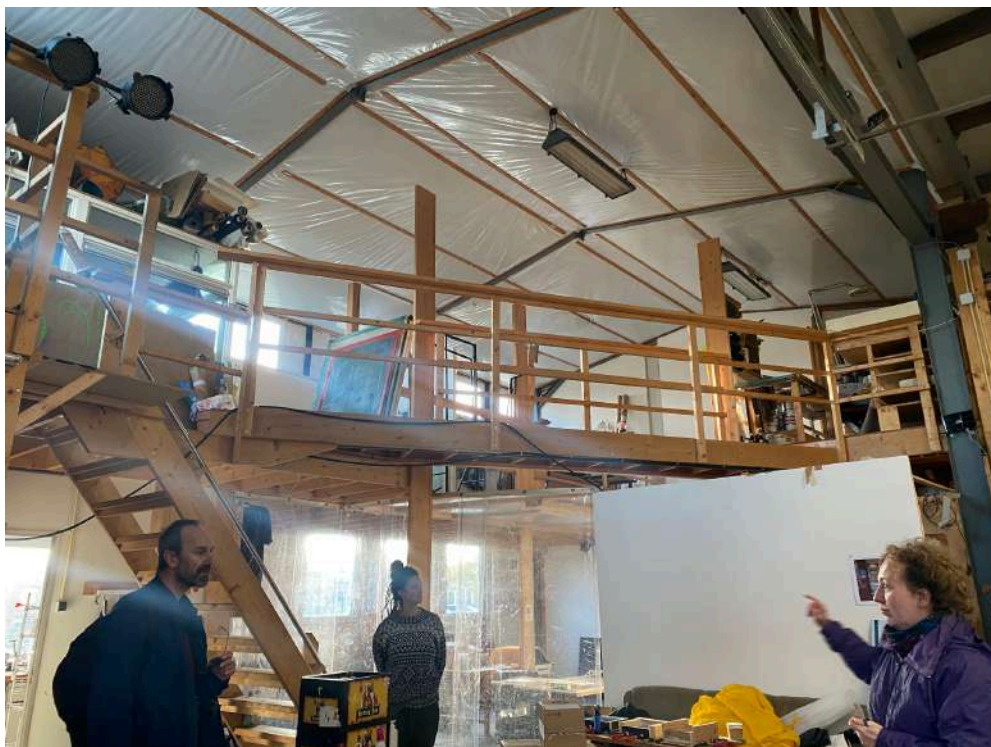
Oude RKZ, a village inside the city as some might call it, is exemplary of what is possible when people share their space and time with one another. After the construction of the new hospital, the former location (Oude RKZ) was left empty for several months and squatting groups entered the building making it their new home, blocking the demolition plan. In the 80s, where the municipality was more experimental and flexible, squatters were given the opportunity to prove that they could upkeep the conditions of the building within five years

and since then Oude RKZ has become a horizontally-organized common inhabiting around 280 people, after its legalisation in 1990. Many opportunities arise from such commons, as the inhabitants run their own cooperative with several committees and boards, contributing every week in the maintenance of the way of living through collective actions. Housing spaces and facilities in Oude RKZ, include artist's studios, workshops, gardens, cinema and more. Consisting of corridors that make up sub-communities, they differ from one another, as cultures and conditions within them fluctuate over time.



### **Moshpit of Creation:**

Organized by artists themselves, who were in need of studios, Moshpit of Creation is an artist space, consisting of four buildings with twenty artists and twenty studios. The grounds of this common sit on a paint factory that nobody desired to utilize. What makes Moshpit of Creation, a common space is the fact that it facilitates several exhibitions, events and residencies. A variety of workshops are available at hand, such as lithography, ceramics, metal, leather and band rehearsals and the machinery is often donated by others. The variety of artists here rests on a community that shares their skills and tools with one another. Moshpit of Creation is not dependent on subsidies; it is built around artists who are the driving forces behind the events, fostering creative solutions as they work under pressure doing what they love.



### **Rollen Goed:**

As a member of the squatting movement, Fiona recalled when the community at Rollen Goed, was brutally sent away by police from another location, where another group had been previously evicted by the municipality. This specific community refused to do so, and is situated on said location with a three year contract. Greenery on the property can be seen, but

due to the ground's toxic state, it is more so used to rehabilitate the soil. The municipality refers to such communities as "stadsnomades", despite constantly evicting and displacing them in polluted locations and viewing their way of living as a threat.



### **Remnants of the old Betonbos:**

*“It is really hard to tell you how magical this place was,”* Fiona admitted. Evicted by city planners almost two years ago, the community was forced away from their enclosure and sent to a less desired and polluted location that Rollen Goed had previously refused. Betonbos, a space where people had invested, created a community and families for over twenty years, suddenly being forcefully separated from the people and the land, is nothing other than unfair. Even so, before the eviction, the residents around the Betonbos, had filed a court case against the city planners, emphasizing its importance not only to the people but also its ecosystem as over the years it had become a habitat for endangered species. Despite the active case, the city planners started tearing down the common, ignoring the community, the residents and environmental activists. Fiona, beautifully ended the visit to the remnants of the old Betonbos by quoting Wild Service by Nick Hayes, encapsulating the importance of the beauty and the strength that comes with the kinship between nature and the people.



### **Leroy-gebied Lewenborg:**

The city tour about Groningen's commons ended with a stroll through Leroy-gebied Lewenborg, where landscape architect Louis Le Roy was given complete freedom to design over six hectares of public green space by the municipality of Groningen, that would remain untouched by the government for a hundred years, letting nature take its course. Residents of Lewenborg and volunteers take a role in actively shaping the common, through on-going niche projects. Additionally, the Leroy-gebied, consists of several nature reserves. Le Roy believed that within the city, a space should exist where urban renewal, living art and spontaneous development co-occur with several on-going niche projects.



As the city tour about Groningen's commons came to an end with the final stop being Leroy-gebied Lewenborg, Fiona recited the "The Goose and the Common" poem, that addresses the social injustice caused by the privatisation of common land. By exploring Groningen commons of the past and the present, with this city tour, Fiona highlights that commons are more than just projects, they are habitats that embrace communities that rely on caring and creating common grounds that belong to anyone and everyone.

*"The law locks up the man or woman. Who steals the goose from off the common. And geese will still have a common lack. Till they go and steal it back."*

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Note: *All pictures were taken by the author.*

**Art, Activism and the Commons with Thijs Lijster, Gemma Medina,  
Jeanne van Heeswijk and Rick Middelbos**

“Art, Activism and the Commons”, a transdisciplinary conversation that took place at SIGN, was organized by Libia Castro, Ólafur Ólafsson and Fiona van den Bergh, within the frameworks of the project “The Right to Groningen - Circuit of Commons”. Bringing philosopher Thijs Lijster, curator Gemma Medina Estupiñan, artist Jeanne van Heeswijk and ecologist Rick Middelbos, together, the evening explored discussions on the necessity of commons, art as a tool for societal change, the importance of diversifying public spaces and how we should embrace nature’s autonomy instead of confining it.

### 1. THIJS LIJSTER

As the first speaker of the night, Thijs Lijster, a philosopher, writer and assistant professor in Philosophy of Art and Culture at the University of Groningen, centered his conversation on the conceptualization regarding the commons. What are the *commons* actually? Lijster recited the 17th century English rhyme “The Goose and the Common”, that “*everyone should memorize*”:

*The law locks up the man or woman.  
Who steals the goose from off the common.  
But leaves the greater villain loose.  
Who steals the common from off the goose.*

Traditionally, commons referred to shared and freely accessible resources, like field and water, that belonged and were managed by the communities, but did not belong to a particular individual. In very broad strokes, Lijster, briefly addresses the history of the community which is often described as the “history of enclosures” of these commons. Enclosures, the fencing off the piece of land and privatisation, started becoming a private property of the land of aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Here, Thijs Lijster addressed the contemporary theorist David Bollier, who spoke of these enclosures as a “silent theft” since it is not seen as a theft,

but rather facilitated by the law makers themselves. However, this does not necessarily entail that such actions were not met with resistance from protest movements like the *Diggers*, in the seventeenth century.

Though commons were considered a piece of history, something left in the past, Lijster turns the attention towards the *present*, where a revival of the commons has been noted for a couple of reasons. In the field of economics Elinor Ostrom, emphasized the importance of the commons as something belonging to the present and not just the past with the alternative notion of facing state driven situations. Further, the vast access of sources in the digital sphere has contributed to this rise as the discretion between natural vs artificial commons has been explored. Additionally, enclosures are now, not something of the past, with the rise of Neoliberalism. Stuck between the edges of the Neoliberalist and Neofascist disaster, Thijs Lijster believes that the only way to get out of that path is through the revaluation and reappropriation of the commons.

New forms of commoning have risen in the domain of culture and healthcare and thus, we hold responsibility in reclaiming the commons. For Lijster, the notion of commons is shaped like a triangle, not only a thing, but a practice, reliant on a community: *commons*, *commoning*, *community*. Though abstract in its form, common sense is a trivial fourth ingredient in Thijs Lijster's practice as he acknowledges that in order to understand our commons, we need to develop and train our senses towards them; something that art allows us to share and experience.

On a final note, Thijs Lijster showcased examples of commons in the context of urban life and the enclosures that can be resisted through culture and aesthetic means. In the eyes of Greek architect and activist Stavros Stavridis, urban commons are described as threshold spaces, which nowadays are under pressure from gentrification and "studentification" as the city turns into a market. Hence, commoning is necessary to reclaim our Right to the City.

Finally, Thijs Lijster traces back to how art can be used to reclaim the commons as it allows us to question the *actual common senses*, questioning the fact that there is an alternative, a community ownership, with artists such as Simon Weckert and his project *Google Maps Hacks* (2000). Commons relate to art and to social relationships, politics and how all these things work together is plausible:

*“Collective creativity, directly or indirectly related to art, redefines, extends and develops the common. Communities may employ collective creativity to explore and develop relations with what lies outside: the common may thus become the fertile meeting ground of different collectivities. Potentialising experience, challenging the limits of the possible and questioning dominant reality will in this prospect become not only forces that make communities change but also practices that open communities and build bridges towards what used to be considered as outside, “other”, alien or even hostile” (Stavridis, Stavros, Rise of the Common City, 85).*

## **2. GEMMA MEDINA ESTUPIÑAN**

Gemma Medina Estupiñan is an art historian, independent research-curator and educator interested in contemporary art and the use of social design as tools of transformation within society. Having worked closely with Arte Útil from 2012 to 2014, in this transdisciplinary conversation, Medina discussed the concept and the research of the institution, centering around the concept of exhibitions as catalysts, specifically the projects— *The Rehabilitation La Casa Invisible*, *The Right to Eindhoven* and *Circuit of Commons* by Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson.

*“Útil”* translates to tools, further suggesting art as a tool for societal transformation, going beyond representation within society. Tania Bruguera, instead of creating a solo exhibition around her practice upon the visitation of the Van Abbe Museum in 2012, proceeded with a collective research on the theme of Arte Útil, challenging the museum to collaborate on these practices. During this process, two different positions came to fruition: on the one hand, the artistic practice questioned the role of art in the 21st century and its modern conception and on the other hand the institution itself questioned the role and function of the museum within the same context. As an art historian, Medina believed it was important for the museum to facilitate local communities and groups to expand and reflect about the institution and its role. Instead of displaying objects, this exhibition forefronts practices with a set of criteria, inviting initiatives and researchers to: 1) *Propose new uses for art within society*, 2) *Use artistic thinking to challenge the field within which it operates*, 3) *Respond to current urgencies*, 4) *Operate on a 1:1 scale*, 5) *Replace authors with initiators and spectators with*

users, 6) *Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users*, 7) *Pursue sustainability*, 8) *Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation*.

Consisting of over 288 practices, Medina underscores that this archive of collected practices from the 19th century up until the present, remains active and receptive to new projects and practices. Ever since the opening of the exhibition, new conservations have been generated, making the archive a catalytic tool. Through the open access platform, different researchers and practitioners have the freedom to get in touch with these practices.

Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson for the project *La Casa Invisible*, a response to the gentrification of Malaga, where the municipality used art and culture as an excuse (Picasso) to attract tourism, abandoning and isolating the local cultural scene from this process. The building, La Casa Invisible, has become a symbol about the possibilities for the constitution of communities in a space managed as a common. Stuck in a continuous state of negotiations over their “legal right” by the municipality and after an expulsion threat in 2022, the group made contact with Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson, who invited Gemma Medina on board, to develop an alternative form of negotiation and an alternative use of the house. The Rehabilitation Plan was developed by architect López Osorio and his students, to propose and activate the project.

Tracing back to the current project, Medina reflected on last year’s exhibition “*Art is a Verb*” at Van Abbemuseum where *The Right to Eindhoven: Circuit of Commons* was displayed. Here, art was thought about as an act / action, rather than just an object-production. The exhibition became a place where possibilities could be generated and reclaim processes engaged with contemporary issues. With this, the spirit of *La Casa Invisible* was carried out in this project, embracing local communities and connecting them with the municipality to spark new conversations. Gemma Medina, emphasizes that the projects in Malaga, Eindhoven and Groningen, echo different forms of gentrification of the monoculture developments.

*How and what would we like to reclaim back from the city?* Well, for Gemma Medina, the starting point is institutions, museums and exhibitions and their responsibility in assigning agency and negotiating with administrations. Medina foregrounded the importance of connecting with one another, utilizing spaces and museums as an open ground for initiatives

to work together. In displaying and framing discussions within such spaces, an intimate connection between the artistic practice and the ongoing affairs in the “outside world” can be established. Despite its lengthy process, what is important for Gemma Medina (and for Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson) is to invent a new model where all these departments are able to unite together, negotiate and locate the commons and how they can be implemented in the future of the city— *coming to solutions for the future*.

### 3. JEANNE VAN HEESWIJK

Jeanne van Heeswijk, a Dutch visual artist, curator and part of the BAK in Utrecht, a platform for art, knowledge and activism, spoke about the idea of tactile imaginations and the collective ways in which cultural infrastructures can be deconstructed and rebuilt. “Trainings for the Not-Yet” was a project that took place at BAK in 2020, consisting of a series of trainings which brought together installations and learning objects, embodying communities in the times of struggle. Living in periods of unbelievable crisis, one might ask: How do we survive together? How do we common our understanding of time, our insecurities and our fears? This aspect is significant to Jeanne van Heeswijk.

Such nuance is reflected in a part of BAK’s staircase, contextualizing Gabriel Elrach’s staircase in her neighbourhood that was difficult to maintain. By doing this simple action of inviting neighbours to converse on the stairs, it inevitably became a weekly thing. As a result, Gabriel thought about how the stairwell of the city would look and how could we bring in the commons, with the fast-paced rhythms of life? An underlying conversation of this exhibition was based on the collective Black Quantum Futurism’s exhibition *All Time is Local* and indeed for Jeanne, all time *is* local, but more so as an emotional condition that embodies global conflicts with local emotions.

How can we re-engage the place where we are, to think more than just a future? In “Trainings for the Not-Yet”, different communities came together, exchanging tools and skills to fight gentrification, practicing on themes of community and living. Part of the project was the Homebaked in Liverpool, where the community had been fighting to gain back the right to the city where an entire neighbourhood was demolished to make room for developments. Using an empty bakery as a space to talk about the interconnections between the struggles of

life, lead to a collective ownership of the bakery, marking it as a meeting point for the community. Jeanne van Heeswijk emphasizes that these projects are not just projects but living entities that have a voice and an agency; they move, they scream and need care and maintenance to blossom.

How do we build imaginaries that can hold all the collective desires? *Freehouse*:

*Radicalizing the Local* in Rotterdam, revolved around the collective ownership and autonomy of the community in the Afrikaanderwijk neighbourhood. This journey focused around insourcing, by actively challenging the narrative and the image the city was using for the neighbourhood. Imagery, Jeanne underscores, is manipulated by the hierarchy to express their desire to cleansify and gentrify the place. Through this project, these assumptions were actively challenged with interventions, working hand in hand with the imagination and the social, economic, political and cultural factors. Since then, they have become a cooperative network system in adjacent neighbourhoods, helping in structuring the workers with equal wages.

Jeanne van Heeswijk believes that we should strive to organize ourselves in such a way that we can take control of our lives by developing cultural spaces and generating stronger networks, to take the right to our city back. At the start of the year, BAK was defunded, however this led to discussions on: *How can we collectivize what is left? How can we create cultural institutions that expand in more spaces?* Thereafter, BAK has embraced several workshops and programs, actualizing theory and action, building new imaginatives together. If we want to common our spaces, we have to ensure that our institutions are ours. If art is a tool, we must learn how to use the tool and employ it. We must take action now and actively unbuild and rebuild.

#### **4. RICK MIDDELBOS**

Biology teacher, ecologist and nature advocate Rick Middelbos, discussed the collective need to maintain nature within the city and how we, as residents of the city ought to facilitate it. Middelbos acknowledges that everything is nature and nothing is, the same as nature. Within nature, there are several things that are so vast, making them impossible to grasp and in a greater sense, it makes the world a “large museum to walk around in.” Even by doing the

simplest act of looking at the moss between the pavement tiles, Middelbos stresses how in our everyday lives there are many things hidden in plain sight embedded within nature.

The false dichotomy between the city and nature that has developed over the years has been a key contributor to this separation between the two, as within a city, whole ecosystems exist and a lot is possible, by simply *making things happen*. In Groningen, there are many spaces where people live together with nature, and many are erased and cut down for gentrification, like Betonbos, which was a free space where a forest came into existence by itself on a concrete field. JNM, the Youth Association for Nature and the Environment, became a place where he was able to experience the ways in which nature and culture can co-exist. Things which don't have monetary value are mostly valued when you learn to value it and the unknown becomes familiar and cherished.

*“Nature makes me humble, I don't all need to understand  
it in order to facilitate it.”* (Rick Middelbos, 2025)

Nature and humans can cohabit organically and through his practices at Parcival College, Middelbos does just that, by cultivating nature in the presence of kids. In facilitating nature, plenty of possibilities come to life whether that is from sowing indigenous plants, building bee hotels and upkeeping the land. It is important for Rick Middelbos, for us, to strive to work and insource directly with nature and learn how we could collectively learn to see it and find out how to collectively maintain it as there are several ways to get creative with what is around us. There is so much more which can be facilitated other than planting trees and it is crucial to seek these out.

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**The Edible City: Tasting Urban Futures  
With Leonie Bais and Ilse Donker**

In the context of the project “The Right to Groningen - Circuit of Commons” by Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson, in collaboration with Fiona van den Bergh, organizer, performer and city guide, Leonie Bais and Ilse Donker were invited to show how the city is and could become more edible.

During her life as a squatter, Ilse Donker often dumpster dived to sustain herself but upon realizing how unhealthy it truly was, she started wondering if there was a way to do so, to the core of her being. This led her to foraging, something that has been present since her childhood and further stemmed from hunter-gatherers’ living in relation to the land, an instinctual way of being human. Capitalism does the exact opposite, cutting away our relationship with food and the landscape. In April, Ilse took part in a three-month foraging lifestyle for scientific research as part of the Wild Biome Project that aimed to research the impact such a diet has on gut health. Before starting this experiment, Ilse’s blood values results flagged as GREEN - YELLOW - ORANGE and after the three months, a follow-up analysis showed improvement, with all metrics returning as green. Now that Ilse has returned to her “normal diet” she admitted that adapting the foraging lifestyle within this, has not been an easy journey as her body needs time to get accustomed with the nutrition changes.

Up until three years ago, Leonie Bais worked as a psychiatrist and after receiving a book on fermentation from Noma, a renowned restaurant in Copenhagen, she was left fascinated and realized that this is something she wanted to explore further. Since then, Leonie has become the initiator of FoodLab focusing on making the food chain more sustainable and often hosting hands-on workshops with clients including the University of Groningen, incorporating vegetables and plant-based proteins. Further, Loenie is involved in a civil movement called Ons Eten, that prioritizes local food and produce within the province of Groningen where events, dinners, workshops and lectures are frequently organized to spread the concept of local food.

Before heading off to our walk towards Paradijsvogeltuin, Ilse and Leonie gave us a handful of hazelnuts and chestnuts to plant along the way. Throughout this walk, several nuts and tree cuttings from the forests were planted within the city, in spots that were deemed best suitable for the growth of the foraged goods. Despite the fact that the growth of the nuts and cuttings will not be visible for a couple of years, the act of foraging, of “doing it” is activism in itself. Aside from learning more about these, Ilse and Leonie, shared their knowledge on trees and seeds like rose hips, oak, elder and linen trees, expanding on how the city is, indeed edible and medicinal.



At Paradijsvogeltuinen, Leonie Bais and Ilse Donker's home, a beautiful harvest of wild-foraged ingredients and local produce were gathered, from which a cozy and warm dinner was prepared. Before dining, Ilse shared that nature preservation can be very fascist considering that we are encouraged to "eat the invasive plants" and alternately we ought to make space for native species and plants. The wide spread of local produce on the table in a way, exemplifies this, with local honey, goose rilette, chestnuts, bread as well as homemade kimchi, cola and kombucha paired with several spices and herbs. In addition to these, Leonie brought Noma's flavorbox, including candied pine cones, hot sauce and oysters and mussels that she and Ilse had harvested the day before.



**Fig. 2** *Various herbs and spices to mix with kombucha, juice and cola*

With these in mind, each of us took on a task, helping to prepare the dinner; making waffles out of nut dough, peeling apples and cutting cabbages for stampott and creating our own drinks. At the same time, everyone relished the local produce and foraged ingredients, warming up with goose and vegan soup and reading through books on fermentation and foraging. In time, stampott with boar sausages was served and the dinner ended with a farmer's sweet pumpkin pie with an almond crust, paired with ground dandelion coffee.

Starting the day off with a walk through the city, planting hazelnuts, walnuts and cuttings along the way and ending at Paradijsvogeltuinen, their community, with a cozy dinner filled

with local products and harvest of wild-foraged ingredients, everything seemed to come in a full circle. Having the opportunity to savour such flavours and produce in a singular day, was very nourishing and eye-opening. In times where consumerism and capitalism engulfs our way of living and being, taking a step back and re-connecting to our surroundings is important. To build a sustainable future, we must reframe our mindset and reciprocate with the environment and we should make the effort to tend and pay attention to nature, support our [local food systems](#) and understand urban landscapes as a source, as something that is and can be edible.



*Leonie Bais: [leoniebais.nl](http://leoniebais.nl) | Ilse Donker: [ilsedonker.nl](http://ilsedonker.nl)*



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