

## New neighbours

As a young adult living in the Netherlands, I have always been surrounded by many waterways, but never notably noticed them. They were there, but seemed no different than the buildings, streets and fields. Until I moved to a houseboat on the Rhine. Suddenly, I realised that all those waterways were by no means static; I could feel every small change and movement of the water under my feet. The first weeks I would spend hours looking at the water passing and started to notice that the river flowed differently every day, if not every hour. When the water would rise due to rainfall or meltwater, so would my house. The river turned brown from all the sediment it brought along, the floodplains across would disappear under the current and my backyard had changed in a matter of days. Sometimes it would stay for weeks, sometimes the grass would greet me again the next morning. I realised that these waters seemed no different than the streets, because we 'make' the waterways too. We direct, redirect and guide the water, so that we can both make use of its power, but also keep our feet dry. But living within the dikes, I became interested in all the natural changes and qualities that came with the river. I started wondering who the river and its floodplains were; who were my non-human neighbours?

For my graduation project for Fine Art (BEAR) at ArtEZ in Arnhem, I dedicated my time to my new neighbourhood and spent many days in the floodplains; looking, listening, noticing. Determining plantlife, recognising different animals, digging in the ground, cooking with edible plants, finding clay and taking a swim if the weather was kind. It felt good to get to know my new neighbours, but still felt like I could not fully understand them. After all, we spoke a different language. One afternoon I was riding my bike through the fields and stopped to take a closer look at a blackthorn. But before I had the chance to, a finch accompanied me; perched on a branch closeby and started singing his song. Fully focused on him, captured by his singing, it startled me when he took off after a minute. But his song echoed in my head; I wanted to answer, speak with him, sing back. In a matter of minutes, things started to fall in place; In order to speak with the land and my new neighbours, I had to learn the language of the land. To speak with land, would mean to translate the land into a language that is both for human and non-human beings. This language had to be a co-creation of me and the land. I rushed back to my studio to put my ideas on paper; I was going to create instruments that could be played by humans, but spoke the language of the land. And so they had to be made from and with the land; I wanted to use the clay I found. But not only the material; the sound too had to be co-created by the elements of the floodplains and its sediment; different stones would function as a mould to shape the instruments.



## Gathering sediment

Using soil maps, in search of clay and other sediments, I started digging in the surrounding grounds and wandered along the riverbank and the fields. By carefully unearthing the soil, this hands-on method taught me many things about the characteristics of the floodplains and its sediment. In school I learned how a river deposits its sediment; where which grain size would end up in the landscape and how a river would change shape over time. Never doubted it, but I had never seen it so clearly as now; the more soil I dug up, the





more I started to understand fluvial deposits and the movements of the landscape, and suddenly theory turned into tangibility. The next step was to figure out how to make a usable material from the raw clay. Reading many articles, manuals and tips, I figured that the clay had to be filtered, be undone of any impurities, to be of good quality. Many filtering steps and weeks later, I had smooth clay, but I started to wonder if all this work was really necessary; was the clay not good by itself? The difference

was visible and feelable, but to me the clay had become more general, more ordinary, less unique. Studying at an art academy, people are used to clay of quality that comes in plastic bags, processed clay, clay that behaves. But clay that comes directly from the soil has a different set of qualities; it tells a story. If you watch it closely, it contains information about the landscape. Sometimes recent stories, sometimes old tales. The clay I found in Arnhem had a deep brown colour on the surface, but the further I dug, the more blue and grey appeared; oxidised and reduced iron. When I dug closer to the river, more silt and sand were mixed in with the clay. Except for a few patches of pure, heavy clay soil; here the river only flowed at times of flooding, followed by enough time to rest and deposit its clay particles. With all these nuances in soil composition, I started to wonder how clayey soils from different places would bake in the oven. I was hoping the clay did not behave well; I hoped the clay would behave as a reflection of its origin.

### Sound of Sediment

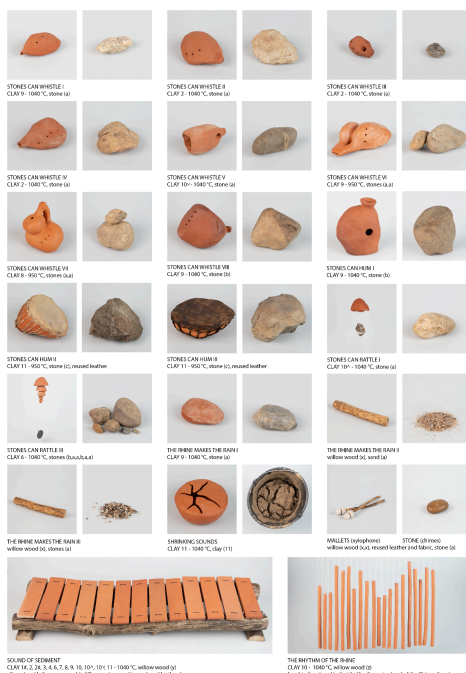
The first instruments I tried out were ocarina-like whistles. After all, I wanted to whistle back to the finch. To use the vocabulary of the land, I used different stones as a mould for the chamber of the whistles. This way, the cavity in which the sound originates, is the voice of the stone. After many tries, more and more stones were translated into whistles, all making different sounds. I took them back to the floodplains to play for my non-human neighbours, hoping they would give a listen. For a few moments, me and a bird in the distance exchanged some of our sounds, and then they went off. After their silence, I started to notice the complexity of sounds that were at place, other than the birds. The songs of the wind and water made me wonder; what else did the sediment have to say? In what other ways could I work with the clay and facilitate new sounds for the sediments? A collection of instruments arose: windchimes of which the cup-like shapes were moulded too with stones; drums where the base was made with bigger stones, finished with stretched recycled leather; rainsticks from local willow wood with sand or stones trickling down; a tongue drum with its shape inspired by the cracking quality of drying clay. And they all spoke differently. And slowly, the title 'Sound of Sediment' arose.



During the making of the instruments, I was doing many tests, baking little test pieces of the same size with clay from different places of the floodplains. One day, just to get an overview, I hung them all on nails in the wall. And every piece that I put up, the clay made a different sound. Was I dreaming? Could that be true? Could every different clay have a unique sound? I had to find out. And so began the making of a xylophone; each bar would be made with the same mould, all baked at the same temperature, all installed the same way. The only variation had to be the clay itself. Each bar had a number marked corresponding to places of origin on my map. After weeks I could conclude, to my delight, that each clay in fact does have a different voice. The fact that this instrument was the result of doing thorough material research reflects for me the importance of putting time and attention into your surroundings. Because if you are attentive enough, it will reward you a thousandfold.

## Art as translator

Towards my graduation, I felt the urge to translate my first attention-shifting experience with the Rhine into an instrument too; the changes in water level; the fluctuation of the river. Checking the water level often, I had seen many amounts of water in graphs and numbers. Scientific data and numbers help us understand and predict the world around us, but I have always had a hard time translating data into the real world experiences again. To me, art is a translator by nature; it can do so with feelings, opinions, places, as well as data. The quality of feeling the water level change under my feet; how could I translate its data into something sensitive again? By using both the data and the sediment the river provided, I could make a sonic bridge between the two; using sound to understand. I gathered both the data of the water level per month and the clay from the Rhine. I came up with a calculation, so that the numbers could decide the length of the instrument. Making rods of different sizes, each representing the water level of that month, putting them in chronological order to create a fluctuating chime. Each rod has its month marked on the bottom and can be played individually, producing the sound of that month. Or, they could be played together, and the chime reflects the fluctuating nature of the river. And so again, theory becomes tangibility.



Next to translating, art is a communicator as well. Through the making of 'Sound of Sediment' I gained more knowledge of the floodplains; of the river and its sediment. But as I showed the instruments and their stories with others, this gained knowledge passed on. I noticed that both kids and adults experienced the floodplains in ways they never did before. Some people told me their next walk along the river was different then before, and some even went on a search for riverclay themselves. Whilst giving workshops and chatting with fellow artists, I talked about the process of gathering clay, the qualities that wild clay holds and what it means to work with natural materials. Art is to be seen, heard, felt and experienced. I strongly believe art is a wonderful tool to create more awareness of our surroundings, and in the case of Sound of Sediment, to create more sediment literacy in specific.



### **About Carmen Molenaar**

*Carmen Molenaar (2001, NL) is a visual artist that uses her artistic practice as a tool to question the relationship we have with our environment and investigates new ways of living together with our non-human surroundings.*

*Molenaar's practice is not only driven by personal fascination, but also by the urge to address the current planetary changes and the growing disconnection from our environment. Through the question 'How to become a Mountain?' she explores what it means to live and work as a holobiont in this entangled world. She has started calling her natural environment and all its inhabitants her non-human neighbours. In order to understand these non-humans better, Molenaar searches for lost and forgotten stories by doing field research and diving into the geology and ecology of her surroundings. Because her surroundings often guide her not only in theme, but also in material, she sees her non-human neighbours as co-creators. To Molenaar, the natural world and its sciences hold many stories that need telling, but only numbers often do not go further than our rational thinking. Using her art as a sensitive translator, working with photography, film, sound and text, along with natural materials, she aims to find new expressions of their stories that can stimulate not only our knowledge, but also our emotion and sympathy.*



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