

“Why are we so
afraid of the grid?”

An Interview with Het Nieuwe Instituut

abstract What is the role of public institutions, museums and archives vis-à-vis the various financial and authoritative grids that support them? The Research Department at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam works at the intersections of architecture, design and digital culture to develop the ideas, concepts and formats that in turn shape the institute’s

agenda. We spoke to Marina Otero Verzier (the institute's Director of Research), Katía Truijen (media theorist and senior researcher for *Architecture of Appropriation*) and Marten Kuijpers (architect by training and senior researcher for the *Automated Landscapes* project) about Het Nieuwe Instituut's uneasy relationship with, and attitudes towards, various gridded structures. Is it possible — or even desirable — to resist, reshape or break away entirely from these grids?

Soapbox [Calvin Duggan & Noura Borggreven]:

Het Nieuwe Instituut seems to approach research from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds, fields and domains. How does the work you do here differ from that done in a more traditional academic setting?

Marina Otero: I think each of us has a different expertise. In my case, I previously worked at Columbia University in New York. In traditional academic spaces,

there is a certain type of language, a set of references and a form in which research has to be presented in order to have validation, be recognised and actually form part of a long-term conversation. Being invited to come to Het Nieuwe Instituut was a fantastic opportunity to question everything that I had done before and to ask what it means to do research in the framework of a museum, as well as in relation to a national archive. What does it mean to do things not only for professionals or scholars, but for public? What is my role, as well as the role of the department more generally, in connection to the government?

We want to position research as a particular space and time from which to look at the world and from which to disentangle normative, pervasive, familiar — even banal — realities that surround us and their forms of knowledge. We want to unfold these modes of knowledge production, question them and start looking at them differently. Research doesn't necessarily have to have an outcome. It is an open ended process. We work with questions of property, technology, gender, race and the colonial past, but we also question the role of the museum. How might research be able to create other notions of what should be included in the archive, or what an archive actually is? Must research be a phase that comes first and is then presented in the form of an exhibition or a public program? What happens if research does not happen individually, but collectively?

In investigating these different ways of thinking about research, sometimes exhibitions form the first stage of our research. In these cases, an exhibition is a public act where we pose certain questions and we want people to come and think together with us. Suddenly, research is intrinsically public in its nature. It is collective, with both experts and non-experts involved.

Katía Truijen: Maybe I can give a few examples of the kind of research we do in public. We have recently started a long term research project on video culture as a discursive space. The goal is to see how music videos allow us, on the one hand, to address questions to existing realities, but, on the other, also allow us to imagine alternative realities and possible worlds. We will investigate these questions together with a public audience and speakers that we have invited. So tonight, we will transform the library into a kind of public recording studio, almost a TV set. We have invited set designers and videographers to work with us, to help us expose the process of video production and to also build up an archive of the public conversations that we have.

MO: In this way, the subject of research and the media that we use to do the research collide to produce a new way of looking at the subject.

KT: We have managed to develop a public program through which we can update and reformulate the questions we ask along the way.

Marten Kuijpers: This public aspect, as stressed by Marina and Katía, is also key to the way we move forward with the research on *Automated Landscapes*. Our research is an open ended process, but one that is steered towards presentations at biennales and other public events, which themselves become a resource for further research. Often, while doing research, we are already thinking about how to present it. To introduce a concrete example: not long ago, I gave a presentation as part of the ASCA Cities seminar series [a collaborative research initiative aligned with the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis] about the container terminals in the new extension to the Port of Rotterdam. We started work on the project immediately after this. Around two months later, we got asked if we could present the project at the Vienna Biennale. I thought to myself, “what, after two months?” But then I realised that we can use platforms like these to not only speed up the research, but also to reflect on our work and share it with others, who in turn can reflect upon it and also move forward with their own research. In this sense, the presentation is not only a summary of the knowledge we have produced so far, but it also becomes the starting point for new research.

MO: We also work with formats that are not necessarily recognised as research. With our work on automation, we often get asked where the results of our research can be found. We respond that we lead a lot of tours! Marten and Victor [Muñoz Sanz] have taken people to visit dairy farms and greenhouses, producing a form of embodied knowledge where you go, you see and you experience. We understand this as an important form of research, one that is not necessarily recognised in other frameworks. People sometimes don't even know what's in their backyard. It is very different to find out about transformations in the environment by reading it in an academic paper than it is to actually go to these places and see, for example, cows interacting with robots. So when people ask where our research is, we answer that it is in our tours, in this podcast, or in that exhibition. We also publish papers, but — for us — a tour, a talk or a formal conversation are equally as important as is a paper with footnotes and references.

We are a public institution, so we are not interested in retaining or protecting authorship of our work. We are not interested in these enclosures of research. Our role is the opposite: it is to open things up. Our aim here is to spark a conversation, to nurture and sustain that conversation and to make it possible for certain topics that are less present in the discourse to be given more attention, and then to find partners that would like to continue and appropriate it. We just say:

take it, this conversation is not ours, is shared. Take it, contest it, improve it. In that sense, it is a bit different from the academic environment, I would say. And I have a PhD, I know! I totally respect academia, but there are things that have to evolve. Many people working in academia, even those from the University of Amsterdam, come here to work with us precisely because of that. They are frustrated in certain academic environments and appreciate the more open ended approach we have here.

KT: We do of course invite a lot of scholars to work with us, present their research and give lectures. We explain to them how we do this public research, and this leads them to adapt how they engage in conversations with our audience, to think of different formats and to address different questions.

MK: This is an issue that is very relevant to this particular institute. We're actually, in this building, sitting in between a huge archive, which is completely author based. It's based on the oeuvres of Architects (with a capital A), mostly men.

KT: I finally have the numbers now: 26 out of the 835 archives are from female architects. That's 3.1%.

MK: I remember when you arrived, Marina, and one of the first things you said was that we should really reflect on what kind of collection we want to be. What do we acquire, and for whom do we acquire it? I also remember questions such as: what do we have on squatting in these archives? We asked the people in the Collection department, and they told us that if a particular architect was interested in the topic, then it might be somewhere in the archive. And so, they had a look. We managed to find some material in personal files within the archives, but for anything else, we needed to go to the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, because that's the institute. But we thought: no, we want to look at this from an architectural perspective. Squatting is in itself a spatial practice, so we should also think about how to include this in our archive. If you want to know something about the history of the built environment, you should be able to find it here. The same goes for automated landscapes.

This is also why we want to go beyond an author-based perspective within the collection. We still acquire oeuvres, and I think we should do that. But aside from that, we also want to focus on an informal, collective architectural practice like squatting and go beyond this dominant notion of authorship and signature. As well as trying to find ways — and it's not easy — to collect material for the archive. What do you collect when it comes to squatting?

What kind of material are you looking for? Is it patterns? When it comes to automated landscapes, is it drawings?

SB: The way you talk about your work seems to suggest the intersection of several different grids articulating themselves to one another: academic, institutional, national and so on. Pepita Hesselberth, in her contribution to this issue, writes about the tiny-house movement, which seems to exist somehow both on- and off-grid. How does this movement compare to the practice(s) of squatting, and how do these, and other, grids interact with one another? What might this mean for the notion of being “off the grid”?

MO: I'm thinking about other grids in terms of logistics. I will allow myself to say that I think the grid is very Dutch. That's why, when we presented at the Dutch Pavilion in Venice [Biennale Architettura 2018] with a project called *Work, Body, Leisure*, the first thing you saw was a grid of lockers. For us, the locker is this architecture that allows bodies to reinvent themselves: you arrive at a factory as a citizen and then you become a worker, or you go to the gym as a worker and transform into a sports person. This orange grid of lockers was also thinking or talking about the Cartesian organised landscape of the Netherlands, a very rational landscape that is designed for productivity and efficiency, but also designed for equality. The Netherlands has always

championed this idea of welfare, and this grid ensures that everyone is the same with an equal amount of opportunities. This is not necessarily true, but it is at least an aspiration. We also see this in the repetitive architecture of modernist buildings, where all the windows are identical, seeming to convey the notion that each citizen too is the same, because the architecture says so. In reality, it gets much messier.

In the history of architecture, the grid has been used in many critical approaches to capitalism to understand the spread of normative spaces and the spread of circulation. It has been used by Archizoom and Suprastudio, by Rem Koolhaas and many others. It has often been seen as this totalitarian system: we have to get out of the grid in order to be emancipated from subjugation. But actually, I'm now thinking that it might be the opposite: what if the grid is the ultimate leftist dream? It is a system that allows for a complete redistribution of resources in an egalitarian way. So why are we so afraid of the grid? This is a paradox: on the one hand, we are averse to this normative space that interferes in all aspects of our lives. But if you think about it, the grid is probably one of the few ideas that, without questioning production, promises redistribution. With *Architecture of Appropriation*, we often talk about the level of institutionalisation of squatting in the Dutch context. Squatters are extremely organised, and they often use the law to their benefit.

KT: There are spaces in the law. For instance, there's eight weeks — the time it takes to bring a case to court and get a verdict — before you are evicted. So, they really are interacting with this grid, or those protocols, in resistance.

MO: Squatting challenges the grid, but it's not completely outside of it. It's about using or deploying tools that make the grid go in your favour. There are actually many institutions, lawyers and others that are helping. Squatting in the Netherlands was legal until quite recently, so it was part of the so-called grid. It was a rational attempt at redistribution: if we have empty apartments, people can appropriate them. This is the paradox that I'm trying to articulate: the grid may be the ultimate leftist utopia.

SB: In a sense, squatting and the tiny-house movement can each be seen as a form of self-chosen precarisation. How does that conflict with the institutionalisation of these types of living? Are these bodies more precarious, and how?

KT: We see this when we look at the history of squatting, although it is of course still being practiced. For this particular project, *Architecture of Appropriation*, we have been working with communities and places that, at the time of research, still existed. They were places

that we could visit. Space is divided differently there: there are private parts, in buildings, but also public and common spaces. These ideas of common living, or of combining work and living in the same space, have been appropriated by commercial interests.

MO: This is also a question of how we, as a formal institution, can deal with more informal, emergent, fragile, and even precarious ways of living. How can an established institution initiate a conversation with other such institutions?

KT: It's a long conversation, a kind of methodology that we try to develop which always returns to this question: what are we actually doing as an institute? We try to document and archive these practices together with the communities, while also using architectural tools, and we try to reflect upon these different forms of representation. For this particular exhibition, an active space where we invited people to engage, we worked with students from the TU Eindhoven to document the types of appropriation, the types of architectural spaces that were constructed by the communities and how these spaces were being used. In the beginning, we were only showing the architectural representations, but then we started thinking about how to also include the voices of the people involved and the communities. In the end, we built up what we might call hybrid documents.

MO: These documents consist of the normative architectural representation together with notations from the communities who inhabit those spaces. In this way, it challenged the expectations of architectural representation by including other voices and oral histories. At the same time, these documents still have the capacity to be presented in a court case. Often, these squatters have no documentation about the spaces they occupy; they have nothing which presents how they live and its value. We thought it would be interesting to have these documents that could be deployed, used or weaponised somehow in a court.

KT: Or in conversations with the municipality. Sometimes, as many of those places have been legalised, these documents are also used in conversations with the owner.

MO: We understand the complex, or maybe problematic, nature of including these documents in the National Archives, but we think it would be even more problematic if they were not here. If we think that this is heritage, heritage understood as what society finds important at a particular moment in time, then this is what those living this way want to leave for future generations. Also, we cannot think that the architecture of the Netherlands is only iconic buildings made by famous architectural offices. The architecture of the

built environment in the Netherlands is being transformed by many agents that are not necessarily architects, among them squatters, who make the preservation of many monuments possible. We want them to be heard — their voices within their own space and their own language — but we also want to recognise that not only architects, but also other agents, can be an inspiration for thinking about housing in ways that are not market oriented.

KT: But this project still adheres to the particular grid of this archive, how we normally register an archive and who are the archive formers, so there was an interesting tension. Nevertheless, this project did produce new kinds of texts and new keywords with which to find material in the archive. And these texts — for instance, those documenting collective forms of living — can also be connected to existing material in the archive. So, there are also new connections that will come out of this.

SB: *Automated Landscapes* engages with spaces that are not designed to be inhabited by human bodies, challenging conventional spatial requirements and normative rules for health, safety and welfare. At the same time, the Port of Rotterdam is part of a huge infrastructural system. How can these automated landscapes help us rethink relations between the human body and space from the perspective of authorship and agency? Can we think of these landscapes as being off the grid?

MK: First of all, these spaces are made for nonhumans, so the design is based on the requirements for these new technologies to operate well — although I'd like to point out that the spaces are still inhabited by a lot of humans and other species. What I feel in a lot of these larger cases, including the container terminals in the Port of Rotterdam, is that we should actually want these spaces to be part of the grid, because they are not. In fact, they are leaving it. I see greenhouse clusters that are literally going off the grid. If you look at zoning laws and land use plans, these spaces are just a white spot on the map. They're creating their own energy grids and waste grids, but these are off *the* grid, in that they are privatised. In the last two or three decades of deregulation, privatisation and decentralisation of spatial policies in the Netherlands, those behind the container terminals have found all kinds of opportunities — and have been well supported by the national government in this country — to go off-grid.

The container terminals are of course fully embedded in a global network, because otherwise they wouldn't operate well, but they are no longer part of the national grid. For instance, we haven't managed to get access to information about building permits from the municipality, which we should be able to access. It's a peninsula. it's something new added to the country, but I'm not able to find information about ownership. I know another five examples in this country where

I see similar developments and, as I said, the national government is supporting them by speeding up the processes for these huge companies.

These spaces are owned by only a few companies. The landscape is no longer a huge grid where hundreds of farmers take part. It is still a huge grid, but it is now used by only four or five companies, planning and building large environments in which they can produce or do whatever they want and take all the revenue. If you look at the Dutch grid, you see that whilst the majority of land is still owned by the government, this has changed significantly in the last decades. Land is being privatised. The city of Rotterdam, like the city of Amsterdam, is still based on *erfpacht* (leasehold) — that is, renting the land from the government for 50 years. But in these cases, it's privatised, and they're selling the land for relatively low prices. Companies like Google and Microsoft, or Maersk in the case of the container terminal, are buying it and exploiting it. Not only are they exploiting the land, but they are also exploiting the infrastructure and the people.

MO: We always talk about automation in relation to forms of exploitation of certain bodies, whether it is humans, robots or animals. We see in terms of typology that these places are generally enclaves or enclosures, enclosures of certain portions of the land where there

are certain conditions that get implemented or enhanced in order to increase efficiency or production. It is now possible to grow huge amounts of vegetables that previously could not be grown so easily. Similarly, 24-hour workdays are now possible in these bubbles. The idea developed in the 1960s and 70s of utopian spaces that are somehow outside of the grid and function as bubbles or spheres for innovation is beautiful. But the idea has been totally commodified. Now, if you think about the libertarian dream of escaping the grid, it is very much market oriented and neoliberal, something that Trump enacts by saying that the goal is to go to space. I'm thinking of Elon Musk.

MK Or floating cities.

MO Floating cities for tax evasion. Tax havens. This idea of being off the grid is often a libertarian mode that is not necessarily a call for many. These forms of exploitation of the landscape are of course historical. Think about the way in which the UK, like the US, had these vast fields that were not owned and how, by creating different portions of land, they could be exploited. Obviously, they become more productive, but also privatised: a space or bubble to create forms of exploitative practices.

I still feel that there are tools to change whatever we might call the grid: we can change what

an archive is, we can change conversations about the legal and illegal in relation to squatting, and so on. It's not that I'm comfortable inside the grid — actually, I'm deeply uncomfortable with it — but I still think that where I want to put my efforts towards is in changing things from within. We really respect people who are activists, who have their own way of doing things and don't want to be absorbed. In the last few years, we've managed to collaborate through mutual respect. These voices are fundamental to transform the institutions. Their positions challenge the institutional mechanisms and the way in which we communicate research and information. I'm not an activist; I have a privileged position working in a national institute with a permanent contract. But I try to do my best to change the grid in which we work. My role is from within, but it is also to establish alliances with those from outside; there is an outside obviously, and I think there should be. I think we are at least aware of our position here. It's important to be critically aware of where you are within the grid, and to be honest and consistent with it.