



Nele Brökelmann

The Gravity of World-Making

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field-research, speculative fiction, open-endedness, landscapes, lived experience

Summary: In this essay I am exploring how growing into the process of writing a speculative fiction novel has shifted and enriched my artistic practice. While unpacking my recent experience of a residency on the boat of the Atlas Initiatief, I unearth the ways in which the different elements within my practice come together in the evolving speculative world. I am hinting at parallels of my process with the different stages of artistic processes, which Witte Rook and I have identified in a shared research. Finally, I find that abstract conceptualisations need to be approached in their situatedness in a world and with an open-endedness.

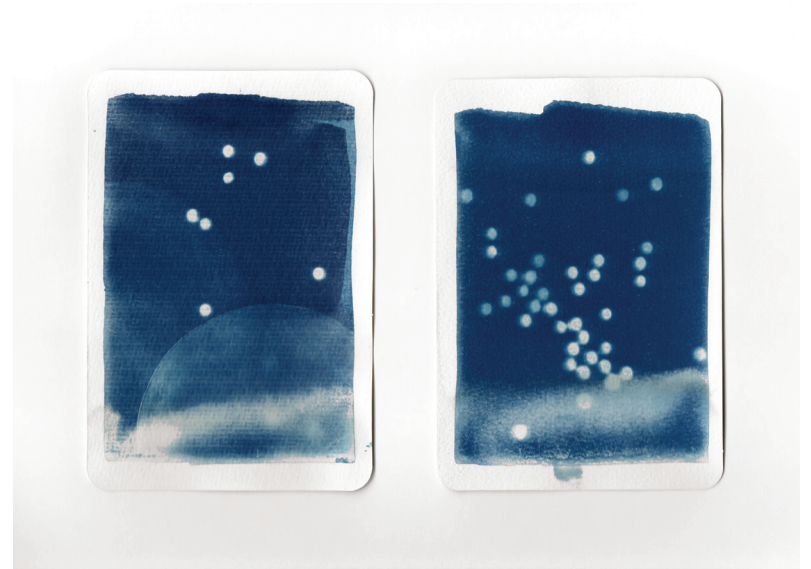
Nele Brökelmann is an artist deeply intrigued by the human need for structures of meaning. The perpetual search for and fabrication of meaning are recurring themes in her practice. She approaches human-made structures and mental as well as worldly concepts that create (physical) borders through walking in landscapes paired with conceptual and fictional explorations. To challenge either/or thinking, she plays with the experiences and concepts of distance, repetition, and parallelity. This finds its form in diverse media such as video, writing, explorative walks, and installations. She exercises creating space for ambiguity, wandering in thought, and approaching the beings in and of our environments otherwise. In addition to her artistic practice, Brökelmann writes for the Dutch contemporary art magazine Metropolis M, curates and moderates the film screening series Matters of Being for the artist initiative iii (Instrument inventors initiative) in the Hague, and has developed a research into artistic processes De Octopus together with the writing platform and artist residency Witte Rook (Breda, NL).

THE GRAVITY OF WORLD-MAKING

Nele Brökelmann



Vilnius
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of Arts



Untitled (2023), cyanotype on A6 watercolor postcards

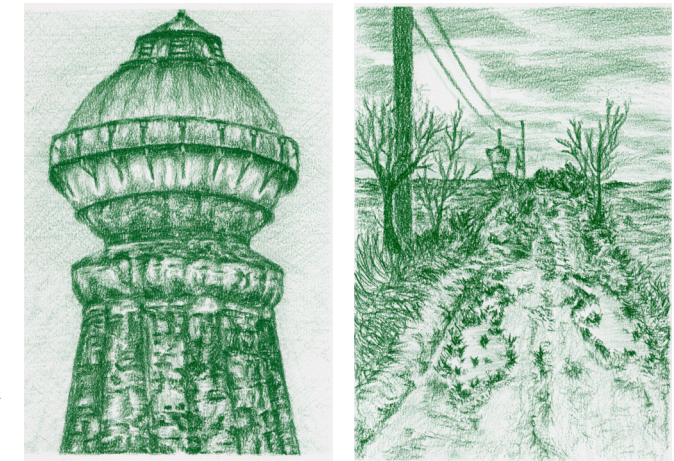
A rush of water woke me. I was sure it was entering the ship. Jumping out of bed, I stumbled. Rocking from side to side with the heavy movement, I worked hard to not fall. I reached out for the balcony door and pulled on the handle, tuned in with the ship's rocking, to close it. Leaning against the wall, I made my way towards the kitchen. With arms outstretched, I let myself fall into my hands against the doorpost, walls and counters. Getting a glass from the cupboard and filling it with water was another challenge in timing it exactly right with the ship's rocking. As I was finally drinking, holding on to the counters, I took my surroundings in and realised that I was standing in my own kitchen in my apartment in The Hague. It slowly came to me that I had left the ship of the Atlas Initiatief¹ two days before. It didn't ease the movement my body was experiencing, the motion sickness was real and would linger in my body for a while.

In the Fall of 2024, I started writing a speculative fiction story, a novel, if you will. As a visual artist, I'm pushing away the ridiculous feeling about this endeavour, since I am by no means an author, to make space for the world that is evolving from this process. It is a secondary world, similar to ours. Water is rationed and a climate of dry heat is the norm. Two characters meet at the moment when a major change in the weather occurs. Starting out from a Watch Station, they explore each in their own ways how the landscape has been shaped, how they came to meet, and why the common consequences for not following one's predetermined tasks are not being enforced.

So far, I can report that the writing of this speculative narrative has taken over my artistic practice. Its ongoing nature² has become a guide and driving force for my process, bringing previous loose (field-)research together and having me relish in the joy of digging deeper and making.³

² *The ongoing nature of the (artistic) process entails a continuity wherein experiments are performed without a clear outcome in mind.*—rephrased and translated from: *Proces is een Octopus*, research into the different stages in an artistic process developed in collaboration with Witte Rook: <https://witterook.nu/offline/proces-is-een-octopus>.

³ *Note-taking, or noticing and reflecting: a necessary element of the (artistic) process wherein thinking and making feed of each other.*—rephrased and translated from: *Proces is een Octopus*, ibid.



Watch Station: The Outlier (2025), pastel-pencil drawings on A5 drawing paper

A general returning interest in my practice is the way humans create meaning by filtering information, blocking things out visually and mentally, and creating anchor points to perceive the world as coherent. To explore those phenomena, I look into different modes of being⁴ on our planet and the physics of (our) worlds, socio-historical backgrounds of cultural developments, and the various ways in which worlds or meaning are created.

⁴ A way of phrasing I picked up from reading Bruno Latour (2013)

¹ <https://www.atlasinitiatief.org/>.

⁵ *The ongoing nature of the (artistic) process leads to a momentarily end, at which it is easier to define the different steps by looking back at what you did and/or the documentation of the process.—rephrased and translated from: Proces is een Octopus, ibid.*

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/pantser>.

My visual works often felt like a beginning or a small piece of something more encompassing that I could not get a hold of (yet). Artworks generally are momentary manifestations of an artist's process,⁵ but I feel a specific pull toward constructing a larger context or world from which my works can develop. Through speculative writing, I can combine real experiences with 'what-ifs,' play and break with the rules of our own world, interrogate how events and relations come to make sense, and examine through characters how I could imagine relating to an environment otherwise.

In telling stories, I am very much a pantser.⁶ With a vague idea of what comes next, I uncover the narrative as I write without knowing how it will end. For the longest time, I have been jealous of artists that can make visual works in that way. Making a speculative world keeps me from overanalysing the experiences and footage I collect during (field-) research. Earlier I tried to channel my experiences into essayistic texts that would relate them to theories and concepts. That practice kept me at a distance and at a loss from making visual works. The speculative writing, in comparison, makes images arise in my mind and creates space for open-ended experimentation from which visual

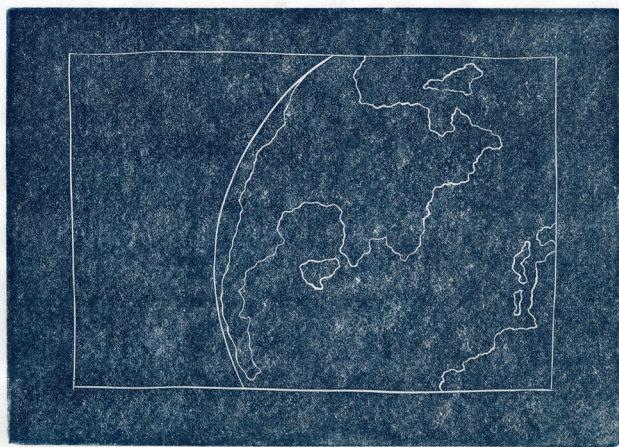
works develop in the process: I am exploring map-making to figure out what the planet's and continents' characteristics are, I'm drawing landscapes and elements of the speculative environment, like the two above, to get a feeling for how the characters move through and relate to their world. I'm even at a point where I am making a landscape drawing for a friend, that in my mind had nothing to do with the speculative writing until the two characters recently arrived at a similar place and are now heading into exploring that very landscape.

Taking the writing seriously was a leap⁷ of faith for me. While I have extensive experience with writing essays, journalistic articles, scripts for some of my works, and short stories from when I was younger, this is its own discipline, and I want to approach it with the necessary humility. The more I am learning about literary world-building, as from a Masterclass by science fiction and fantasy writer N. K. Jemisin (2026) or books on writing by authors like Stephen King (2000) and Benedict Wells (2004), the more I am finding confidence and trust in my process. At this point, reading fiction novels and learning about the processes behind them has become nearly as important as looking into other artists, their works and processes, and performing field-research.

⁷ *A leap is a first step in an artistic process to venture into an exploration of which the outcome cannot be foreseen.—rephrased and translated from: Proces is een Octopus, ibid.*

*It is on the artist to experience as many things as they can so that they can accurately render the world. The artists' job is to speak truth, sometimes to power, sometimes just to reality. Your job is to speak the truth about the world as you see it. Obviously you are a human being, you are going to filter things through your own perception, that is unavoidable. But you want to speak that truth otherwise, you want to try and make sure that you are not letting stereotypes or shorthand thinking interfere with your ability to absorb the world. That is your job as an artist: to perceive and interpret.*⁸

— N.K. Jemisin (2026)



Watch Station: The Planet v.01 (2025), linocut on Vang linocut printing paper, 23x31cm

⁸ N.K. Jemisin, Masterclass, Ep. 7. Worldbuilding: Research, 00:00:39-00:01:33.

During field-research and residencies I aim to familiarise myself with the specificities of an area, landscape and modes of existing. Being more of an observer than a social butterfly, it takes time for me to get in contact with people and feel comfortable to ask critical questions. It's especially tricky in areas where I don't speak the language and need a mediator, but even more so where the residency is removed from the actual lives of local people.

In field-research, which usually takes the form of extensive walks, I am curious about the stories that are told by the remnants of human presence in a landscape. This can be markers on a hiking path, border stones, pre-walked paths leading up mountains (which I'm usually scared to leave), abandoned infrastructure of former water distribution or Cold War weapon station, the paths underneath the mud that an overflowing river has carried there, a wandering dune that has been stripped of its trees by humans in the past, a pyramid-shaped building on an island, and so on. A general rule in hiking is that actual signs and the reality of the terrain override the information on maps. Observing the differences between the conceptualised area and what I actually experience in an environment is what drives me to go for field-research or a residency in a specific landscape.



Untitled (2024), digital photograph, taken during early morning field-research in the dry fields just outside Bechet (Southern Romania)

When I am walking in such areas, I photograph, film, and write about how I observe myself, the effect the characteristics of the environment have on my body and my experience.

⁹ <https://www.atlasi-initiatief.org/about>.

Embarking on the ship of the Atlas Initiatief took the element of extensive walking away, during the residency week a vessel carried me. There was an unignorable distance to the water due to the ship's size (24,5 m long and a draft of 2,5 m),⁹ which we bridged by swimming and kayaking. I could also still observe effects on my body as the motion sickness that finally hit me half-way into our longest sailing day: fourteen hours from Skagen (DK) to Norway's southern coast.

Navigating the sea, as I learned during the planning phase of the residency, involves following predetermined sailing paths. That meant that we had to plan ahead, while keeping an eye on the weather. In that sense sailing appears to be similar to hiking, where in certain areas not following the path, not checking the weather, or being unaware of the markers can get you into legal or life-threatening trouble.

My reasons to embark on the Atlas Initiatief were very conceptual. Stirred up from recognising a fold¹⁰ in the waterway of the Skagerrak, I wanted to experience the North Sea's conceptual beginning and its transition into the open sea. I wanted to observe how moving through areas defined and named by humans would affect me, and what transitions I would notice. Warned that the Skagerrak is one of the busiest shipping routes, I was curious how that would add to my inquiry. Due to the heatwave Northern Europe was experiencing, however, the water was flat and in parts reflective like a mirror, and not many ships crossed our way.

Additionally, sailing with the Atlas Initiatief involved me in the lives of Laura, Stijn, and their daughter Lieve, who live on board. We planned the route, cooked, ate, and played games together. This aspect gave my residency an unexpected worthwhile dimension: I got real-time insights into their lived experiences. These added to our conversations about their life as sea-travellers, as, for example, seeing their sadness to leave the community they had found for the summer on the Swedish island Stora Föro turning into excitement to continue their explorations further north. It reminded me that almost any storyline involves a mental and/or physical journey, for which decisions need to be made and something will be left behind.

The floating jelly fish in the dark water amazed me. From the distance of the ship, they seemed like far away planets drifting by. When Laura took me out on the water in the Atlas' kayaks, they came closer, so close I could reach out for them. With my GoPro, I was eager to catch their mode of being in the water. But there was so much more to notice, that Laura made me attentive to: the sound the plants make, growing along the rocky islands, at just the right height of the barely noticeable tide. The shallow areas, where seagrass grows first sporadically, like an underwater wasteland, just to turn into a thick forest several paddle strokes further.

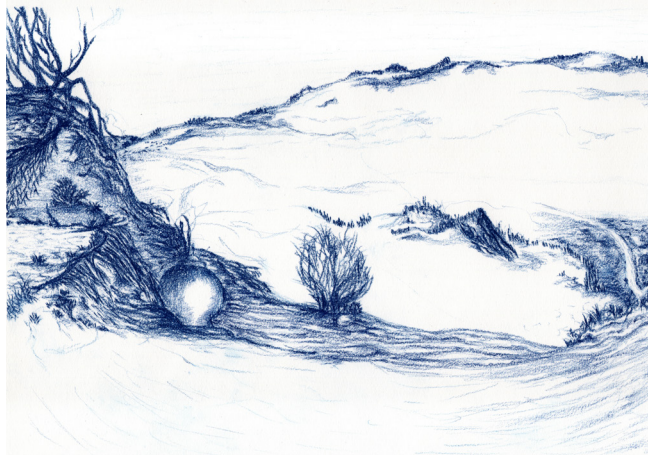
It was amazing how quickly the kayak became an extension of my body. Navigating with the paddles, the whole boat moved, but it really felt as if the turning of my hips was moving it. Returning back onboard of the ship, I stumbled into a sudden but brief motion sickness.

¹¹ I have first heard found words for the sensation of unattainability through the phrase “Man kann sich selber nicht erlangen.” (One cannot attain oneself.—translated from German) in the song *Schatten werfen keine Schatten* (*Shadows do not cast shadows*—translated from German) by the German band Tocotronic from their eponymous 2002 album.

In landscapes and human perception, I find that concepts of distance, repetition, and what exists/happens in parallel play an important role. Distance holds the discomfort of not knowing and not being able to attain something or someone (like oneself¹¹). Repetition can project a feeling of coherence and reassurance onto the world, for better or worse. And observing what exists/happens in parallel makes us encounter our immersion in our own urgencies and modes of being while everything and everyone is confronting their own alongside us in their own unique ways.

Reading N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy* (2018) made me realise how much can be lurking behind the surface of the way a narrative is told. A heap of lived suffering and joy, pain and happiness, history and meaning-making, is woven into a fictional story. The readers, as an art audience, need to open and educate themselves to see the variety of connections to real world struggles, and everyone will perceive it differently. Discovering the world, its workings and internal entanglements alongside the progression of a story to me is one of the most rewarding gifts for an audience, and for me in my own research and making.

Recently, I read a text by the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall titled *About Making Landscapes* (1995) wherein he describes that he makes “landscapes, or cityscapes as the case



Drawing in process (November 2025): pastel pencil on A4 drawing paper, inspired by photographs taken of the Parnidis Dune on the Curonian Spit (LT), a snowy mountain at the Hardangerfjord (NO), the coastal landscape around The Hague (NL), my research into water towers, and the developments within the writing.

may be, to study the process of settlement as well as to [...] recognize the other kinds of picture with which it [a ‘landscape’] has necessary connections, or the other genres that a landscape might conceal within itself.” I was struck by the thought of how an image of a landscape can conceal something as large and complex as a storyline. I spend a good amount of time on field trips photographing. Sometimes I make a book, but more often I see the images as conceptual markers of what I researched and noticed. Experimenting with combining different elements of the photographs in drawings helps me imagine the world of my speculative story.

One key concept that drove my practice in the past years is resonance, described by the German sociologist and political scientist Hartmut Rosa as the readiness to relate to the world in a mutual encounter (2018). It requires an openness “of wanting to be affected and answering” (40) to the calling of an Other, and a readiness to be changed by this experience (25). These are moments in which we cannot avoid acknowledging that encountering is a two-way street, that the world eludes itself from an instrumentalised view and only opens itself to us when we are ready to be changed by what we encounter. Researching resonance made me understand my relations with others and the world better, but trying to somewhat capture it in essayistic works was working against what resonance is.

*What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.*¹²

— Werner Heisenberg (1958)

¹² Quote from Werner Heisenberg, which caught my attention while watching *Twin Peaks*. Season 2, Episode 20: *The Path to the Black Lodge*, 00:30:18, spoken by Annie and Cooper in the RR Diner; the quote made me so excited that I bought the book it is taken from: *Physics and Philosophy* (1958) by Werner Heisenberg. I will read it after I have finished *The Order of Time* (2017) by Carlo Rovelli, which I hope will help me understand physics with a bit more ease.

At one point or another, any (artistic) process asks for a leap: plunging into an exploration without knowing if anything will come out of it. I'm realising now that in the past years I have been too scared to leap into open-ended making. I had filled my time with conceptualising, collaborations, and other responsibilities that made any decision to spend extensive time on exploring something specific feel too risky. Still, I continued reading and performing field-research during residencies and in my immediate surroundings. I was clearly drawn toward exploring abstract elements: *the gap, the in-between, the fold, intangibility*. They are elements of the ways in which beings approach each other and their environment, but without a world or universe to situate them in, wherein things can relate to one another, they cannot materialise.

It's very satisfying to me, how all the experiences, collected materials, and conversations from field-research and residencies are now forming the speculative world step by step. No matter if this process leads me to make a book, film, installation, or perhaps something I have never thought of making.¹³

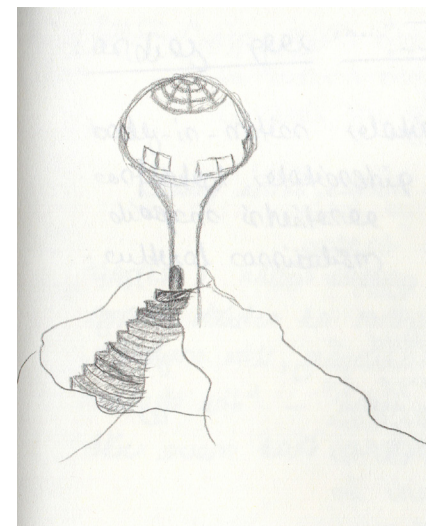
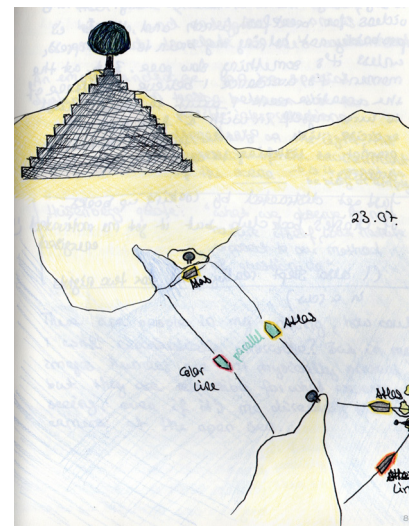
¹³ *The translation of the work: the body of work in the process of becoming and finding its presentation form and context.*—rephrased and translated from: *Proces is een Octopus*, ibid.

Discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation.

— Octavia E. Butler (2019, 74)

Writing this essay has been a process in itself. As in making, I needed to strip away the conceptual layers and embrace not knowing. I wanted to land at an openness, wherein I can give space to my process' meandering paths, questions, and struggles. It was very joyful, full of discoveries and realisations. I found that I can give in to letting the process lead my artistic practice and different forms of writing, while critically reflecting on its outcomes.¹⁴ Essayistic writing is in fact still helpful to think through what I'm doing, what I encounter, research, and read, as long as I explore rather than analyse. I would like essays to have their own role in my process. One where they are not expected to lead to artworks, but to find depth. Because really, the speculative worlds and stories that I make are what brings my practice to life. They need to be cultivated and cherished exactly for their open-endedness, so that I can develop works that can speak truth to reality.

¹⁴ *The moment of reflection is a resting point, to contemplate in-between steps and come up with new thoughts and directions. This can help make choices regarding the process or a work in becoming. This moment is a chance to share the process intimately or publicly with others at an unfinished stage of creation. It is a vulnerable moment, the work might look like it makes sense to share it with others, but for the artist this can be a complex experience.*—rephrased and translated from: *Proces is een Octopus*, ibid.



Process drawings from my notebook, reflecting on the pyramid and globe structures around the coasts of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway (July 2025)

*Lina's maps, that I had been ridiculing the last weeks,
actually come in handy, showing a pattern of
hills and lower lands. Lina was studying them when we
heard a loud rumble. The dogs ran around barking wildly.*

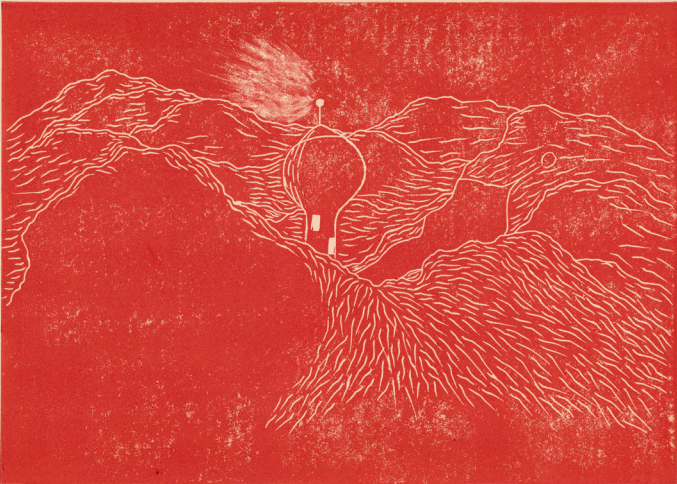
*"Keeping the danger away from us, well done!" I told them
while looking out of the window. Part of the hill that the outlier
is constructed on had collapsed. Only now, Lina looked up from
the maps and asked me: "What are you seeing?"*

*"The sand around the outlier, it ... has moved," I stated.
She looked triumphant all of a sudden.
"And the building has not moved at all!" she said.
"Let's go outside to see if I'm right!"*

*I followed her quietly, leaving the dogs in the corner they
had declared safe. It was strange what we saw when stepping
out onto the ledge in front of the outlier's entrance. There were
more ledges, a bit more narrow, zigzagging downwards and fitting
the length of a foot perfectly. Lina looked at me wide-eyed
and ecstatic, slowly but surely taking steps downwards.
My head was spinning and I had to sit down. The sheer height of this
construction made me dizzy. I could run down steep hills without
any trouble, but this ... I didn't know what to do.*

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Watch Station: The Outlier (2026), linocut on colored inkjet printing paper, A4