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# Slow research in residence: Listening to alterlife

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## Introduction

In July 2025, the Eco-Feminist Art-Science (EFAS) Collective gathered in Schalkwijk, the Netherlands, for our first residency. We are five early-career researchers working across the arts, humanities, and social sciences, drawn together by a shared interest in interdisciplinary practice, feminist STS, and environmental justice. During our three-day residency, we walked, kayaked, mapped our own bodies, painted, photographed, and experimented with sound, slowing down to sense how forms of environmental contamination move through bodies and landscapes. The residency became a space for testing creative and embodied methods, reflecting on curation, and arts of listening. In this report, we share our reflections on mapping as both method and metaphor, and on how such slower-paced gatherings can catalyse ethical, imaginative, and collaborative approaches to research on environmental justice.

# 1. Orienting ourselves

When we arrived in the Dutch village of Schalkwijk, our initial intention was not to start "producing" but to orient and cultivate "arts of noticing" (Tsing 2015, 37). We walked the narrow paths between houses and fields, kayaked along the *sloten* (waterways between fields), paused to listen to the wind in the trees, and the calls of insects and birds. We observed horses in the morning mist, geese and coots on the water, and dragonflies hovering above lily pads.

These activities were not recreational breaks but deliberate acts of attunement, helping us notice both the vitality of more-than-human life and the subtler signs of disturbance as a context for our creative workshops and discussions. Ecofeminism gave us a shared heuristic for these collective inquiries: as Catherine Taft writes, ecofeminism is multiplicitous, it is "a philosophy, a sensibility, a stance, and most importantly, a map for survival" (2025, 45).

## 2. Mapping pollution through creative practice

From the outset, arts-based research was central to our process. Painting, sketching, photography, and sound became ways to synthesise ideas, express unresolved feelings, and create space for reflection. Working with these media allowed us to layer personal experience with theoretical questions, building upon – and sometimes unsettling – prior knowledge. Sofia Greaves' painting of a scene in Schalkwijk captures this sentiment. Greaves writes:

> It is painted over a previous painting, the texture of which you can see coming through, and I suppose that somehow represents the knowledge I gained on this residency which is stratified. Meeting with new colleagues and creating this river between us and our research, lots of currents were brought together and were at times turbulent in my mind.


**Figure 1.** Painting to reflect during the residency. Sofia Greaves.

Sound emerged as an especially generative mode. We speculated about treating objects as instruments in an endeavour to sonify or listen to industrial chemicals and forms of environmental contamination such as radiation: listening to the texture of raincoats, imagining the industrial rhythms of production lines, and even humming to vibrate the microplastics and synthetic chemicals in our bodies.

Inspired by acoustic practices of listening to more-than-human bodies, we explored how place-based sounding might reveal the ever-present nature of pollution. Pollution, by definition, is already in place; listening deeply to a site's soundscape can therefore become a way of perceiving its environmental histories. We asked, how could we map pollution through sound? Could binaural recording capture the affective qualities of a polluted landscape? What is the semiotics of converting pollution's sensory data into colour and tone?

These questions led us to imagine workshop and exhibition formats that merge sound and image, inviting audiences to listen as well as look, and to experience environmental data through composition and call-and-response forms, including narrative and protest songs. Here, we found resonance with Ashon Crawley's work on breath as resistance (2016) and with traditions of singing communities that hold space for resilience and repair.

We also talked about the politics of curation, drawing in particular on Hannah Rogers' framework of curation as knowledge creation in STS contexts (2025). If our work were to be exhibited, who would the audience be? Would the format be accessible and meaningful to the communities most affected by pollution? How might we balance intelligibility to power with the need to remain critical of it?

This conversation linked naturally to the idea of the community archive: how oral histories might be materialised in forms that communities control, and how the act of archiving itself reflects the historical consciousness of its moment. We recognised that archiving is not only about preserving the past but about shaping the present, offering tools for sense-making and solidarity in situations where industrial pollutants, legacies of contamination, ecological changes, and social transformations intersect.

# 3. The body as a site of knowledge

One of our most significant shared experiments was body mapping (Figure 2). We sketched outlines of our own bodies and charted within them the flows, exposures, and sensations connected to environmental contamination. This participatory method, typically used in activist and community contexts (e.g., Luckett and Bagelmann 2023), helped us explore how pollution is not just an external hazard but an embodied experience.

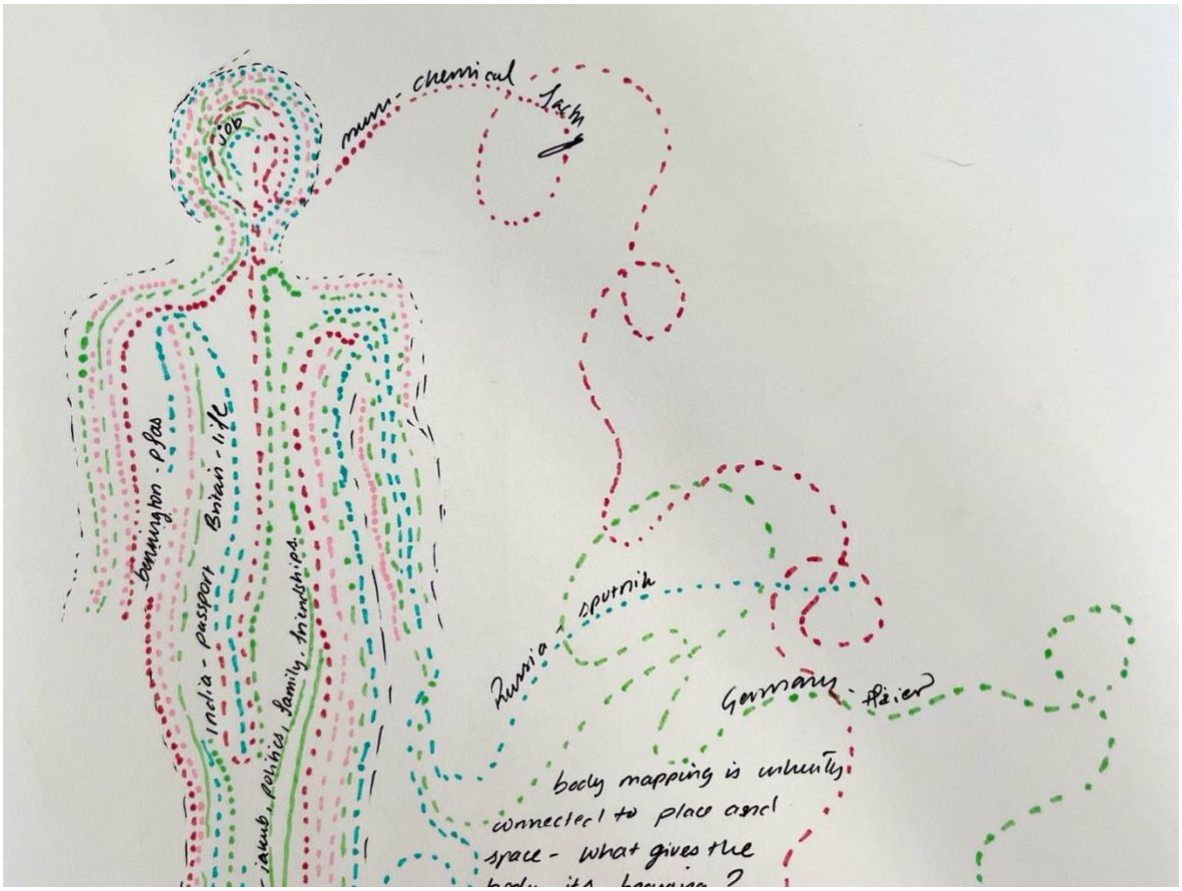


**Figure 2.** Experimenting with borderless body mapping.

Tabitha Hrynick realised after the residency that her research on reparations for nuclear testing has created its own "map" which is constantly "unfurling" through her nervous system. She writes that the map is "stimulated not just by words read on pages or heard from the lips of others directly affected, but by aspects of multi-sensory encounters with landscapes, objects and sounds that carry traces of nuclear histories and foretellings of radioactive futures."

We soon found ourselves asking: where do we draw the line between the body and its surroundings? How do we represent substances that cross those boundaries: hormones, pollutants, grief, breath? For some of us, this exercise underscored the impossibility of neat demarcations between personal health, environmental systems, and political structures. The silhouettes spilled beyond the body's edges to include rivers, gusts of wind, or even imagined creatures.

This work was also a lesson in vulnerability and trust. Drawing our bodies required us to acknowledge how individual health stories connect with shared ecological conditions, and how representation, visual or otherwise, carries ethical weight. We discussed how such methods might work with communities affected by pollution, and what care would be needed to ensure they could choose what to reveal, conceal, or reinterpret.

# 4. Memory, storytelling, and environmental harm

Our reflections also turned to how pollution permeates language, memory, and family stories. Christianne Blijleven shared her experiences of growing up in a town that was later revealed to be contaminated. Blijleven described how the news that Chemours (DuPont) had polluted air, soil, and water for decades was met in her family with a variety of responses, including dark humour: jokes about mutant rats or glowing-tailed catfish. GenX, the replacement for PFOA, sounded more like a science fiction villain than a purportedly safer chemical.

We connected these stories to our earlier discussions of archives. Artistic methods, we realised, could serve as "anarchival" practices, suggested Shachi Mokashi, allowing space for speculation, uncertainty, and contradiction. Rather than aiming for definitive closure, we might focus on creating records that invite future reinterpretation, making it possible for new meanings and solidarities to emerge. And yet, as Mokashi ventures, "If we agree to be imprecise, who can we trust with the task of constructing approximations and ambiguities that can propel action?"

# 5. Redefining the local, living in alterlife

Throughout the residency, we questioned what "local" means as a sphere of study and intervention, given that pollutants and radioactive materials leak through air currents, water systems, and global supply chains. How might we still speak of "local" in a way that honours the particularities of place and the possibilities to intervene, while recognising connections to distant causes and consequences? Of course, the answer varies according to our unique research contexts.

In our group discussions, we continuously circled back to concepts from anticolonial and feminist scholarship in STS; these bodies of literature helped us with redefining notions of ecological change, and care. For example, as Michelle Murphy describes, we are living in "alterlife" meaning that life itself is transformed by ongoing chemical entanglements (2017). Nature, in this view, is not a pristine realm separate from humans but something long shaped by political, technological, and chemical systems, with uneven distributions of harm across multiple scales.

Acknowledging this does not mean resignation. Rather, it pushes us to be precise about where we intervene, whose knowledge we value, and how we connect personal experience with broader collective struggles. Indeed, Murphy claims that the conceptualisation of alterlife calls for "alter-concepts of care and responsibility [...] calling forth alter-modes of collaboration and study that simultaneously aim at world-building and dismantlement" (2017).

**Figure 3.** Walking and listening session. Schalkwijk, July 2025.

## 6. The residency as a space of trust and experimentation

The residency created a bubble of trust and space to experiment. Academic life often fragments our attention into individualised tasks, but here we could work in a slower, more generative mode. Context was important: to step outside the physical institution and sense our bodies in a multispecies landscape (Figure 3). Birdsong accompanied our conversations; flies, rabbits, alpacas, and sheep were companion species (Haraway 2003). Listening together to the surrounding soundscape attuned us to subtleties we might otherwise overlook: the hum of distant traffic, the echo of wind along canals, the low murmur of livestock.

These rhythms helped quiet the “voices” of deadlines and administrative demands. At the same time, we acknowledged the difficulty of sustaining this way of working once back in our everyday environments. In our closing conversations, we wondered, how can we integrate more sustainable, generative, and collective practices into academic life, rather than reserving them for rare retreats?

# 7 What next?

We left Schalkwijk without definitive conclusions but with a sharpened sense of what such residencies can make possible. They are catalysts: spaces for building relationships, testing methods, and reimagining how research might unfold when care, creativity, and criticality are equally valued. Our next steps include exploring future residencies, developing community archives, and experimenting with formats – whether exhibitions, digital platforms, or local interventions – that keep our practices accountable to their intended communities and contexts.

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**Christianne Blijleven** is a museologist with an interdisciplinary background in the humanities and a specialisation in science museums. She has a particular interest in generative curatorial approaches for science museums, drawing from art-science practice to experimental media archaeology.

**Shachi Mokashi** is an anthropologist whose doctoral research focuses on environmental pollution and remediation. In her fieldwork, she traces people's efforts in making sense of PFAS contamination in the Netherlands.

**Sofia Greaves** is an arts-based researcher and historian whose research explores the roles that artists play within knowledge production processes in the context of urban planning and environmental policymaking.

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