

Feet in the clay head in the clouds

Activating the commons through ceramic making and story sharing



Femke van Heijningen



Clay

how to work it

GET
THE
AIR
OUT



S H A P E

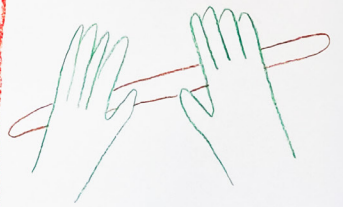
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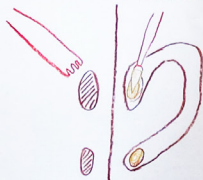
ROLL



SLIB

=

GLUE



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Front cover art by Rita Leitaó

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 the goose.

— Anonymous, 1821

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Prologue

There is this Dutch expression: uit de klei getrokken (pulled from the clay). It describes someone of humble, rural origins, someone who works the land and knows it through their hands.

During this research process I became aware of being pulled from the clay myself. While making ceramics with wild clay, I noticed how natural it felt to put my hands in the soil. I grew up that way! My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were greenhouse farmers in the Westland region. For generations, my family lived from the land. They learned to read the soil, to anticipate the weather, and to make a living from what could be grown.

My second cousin Ria Verbeek (2018, p. 19) wrote a book about our family history. Through her stories I learned more about the lives of my grandparents and great-grandparents. For my grandfather and great-grandfather, there was little choice in what they would become. You became a farmer, a priest or at most a teacher . They became farmers.

Farming was hard work, but it was also a way of life. The farm provided not only income but also food, security, and a degree of self-sufficiency. Yet farming depended on forces beyond human control: changing temperatures, rain and drought, the rhythm of the seasons, and the quality of the soil itself. The greenhouse became a way of negotiating with those uncertainties. By creating a more stable climate, my family could cultivate crops despite the unpredictability of the world

outside. The knowledge required to do this was passed from one generation to the next.

The women in my family inherited a different kind of labour. My great-grandmother, Cato, had even fewer choices available to her. As a Catholic woman, she was expected to bear as many children as possible. She gave birth to eighteen children, ten of whom survived into adulthood. The physical toll was immense. “Between 1915 and 1935 she is continuously pregnant or has just given birth or is breastfeeding a baby”. This meant that for years she was largely confined to the house and rarely left *de werft*—the family farmstead, where living and working were inseparable. She had even built herself a small altar in the house so that, as deeply religious as she is, she did not have to leave the house to pray. (Verbeek, 2018, p. 28-29).

Yet her labour did not end there. Alongside caring for her children and household, she worked in the greenhouse whenever needed. This was also the life of her daughters, including my grandmother. The women in my family worked constantly, but much of their labour remained unnamed. It was simply what was done: the invisible work that made everything else possible. It allowed the crops to be grown, the farm to function, and the family to continue.

Because of the struggles and achievements of feminist movements, my parents' generation inherited more possibilities. My mother was the first mother in generations to hold a job beyond *de werft*. My father eventually sold the family greenhouse and changed professions. Both still work within the agricultural sector, at the flower auction, but they stepped beyond the boundaries that had shaped the lives of those before them. One might say they broke the glass ceiling or perhaps the glass roof of the greenhouse.

Although the stories I inherited are filled with love, they are also filled with accounts of confinement. My grandmother and great-grandmother cared deeply for their families, but they also spoke of feeling trapped within the boundaries of the farm. I have often thought about how fortunate I am not to share the same fate.

Growing up, I felt a strong desire to leave the Westland. Greenhouse horticulture defines the landscape there, but I dreamed of working in the cultural field and becoming an artist. I dreamed of building a future outside of the place where I was born.

And yet, I carry the westland with me. Growing up among farmers taught me to pay attention to what is already present. To look around and notice available resources. To understand that value often lies beneath the surface. To not be afraid of getting my hands dirty, digging something up, and working with it.

Today, I find myself with my hands in the clay and my head in the clouds. I daydream about the places we inhabit and the stories they hold. I reflect on what was, what is, and what might still become. I wonder what we can learn from past relationships to the soil. I wonder how we might live in greater reciprocity with our surroundings. And I wonder what might happen if we began to share the land again, as people once did through *the Commons*.

Introduction

I see myself as a maker. Making is at the centre of my artistic practice, and education has always been part of it. As a ceramist, artist, and educator, I move between the atelier, workshops, schools, museums, neighbourhood centres, and public festivals. Across these contexts, I work with material research, participatory making, and questions around art, society, and living together.

Clay is my favourite material to work with. It remembers touch, holds traces of previous forms, and resists being rushed. It can collapse, crack, or refuse what I ask of it. Yet, with care and attention, it can be transformed into countless forms. Through clay, I try to give shape to the world around me. And that world is full of stories.

The desire to receive and share stories has always felt natural to me. I am curious about the world, and stories have always been one of my favourite ways of learning. Whether read, heard, or exchanged in conversation, stories help me make sense of places, people, and experiences. In my artistic practice, story sharing often emerges alongside making. Some of the most meaningful conversations happen when hands are occupied, when attention is shared between material and dialogue.

I ask: How can an artistic practice focused on ceramic making and story sharing foster shared reflection and speculation about our living environments?

To explore this question, I follow the process of working with wild clay. Wild clay is clay that has not been

bought, but is found in the landscape. It must be searched for, dug up, filtered, shaped, dried, fired, and finally shared. In this thesis, these stages become both material process and research method.

Through this method, I frame my work through the idea of the Common: the natural, cultural, and social resources that communities share and collectively care for, such as water, soil, air, knowledge, culture, and relationships. The Commons is sustained through participation and mutual responsibility, through ongoing acts of care rather than single gestures of ownership. Throughout this research, I became interested in whether collective making might function in a similar way: as a practice through which shared knowledge, stories, and relationships are gathered, cared for, and passed on.

Inspired by Paulo Freire's concept of dialogical pedagogy and Robin Wall Kimmerer's writing on stories as forms of orientation, I approach learning as something that emerges through dialogue, reflection, lived experience, and relation to the more-than-human world. By presenting this research through interconnected stories, I invite the reader into that process as an active recipient of someone finding ground alongside me.

Structure

The thesis is organised around the process of making ceramics from wild clay. Each chapter follows a material stage in the transformation of clay and connects it to a stage in the development of my artistic practice.

Finding Ground introduces the conditions from which the research began: my position as a freelance artist, experiences of precarity and disconnection, and the desire to become more rooted in the places where I work.

Digging moves into the theoretical ground of the research. It introduces the Commons, enclosure, and the moment I began literally digging for wild clay as a way of thinking through shared resources and shared knowledge.

Filtering develops the method. Drawing on Paulo Freire and Robin Wall Kimmerer, it explores dialogue, commoning, and more-than-human relationships as foundations for the practical projects.

Shaping focuses on the two practical research projects: Rats Looking to Nestle at Kunstenfestival Borkel en Schaft, and the ceramic workshop series at Dokhuis in Oud-Charlois.

Drying allows stories from my own living environment to settle, reflecting on attention, memory, and local relationships.

Firing looks at what remained after the workshops: continued relationships, broken objects, and the question of what forms of continuity became possible.

Feasting concludes the thesis by returning to the research question and reflecting on ceramic making and story sharing as practices for activating the commons.

Finding Ground



Before clay can be gathered, you need to know where to look. You walk the landscape, paying attention to cracks in the earth, traces of water, and signs of what lies beneath the surface. Finding ground is learning to recognise a place and what might be found there.

Farmers often remain rooted in one place. Their relationship to the land develops over years and generations. As an artist, my experiences were different. After I left the Westland region, I experienced much instability within my living environment. I frequently had to move. Not just between houses, but also between workplaces. The housing crisis made it difficult to settle for a longer period. And working as an artist and art educator in the cultural sector often meant moving between projects, institutions and temporary opportunities.

Above all, dwelling in these different places I found it important to connect with my new surroundings. Getting to know the people, plants, animals and trees around me. These encounters often found their way into my work. The places where I lived became sources of stories, materials, and inspiration. The frequent changes to new locations made it hard to connect with them.

It is often said that in contemporary life, we have become increasingly disconnected from our natural surroundings. But this process has been underway for a long time. Since the growth of capitalism in the late Middle Ages,

communities have increasingly lost accessibility to natural resources. Karl Marx describes the process of dispossessing people of their land and means of production, as a process of *primitive accumulation*. As access to land became restricted, relationships of care and reciprocity became less visible in everyday life. (Marx, 1887/1867). I recognise this feeling of disconnection in my own practice. A recurring search for ways to become rooted in places that stay temporary and out of reach.

After graduating from the Fine Art programme at St. Joost, like many artists, I pieced together an income through a combination of side jobs, projects, workshops, teaching, commissions and freelancing. Freelancing offers a certain kind of freedom. It allows me to pursue questions that genuinely interest me and I can shape projects around the communities and surroundings where they take place. At the same time, that freedom comes with precarity. Many projects depend on grants, temporary funding, or institutional support. A project may receive enthusiastic support one year and may disappear the next.

Over time, I learned that this uncertainty is not simply a personal challenge but part of the conditions under which many cultural workers operate. The cultural sector can be a place of remarkable generosity, creativity, and collaboration. It is also a place where belonging often remains temporary.

The philosopher Antonio Negri (2018, p.106) describes cultural institutions as arenas. They are a space of “a fight for the truth, of critique of ideology and production, places where the discourse of power is exposed, but they are always also a marketplace.” I recognize this tension of it being a space of different interests. Some of the most meaningful work and relationships in my practice emerge through institutions. Yet I

rarely feel fully rooted within them. As a freelancer, I am often just passing through.

Quickly after graduating I joined Art Collective YAFF. A collective that creates participatory artworks and workshops around questions of art, society, and about living together. Working within collective collaboration was an important step for me in not having to deal with this complex 'arena' alone.

The members of YAFF had all studied at St. Joost. Some were already working in the field for a few years. They had gained knowledge and experience with writing grant applications, organising projects and navigating the cultural field. When I had just graduated, this knowledge felt invaluable and I am very grateful to them for welcoming me into the group.

One of my first opportunities of working with ceramics came through a project in Breda in 2022. YAFF-member Floor Snels and former YAFF-member Eef Schoolmeesters were already involved in a collaboration and invited me to participate. With their help we developed a series of ceramic workshops in a community centre. The project was made possible through municipal funding, allowing residents to participate free of charge.

Over three workshops, participants created a collection of ceramic mugs. During the first session we shaped them. During the second we glazed them. During the third we celebrated together by using the finished objects. The atmosphere was warm and enthusiastic. People shared stories while working with their hands. New connections emerged around the table. The workshops felt successful.



Workshop in Breda photographed by Eef Schoolmeesters

At the end of the project, I asked participants whether they would be willing to leave one mug behind in the community centre. The idea was simple. Instead of taking every object home, a small collection of mugs would remain in the building. Participants could return later, drink from them, and encounter one another again. The mugs would act as a physical reminder of the relationships formed during the workshops.

At the time, I thought this was a way of creating community. Looking back, I realise the community I imagined depended on something that I did not have. The mugs stayed in Breda. I did not.

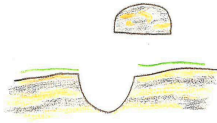
When the workshops ended, and I returned back home to Rotterdam, I felt that I was not embedded in their neighbourhood. I would not come across any participant in the supermarket or in the street. I could not observe whether the mugs continued to be used or whether new stories were formed around them. The project had created a moment of connection. Whether the continuity of this connection was ensured was however beyond my control.



The mugs on display in the community center

This experience stayed with me. It made me realise that the proximity of a project matters. I became aware of my position as a visitor. How can I connect with the living environment if I myself am not connected to this living environment?

Digging



Digging is an act of searching beneath the surface. Layers of soil, roots, stones, and sediment reveal traces of what has come before. Some layers are useful, others are not, but all contribute to understanding the material that lies below.

When I began this research, I was looking for ways to create more connection within my artistic practice. I wanted to understand why some projects seemed to create lasting relationships while others disappeared as soon as the funding ended. I was searching for forms of collective ownership that could survive beyond the duration of a workshop or exhibition.

At the time, I did not yet have the language for what I was looking for. That language arrived during a meeting with YAFF.

One of the members of the collective, Dagmar Marent, introduced us to the concept of the Commons. Dagmar's family has lived in the Austrian mountain village of Braz for generations. She introduced us to the Allmein-Wiese (common land), known in local dialect as Alma. This land consists of meadows, forests, and water springs. These commons are not owned by a single person, but by the people of Braz. They use these lands collectively for farming. Landslides are common in that area, and the common lands ensure that there is always enough land for the cows to graze on. It is a practice that is rooted in the necessity of survival for the inhabitants. The local community manages these lands by adding fencing, creating safe walkpaths and adding benches to enjoy the view. Dagmar

taught us that the commons located where her family lives have been protected by law since the Middle Ages.

Silvia Federici (2014) gives a theoretical grounding for the experience Dagmar shared. Federici describes how for centuries, many European communities depended on common lands. People grazed animals, collected firewood, gathered food, and cultivated shared resources. These commons were essential for everyday life, and especially to the economic autonomy of women who relied on collective access to land for the work of providing that fell to them.



Floor made these visual slides picturing a landscape



that slowly gets enclosed

Yet many of them gradually disappeared through a process known as *enclosure*. The gradual disappearance of these commons through enclosure was not simply a redrawing of property lines. Over time, it was enclosed by the nobility

through hedges, fences, and eventually legislation. People who had depended on the commons were forced into cities and wage labour. What was lost was not only land but community ties, ecological knowledge, and autonomy over everyday life.

Reading this history, I was struck by how familiar it felt. The enclosure of land may belong to the past, but the enclosure of collective life continues in new forms. Spaces emerge, communities gather, relationships develop, and then the conditions that made them possible disappear. I thought about the projects that ended when funding stopped. As for instance at Boijmans Zuid:

In 2024, I worked as an art teacher at Kunstwerkplaats Boijmans Zuid located in Hillesluis. For almost a year I facilitated workshops with local residents. Children and their parents returned week after week. Over time, relationships developed. Familiar faces became part of my weekly routine. For the first time in my practice, I found a place resembling continuity. Then the museum's board decided to close the location.

My colleagues and I, mostly freelancers, were asked to communicate this decision to participants. Children wanted to know why we could not remain open. Parents expressed frustration and disappointment. I shared those feelings. Yet I had no influence over the decision. Something that had been collectively built had just... disappeared.

The closure made me realise how fragile these spaces can be when they depend entirely on institutional structures. We had created relationships, routines, skills, and forms of care together, but none of these belonged to the people who used them. The commons had never truly been ours.

Later, while reading philosophers Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2019, p. 123), I encountered their argument that enclosure is not merely a historical event. It remains an ongoing process within contemporary capitalism which they call “The New Global Enclosures”. Resources, spaces, and forms of collective life are continuously enclosed, privatised, or made dependent on external systems of control .

Yet political economist Elinor Ostrom (1990, chs. 3–6) demonstrates that communities have developed countless ways of collectively managing shared resources, from forests and fisheries to irrigation systems and grazing land. Contrary to the common assumption that shared resources inevitably lead to overuse, many communities have successfully governed commons for generations. Survival required cooperation.

What interested me most was not the management of resources itself, but the relationships required to sustain them. A commons is not simply a thing. It is a practice. It is something people do together.

The closure of Boijmans Zuid was not the same as the enclosure of common land. Yet it helped me understand the feeling of loss. A space of shared learning had been created, but it lacked the autonomy required for cooperation to sustain itself. This insight changed the direction of my research. Rather than asking how workshops could create connection, I began asking how connection might become rooted in place. At around the same time, I started digging for wild clay.

My first experience of extracting clay from the ground had felt liberating. Roeland Rooijakkers, an artist colleague who has experience in the practice, took me out digging. We stood outside with a shovel, collecting material directly from

the landscape. The clay had not been purchased from a supplier. It came from the earth beneath my feet.



Finding wild clay with Roeland

What stayed with me afterwards was not only the clay itself, but the fact that Roeland had shown me where and how to find it. He shared knowledge that had taken him time to build, knowledge that was his to keep if he wanted. Instead, he passed it on. That small act of showing someone where to dig felt like a form of commoning in itself. Not the land, but the knowledge of the land. I began to understand that commons are not only sustained by shared access to resources, but by a willingness to share what you know about finding them.

I began paying attention to exposed soil, construction sites, riverbanks, and places where clay revealed itself. Every location seemed to contain hidden resources waiting to be noticed. Digging became more than a way of collecting material. It became a way of learning, and a way of being shown.



Exposed clay

Historically, the enclosure of common land did not happen without resistance. The affected residents pushed back by digging up the fences that had been whipped up around what was once shared. The protest movement came up in the 1640s and called themselves the Diggers and Levellers (Lijster, 2022, p. 64). Their digging was an act of reclamation, a refusal to let the land, and the relationships it sustained, disappear behind a boundary.

My own digging was not a protest. But it carried something of the same spirit: a small, physical insistence that the ground still has something to offer, if you are willing to look, and if someone is willing to show you where. Cooperation, I began to realise, does not always announce itself. Sometimes

it looks like a shovel, a patch of disturbed earth, and someone saying: here, try this spot.

This chapter began with a question about connection. Through the commons, I found a way of thinking about connection not as something created by a single project, but as something maintained through ongoing collective care. Through digging and through being shown how to dig, I discovered that places carry resources that are often invisible until someone takes the time to look, and that knowledge of those resources only stays alive when it is passed on.

The deeper I dug, the more I realised that the answers I was searching for were not waiting to be invented. They were already present in the ground beneath my feet, and in the people willing to help me find it.

Filtering



The soil contains stones, roots, sand, and other traces of the place from which it came. To filter the clay, water is added and the mixture is stirred. Slowly the material separates. Heavy particles sink. Twigs float to the surface. The clay remains suspended in the water between them. This is poured off.

This chapter is about the thinking that shaped how I approach the practical projects: the pedagogy behind the workshops, and the method I used to move from an idea to something that could actually take place.

Dialogical pedagogy

The pedagogy behind this research is shaped by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Freire (1970, p. 71) criticises what he calls "banking education": a model in which the teacher holds knowledge and deposits it into students, who receive, memorise, and repeat it. The students are containers to be filled; the teacher decides what is poured in and what is left out. Against this, Freire proposes a dialogical, problem-posing education. One in which teacher and student both bring knowledge, both ask questions, and understanding is produced *between* them rather than transferred from one to the other. He calls this relationship "teacher-student" and "student-teachers": both roles are present at the same time .

Central to this is what Freire (1970, p. 115) calls *generative themes*. He argues that education cannot begin with content chosen in advance by the educator and handed down. It has to begin with themes that are already alive in people's own reality: their concerns, contradictions, hopes, and the limits they come up against in daily life. These themes are not isolated facts to be identified and ticked off. They form a kind of web, a "thematic universe", in which each theme connects to the others, and investigating one inevitably leads toward another .

Crucially, Freire (1970, p. 109) insists this investigation cannot be done *for* people, only *with* them. The educator does not arrive having already decided what the generative themes are and then design a programme around them. The themes have to be found through dialogue itself. Through *problem-posing*: presenting an aspect of people's lived reality back to them, not as a fact to be accepted, but as something to be looked at together, turned over, questioned. Through this, people move from seeing their situation as fixed and given, towards seeing it as something made, and therefore something that can be acted upon. Freire calls this shift *conscientização*, critical consciousness.

Beyond the human

Freire's dialogue is a dialogue between people. The "world" that teacher-students and student-teachers come together to read, question, and transform is, in his writing, a social and historical world: made by humans, shared by humans, and changed through human praxis. The generative themes he describes emerge from people's lived reality, but that reality is framed almost entirely in terms of human relationships: between oppressor and oppressed, between

people and the social structures they live within. What I want to add to this, what I think is missing, is the ground itself.

Education, in a way, always takes place in a specific location. It emerges in the relationships between beings and places: human to human, but also human to more-than-human (to material, to organism, to place) and more-than-human to more-than-human. The environment is not simply the backdrop against which dialogue happens. It is in itself a relational space, one in which learning emerges through many kinds of interaction, not only the human ones.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) offers a way of thinking about what it might look like to take this seriously. Writing from her position as both a botanist and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer describes plants and animals as our oldest teachers. Beings who offer us gifts and lessons, if only we have not forgotten how to listen. She has also written about the opposite experience: studying botany in a scientific tradition that reduced plants to objects of study, stripped of the relationships that might let them teach at all. That, too, is a kind of banking education. One in which the more-than-human world is not a participant in learning, but the raw material for it.

If Freire asks us to read the world in order to transform it, I would like to question: who, and what, gets to be part of that "world" when we read it together? This is the problem I am posing: in our thinking about dialogue we forget to include the more-than-human. We treat soil, water, plants, and animals as the *site* of learning, but rarely as participants in it. Kimmerer would put it more simply: we have forgotten how to hear their voices.

By looking at art education through the lens of the environment, I hope to open up pedagogical possibilities tailored to specific geographical locations. By sharing methods of collecting and making with clay. With the environment in hand and in mind, I hope to inspire other educators and makers. With the question how we can use our surroundings within our practice in a way that gives back to it. Not only learning *about* the world, but learning *with* it.

A method for approaching a project

To give this method a more concrete form, I linked the practice of commoning to the practice of working with wild clay. The thesis of Constança Saraiva (2025, p. 34), an alumna of MEiA, inspired me to work out the structure of my own thesis. Saraiva had used the physical structure of a book (its glue, spine and title) to work through the different exercises of collective making that could help maintain connections between people. Her approach shows how the structure of a familiar object becomes a structure for thinking about processes. I worked in a similar way, with the structure of making ceramics from wild clay in mind.

The table below breaks the ceramic process into stages, and maps each stage into a parallel stage in commoning, and into a parallel stage in how I approached each project in practice.

This table is not a recipe to be followed in order. As with the clay itself, each stage depends on the one before it, but the process is not linear. You can return to digging after you've started shaping, or find that filtering never quite finishes. What the table gave me was a way of asking, at each stage of a project: what would the equivalent of *this* be, here?

Stage	Ceramic process	Commons process	Project Practice
Finding ground	Finding a spot for wild clay	Finding a place to relate to	Finding the location for a project
Digging	Digging up soil	Mapping the resources of that place	Collecting information about that location
Filtering	Extracting the clay from the soil	Relating to those resources	Shaping the project around local information
Shaping	Shaping the clay	Using those resources	Carrying out the project
Drying	Drying the clay	Waiting for things to settle	Practising patience
Firing	Firing the clay	Sustaining the resources	Analysing the project
Feasting	Celebrating finished object	Celebrating the commons	Celebrating the outcome

Shaping



Clay is pressed, stretched, folded, and formed through contact with many hands. The shape that emerges is neither entirely planned nor entirely accidental. It is a response to the material, the maker, and the conditions in which they meet.

In this chapter, I will highlight two practical research projects.

The first project was the participatory artwork *Rats Looking to Nestle*, held during the Kunstenfestival Borkel en Schaft in North Brabant in October 2025. Together with Floor Snels from the art collective YAFF, I set up a temporary laboratory under an apple tree during the four-day open-air biennial festival.

The second project took place at Dokhuis, a neighbourhood centre in Oud-Charlois, Rotterdam, where I organised a series of ceramic workshops between December 2025 and January 2026. Across five sessions, participants followed the complete process of making ceramic mugs from locally sourced wild clay. The digging of clay in the neighbourhood, filtering and preparing it, shaping and glazing the mugs, and finally sharing a meal using the finished objects.

I did not design them as a controlled experiment. Each one grew from the previous one, and each one taught me something I needed for the next.

Rats Looking to Nestle, Kunstenfestival Borkel en Schaft, October 2025

In October 2025, Floor Snels, my collaborative partner in YAFF, and I created a participatory artwork for the Kunstenfestival Borkel en Schaft: *Rats Looking to Nestle*. The Kunstenfestival is a four-day biennial art festival that takes place across the two North Brabant villages of Borkel and Schaft. Visitors were invited inside our 'laboratory' to become rats by making one out of clay and participate in the creation of a rat plague that spread across the festival. The project used the rat as a lens through which to speculate on our shared living environment and foster reflection on how humans live together with both human and more-than-human.

The temporary festival setting, characterised by brief and informal encounters, led us to a specific question: *How can meaningful speculative conversations be facilitated within temporary festival settings characterised by short participant encounters?*

Because of our earlier experience in facilitating temporary participatory artworks, we knew that location is substantive to the work. Where the workshop takes place determines what conversations are possible, what materials are available, what position the facilitator can honestly bring. For the Borkel en Schaft, Floor and I therefore wanted to be conscious of our position as visitors. We arrive temporarily, use the space, and then leave again. We played with this, with the role of being an outsider by thinking of ourselves as scientists doing fieldwork: arriving at a site for a limited time, participating and observing, and leaving traces. The festival

visitors were also temporary inhabitants. We needed the participatory artwork to reflect this temporary relationship to place.

The commons and the more-than-human

For this workshop it was important to us to talk about the more-than-human. This was an aspect of the commons that we had not done before. Drawing on Gerard Kuperus's (2023) chapter *Becoming Rats* in *Ecopolitics*, Floor and I chose the rat as our central figure. Kuperus proposes that "becoming" another species allows us to loosen the boundaries of human exceptionalism and rethink our position within shared environments. Inviting the participant to become a rat is not about imitation, but about stretching the limits of imagining human experience.

Rats are generally viewed negatively, associated with pests, disease, and uncontrollable reproduction. They move between city and nature, inside and outside, pest and co-resident. Because their identity is constantly shifting, rats are a liminal species, existing at the edges of social, spatial, and moral boundaries. Their presence is often unwelcome: feeding on waste, occupying margins, crossing boundaries humans prefer to maintain. But Floor and I wondered: are we as humans that different from rats?

Through the rat, we wanted to raise questions without pointing fingers. Who is allowed to inhabit space? Who decides how resources are used? How do we respond to dominant norms of order and ownership? By working with the rat as an ordinary and recognisable form, it becomes an entry point through which complex ideas about the commons can be approached playfully.

I see this choice through the critique raised in that Freire's dialogical pedagogy, for all its insistence on shared meaning-making, remains a conversation between humans. Becoming a rat was a small, playful attempt to widen that circle, not to give the rat a voice exactly, but to ask what happens when a human is invited to imagine themselves as something completely different. If generative themes are supposed to emerge from people's lived reality, the rat became a way of asking whether that reality could include more than human life: pests, vermin, the uninvited.



Floor and I working in our lab

Shaping The Laboratory Setup

The workshop was set on the border of the two villages, in the garden of the former mayor's residence. Floor and I set up what we called a 'laboratory', invoking scientific experimentation while maintaining a playful tone, we called ourselves lab rats.

The installation included:

- a self-made table with wobbly legs
- a microwave kiln for Raku firing rats on-site
- pre-made rats
- clay
- tools kept deliberately simple
- a bucket of water and a towel
- lab coats for Floor and me
- the setting itself: making rats under the apple tree.



Working in the lab

Participants sculpted clay rats, left them to dry, and in return chose a rat made earlier by another participant or by us. They could not take their own rat home because the fresh clay had to dry before it could be fired. When they chose another rat, they got to fire it on site using the microwave kiln and Raku technique. With the Raku technique the participant can still personalize the rat. It is a technique where the ceramic piece is decorated when it comes straight out of the microwave kiln. Using hair and feathers the participant can create unique patterns on the rat.



Decorating a rat with the Raku technique

Floor and I both worked in dual roles as facilitators and participants. While guiding the making process, we work alongside participants. This position allows us to share technical knowledge and also to experience the commons directly, from within the group rather than observing from outside. Also, the spread of rats across the festival extended the play beyond our workshop space. Participants became co-creators of a larger intervention, a rat plague that transformed the festival landscape.

Documentation

Documentation during the festival consisted mainly of photographs and mental notes shared between Floor and me. The rats themselves remained as material evidence carrying

traces of their makers. Because I had not initially planned to include this project in my research.



Rats drying on the microwave

Floor and I regularly exchanged brief verbal reflections during the festival, though these observations were not written down. To deal with this after the festival, Floor and I recorded an extended reflective conversation, which now functions as the primary documentation for this project. Having Floor as a partner to reflect with was helpful. During our conversation we both remember different things, causing things to surface for the other person. But I realise that this form of documentation limits my ability to demonstrate exact conversational patterns or quantify engagement that happened during the festival. This lack of concrete data clarified something important: reflection itself is a methodological tool within artistic research.

Findings

Participants' first reactions were very diverse. When they realised that they were allowed to make something, some

immediately got excited and rolled up their sleeves, some were a bit hesitant at first and wanted to look at how others did it before they took the step to participate, and others were just confused: *Is this art? I did not come for this...* And asked where they could see the art. Sometimes they wanted to know a bit more about the project before they decided that they wanted to participate in it. Visitors should feel comfortable participating, but how they become comfortable varies from person to person.



Participant shaping a rat

What worked well was the simplicity of the prompt: moulding rats and getting into conversation with visitors. Working with clay creates a particular state of concentration where hands are busy, attention is grounded, and shared conversation can flow. The moulding creates a contemplative state without face-to-face performance pressure. When participants reached this state of making, I would start conversations to dive deeper into the subject of becoming rats. This focus opened space for informal dialogue where participants revealed personal stories, opinions, and experiences that might not surface in more formal settings.

One example: a participant who had experienced a rat infestation in their home made a clay rat to process that trauma. She shared her story while forming the animal that had caused such distress in her home. A rat infestation so severe that their urine had stained her ceiling yellow. She was happy to leave the clay rat at our table, closing that chapter of her past. The clay rat became a container for the unwanted experience, something externalised and placed elsewhere.

Some visitors were initially taken aback by the metaphor, though we could persuade most of them to participate. However, not all encounters went smoothly. One visitor didn't want to touch the clay, and definitely didn't want to *become* a rat, showing defensiveness with a closed posture and crossed arms.

Her daughter, however, made a rat. We later realised that asking people to become rats can be a confrontational proposition. Floor noted that the woman's defensive territoriality was itself rat-like behaviour, but pointing this out would have violated the trust of the workshop space.

Floor pointed out how the laboratory's form itself functioned as speculation. A playful twist, moving beyond the lugubriousness of cutting into rats and beyond the precision of hard science that searches for established facts. By using the aesthetics of a lab but playfully filling it with everyday objects. Floor noted playfully, we were molding new realities under the apple tree (breaking with the Garden of Eden). Our Lab speculated about a more playful, open approach to getting to know the world around us, breaking with sterile scientific precision. And speculated about an interactive artistic practice, breaking with the traditional art-making contexts.



The table filling up with Rats

Reflection

The temporary nature of the festival was a condition that shaped the work from the beginning. Floor and I were temporary inhabitants of the festival site. The figure of the rat allowed us to play with this condition. Rats appear, occupy a space for a moment, leave traces, and move on. In a similar way, the workshop invited participants into brief encounters characterised by curiosity, surprise, and speculation. It created playful dialogue. Some participants embraced the invitation immediately. Others approached more cautiously, observing before participating. A few resisted entirely.

By asking participants to contribute to a rat colony rather than eradicate one, we disrupted familiar assumptions

about ownership, belonging, and human superiority. We were not asking people to learn about rats. We were asking them to imagine themselves differently. The participant who refused to touch the clay and firmly rejected the idea of becoming a rat revealed something important about the limits of speculative participation. To become a rat, even playfully, requires a temporary suspension of ingrained assumptions about what is desirable, respectable, or human.

The project sought to create small shifts in perspective. For some participants, this meant imagining a rat differently. For others, it meant sharing a story, questioning an assumption, or contributing to the growing rat plague that spread across the festival. The value of these encounters lay in their ability to briefly disrupt familiar ways of seeing and relating to the environment.

The clay rat became a material container through which an experience could be externalised, reflected upon and ultimately left behind. This aligns closely with Freire's idea of generative themes. The most meaningful conversations emerged from participants' own experiences when the conditions allowed them to surface.

Commoning emerged through the structure of the workshop. Participants left their rats behind and took rats made by others, contributing to a collective rat plague that spread across the festival. In this way, the artwork shifted attention away from individual ownership towards collective creation.



Documentation of the rat plague, spread over the festival

Finally, the project taught me the importance of documentation. Reflecting on the project afterwards with Floor made me realise that reflection itself is a methodological tool, but also that it benefits from more systematic documentation. This insight directly influenced the Dokhuis workshops that followed, where I introduced structured moments for documentation and reflection after every session.

Ceramic workshop Series, Dokhuis, December 2025 - January 2026

Dokhuis is a culture and community centre in Oud-Charlois with a focus on education and pedagogy. On the website Dokhuis writes: “Dokhuis takes responsibility for the local community. We are keen to forge lasting connections, prefer to work with people from our immediate neighbourhood, and are happy to provide space for local initiatives” (2026). This sparked my curiosity. Could I find others to *common* with here?

In September 2025, Dokhuis posted an open call: *Van idee naar buurt* (From idea to neighbourhood), inviting local residents to propose a community project. I applied to run a ceramic mug-making workshop and, in addition, the request to come and run workshops at Dokhuis in the longer run.

My proposal got selected, together with three other residents with a neighbourhood project. Vivian wanted to find a way to store and use trash that is often scattered around the street of our neighbourhood. Ako wanted to find others to make documentaries with. And Honza was researching ways to bring in public and local AI setups to Dokhuis.

Noemi, community builder at Dokhuis, helped us throughout the process. Throughout six months she helped the four of us bring our idea to the neighbourhood. Every few months we came together as a group with Noemi and we would update each other on how it was going, share our struggles and support one another.

We had our first meeting with Noemi, together with Inge Spaander, Program Manager at Dokhuis. they shared with us that it was their first time to organise the open call. They had been looking for ways to uplift their neighbours who had an idea for the neighbourhood.

In a meeting with Noemi one on one, she shared that they would love to see how I could play a role in helping with workshops in the longer term. But she proposed to first host the ceramic making workshop as a way to get to know each other. And so we did. Dokhuis would facilitate the location for all the workshop days and would guide in communication with the participants. I also invited Noemi to join the workshop as a participant.

These ceramic workshops were held between December 2025 and January 2026. Bringing participants through the complete process of making a ceramic mug. From digging wild clay in the neighbourhood to filtering, shaping, glazing and finally eating together from the finished mugs.

The workshop was advertised as follows:

"During this five-part ceramics course, we will make ceramic mugs and go through the entire process: from collecting clay in the neighbourhood to shaping, glazing, and finishing. We will conclude the series with a festive meal at the Dokhuis, where we will immediately put the mugs to use. During the course, we will explore the theme of The Commons – shared resources that we manage and care for together."

Like the workshop in Breda the participants were involved in almost the entire process of creating a ceramic object. This time adding the steps to work with wild clay. It would be my first time organising a workshop where

participants were involved in that process. Thinking through the practical steps was an important part of preparing for the workshop days.

Each session was two hours and corresponded to the next stage in the making process:

December 4th — Workshop day 1
Learning about the commons and finding, digging and filtering the clay.

December 11th — Workshop day 2
Filtering the clay and introducing clay modelling techniques

December 18th — Workshop day 3
modelling the clay into mugs and decorating with foraged clay

January 8th — Workshop day 4
Glazing the mugs and making a keepsake of the foraged clay

January 15th — Workshop day 5
presenting the finished mugs, using them for soup and reflecting on the workshop

The firing of the clay after shaping and glazing I had to do at home in my studio because there is no kiln at Dokhuis. Therefore the Christmas holidays provided a break in the workshop series, so the clay had enough time to dry and I could fire them in my kiln.

For the shaping of the mugs I wanted to use store bought stoneware clay, since the wild clay is less suitable for making dinnerware, and a bit more difficult to work with. The wild clay will be used to decorate the stoneware mugs.

Workshop Day 1 – Finding Ground and Digging

Purpose and Format

The workshop began indoors with introductions and a presentation on the commons. Introducing participants to each other and to Dokhuis, and also to the themes of the project. The aim was to introduce the concept of the commons, explore how materials can be sourced from the immediate environment.

After the introductions and presentation, we went outside to search for and collect clay from several locations in the neighbourhood. If time allowed, the session would conclude with an introduction to the clay-filtering process.

I was curious about how participants would respond to digging for clay. Until then, I had only undertaken this activity by myself or with other artists. I wanted to understand whether participants would feel comfortable engaging directly with the ground and whether the activity could encourage a different way of looking at their surroundings.

Preparation

- Presentation on the commons
- Selection of suitable clay-digging locations
- Preparation of the workshop space for clay filtering
- Collection of tools and safety equipment

Materials

- Buckets
- Gloves
- Hand scoops and small rakes
- Sieves
- Water source
- Additional buckets for filtering

Space set-up



Findings

Ten participants attended the second workshop session. The first workshop session began with introductions. Participants shared their names, backgrounds, and reasons for joining the project. Noemi told the group about Dokhuis, as most of the participants were there for the first time. Then I gave a presentation introducing the concepts of the commons and enclosure. Including examples of contemporary commons.

I introduced the idea that each participant would make two mugs: one to take home and one to leave behind at Dokhuis. The proposal was met with enthusiasm.

After the presentation, we went for a walk through the neighbourhood in search of clay deposits. This proved to be the most engaging part of the day. Participants moved through streets and green spaces with a different purpose than usual, paying close attention to the ground and discovering where clay can be found. The neighbourhood temporarily became something to investigate rather than simply pass through.



During the digging process, an unexpected moment occurred. As participants broke open the soil, they discovered earthworms and other small forms of life living within it. Participants began carefully removing the worms from the excavation area and placing them safely to the side before continuing their work. The action was collective and instinctive. They seemed to agree that care should be taken not to harm the animals.



The workshop also generated moments in which participants connected the concept of the commons to their own lives. One participant described a vegetable garden that residents had established in her neighbourhood and recognised it as a form of commons. She translated the concept into a local practice she already knew.

Reflection

Looking back, the first workshop revealed a tension that would remain present throughout the project: the difference between explaining the commons and experiencing it.

The presentation, in a way, resembled the form of education that Paulo Freire describes as problem posing: I invited participants to understand how our living environment has changed. And asked them to consider what reclaiming shared resources might look like in everyday life.

When the worm appeared from the soil, people adjusted their actions. They slowed down, worked more carefully, and protected the animals before continuing. This response suggests that care emerged through direct encounter. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) argues that relationships with the more-than-human world are often a source of knowledge in themselves. The worms became unexpected teachers. They transformed digging from an act of extraction into an act of negotiation with other forms of life sharing the same space. The encounter had left an impression as one participant later painted a worm onto her mug as a tribute to the experience.



An important moment occurred when a participant recognised her neighbourhood vegetable garden as a commons. This was the first indication that the concept had begun to move beyond the examples I provided. Rather than learning about commons as something distant or historical,

she connected it to an existing practice within her own environment. The concept became meaningful because it attached itself to lived experience.

At the same time, the workshop exposed several practical challenges. Many participants arrived late, which disrupted the flow of the session and made it difficult to establish a shared beginning.

The workshop ended in a fragmented and somewhat chaotic manner. Several participants had to leave before the filtering was completed, leaving little opportunity for collective reflection or closure. In retrospect, this highlighted the importance of designing not only a meaningful beginning but also a meaningful ending.



Workshop Day 2 – Filtering Clay and Introducing Handbuilding Techniques

Purpose and Format

The second workshop focused on transforming the collected soil into clay. We continued filtering the clay we had gathered during the first session and learned how clay slip can be prepared as ceramic glaze.

Afterwards, I introduced three basic handbuilding techniques and demonstrated how they could be used to construct ceramic vessels in preparation for making mugs during the following session. Participants then sketched ideas for two mugs: one intended for personal use and one intended to remain at Dokhuis.

Preparation

- Preparation of clay from the previous workshop
- Handbuilding instruction poster and visual examples
- Drawing materials for sketching mug designs

Materials

- Gloves
- Aprons
- Buckets
- Sieves
- Pehatine additive
- Paper and Pencils

Space set-up



Findings

Seven participants attended the second workshop session. We began by reflecting on the previous week's activities and discussing what had stayed with participants since the clay-digging excursion. One participant shared that she had started looking at the ground differently during her daily walks. Since the first session, she found herself scanning the soil for signs of clay. Another participant explained that she had told people in her community about the workshop and received mixed reactions. Some thought she was strange for willingly digging through mud. But she expressed that they just did not get it and shared her enthusiasm about participating and being involved in the entire journey from digging clay to making ceramics.



After the reflection, the group resumed filtering the second batch of clay collected during the previous session. Participants quickly remembered the process and worked largely independently. Within approximately an hour, the clay had been processed and set aside to settle. We then returned to the clay filtered during the first session and prepared it for use as a ceramic glaze by mixing it with an additive to improve adhesion.

As participants worked, conversations moved freely between topics. Much of the talk centred on local developments in the neighbourhood. Such as the newly renovated local supermarket. A participant enthusiastically shared how pleasantly surprised she was by how good it looked. Another participant shared their concern. Now that the supermarket has been renovated, prices might become even more expensive than they already are. Another participant shared her frustration. Sharing that in her part of the neighborhood, there is no supermarket at all!

After the filtering was finished, we focused on preparing for the ceramic-shaping phase. Because most participants had little or no prior experience with ceramics, I introduced three simple handbuilding techniques. Using visual instructions projected onto a screen, participants familiarised themselves with the possibilities of shaping the material.



After this instruction they began sketching ideas for their mugs and decorations. This preparation was intended to make the following session, in which the mugs would be built, more accessible and productive.

Reflection

During the opening reflection one participant remarked that she now finds herself looking at the ground whenever she goes for a walk, searching for clay. What interests me about this observation is that it occurred outside the workshop itself. The learning did not remain confined to the activity or the information presented. Instead, it appeared to alter the way she perceived her everyday environment.

The second participant's story reinforced this idea. By discussing the workshop with people in her community, the project extended beyond the group itself and entered other social networks. The mixed reactions she received revealed how unusual the activity appeared to some people. Digging clay from the ground and transforming it into ceramics challenged assumptions about where materials come from and what counts as valuable work. Yet her willingness to defend and share the experience suggested a growing sense of ownership over the process.

While participants were filtering the soil, they were discussing the changes of the place they lived in, like the renovation of the supermarket. Clay-making provided the reason to gather, but the gathering itself created opportunities for relationships, stories, and forms of collective concern to emerge. The workshop functioned as a temporary space in which practical activity and local conversation could coexist.

This session also revealed a practical challenge in facilitating collective work. At the end of the workshop, several participants offered to help tidy up. Although their willingness was encouraging, I found it difficult to coordinate assistance while simultaneously managing materials, transport, and planning for the following session. In retrospect, this

highlighted that collective participation requires clear structures for shared responsibility. Good intentions alone are not enough; people also need clarity about how they can contribute. This is something I would organise differently in future workshops.

Looking back, the most important outcome of this session was not the clay we filtered but the shift in perception that participants described. Before any mugs had been made, the workshop was already influencing how participants related to their neighbourhood and how they spoke about their experiences with others. The project was beginning to move beyond the workshop space and into everyday life.

Workshop Day 3 – Shaping the Clay into Mugs

Purpose and Format

Participants constructed two mugs: one to take home and one to leave behind at Dokhuis. Participants translated their sketches into physical objects using the handbuilding techniques introduced during the previous session. Once the shape was completed, participants decorated their mugs using engobes made from locally sourced clay and red coloured slips.

Because each participant would make two mugs within a limited timeframe, the session required careful planning and time management.

Preparation

- Preparation of wild-clay engobe
- Production of fired test pieces showing possible outcomes
- Organisation of workstations and tools

Materials

- Stoneware clay
- Wild-clay engobe
- Red engobe
- Handbuilding tools
- Wooden work boards
- Brushes
- Slip

- Hairdryer
- Turntable

Space set-up



Findings

Eight participants attended the third workshop session. The goal was ambitious: each participant would make two ceramic mugs within a two-hour session. Before the workshop began, I already suspected that the time available would be insufficient for the amount of work required.

As participants began shaping their mugs, many encountered the challenges of working with clay. Designs that had seemed straightforward in their sketch proved more difficult to realise in practice. Several participants became frustrated when the material did not immediately cooperate or when forms developed differently than expected. In response,

I provided practical assistance and reminded participants that clay demands patience and adaptation.



By the end of the session, many participants commented on how much time and effort ceramic making required. One participant reflected that her mug looked very different from what she had originally envisioned, yet she was ultimately pleased with the outcome.

Despite the time pressure, the atmosphere remained focused and supportive. Much of the session was characterised by quiet concentration. Participants regularly observed one another's progress, exchanged advice, and offered practical assistance. The shared difficulty of shaping clay seemed to generate a subtle sense of solidarity around the tables.



Not everyone managed to complete both mugs within the allotted time. A participant asked whether they could take materials home and continue working independently. Because they lived nearby, we agreed that they could finish their mugs at home and later drop them off at my house for firing. This arrangement extended the workshop beyond its formal boundaries and allowed participants to complete the work at their own pace.

Reflection

Looking back, this session felt rushed. The pressure of completing two mugs within a limited timeframe pushed me

into a highly instructional role. My attention was directed towards technical problems, time management, and helping participants complete their work. As a result, I had less capacity to facilitate broader conversations or reflect together on questions of commoning.

This became particularly clear when a participant asked me for help developing a design idea. Normally, I enjoy thinking creatively alongside others, but at that moment I found myself unable to do so. Facilitating the workshop required a different form of attention. I was occupied with monitoring progress, answering technical questions, and keeping the session moving. There was simply not enough mental space left for open-ended creative exploration.

Although conversation was limited, participants repeatedly supported one another through the difficulties of making. They shared advice, helped solve practical problems, adjusted expectations, and accepted imperfections. The process required patience not only with the material but also with themselves and one another.

The session taught me an important methodological lesson. If I were to repeat the workshop, I would either allocate more time to mug-making or divide it across two sessions. The time pressure limited opportunities for reflection and made it difficult to balance technical instruction with the broader aims of the research. At the same time, the experience showed that commoning does not only emerge through conversation. It can also appear in quieter forms: in patience, mutual support, accommodation, and the collective effort required to work through difficulty together.

Workshop Day 4 – Glazing the Mugs and Making Keepsakes

Purpose and Format

The fourth workshop focused on glazing the finished mugs. Participants first cleaned their bisque-fired mugs and learned how to apply transparent glaze through brushing or dipping techniques. While waiting for their turn, participants created small keepsakes using clay they collected during the first workshop.

This session provided an opportunity to experiment more freely with the locally sourced clay while waiting for access to the glazing bucket. At the conclusion of the workshop, plans for the final gathering were discussed.

Preparation

- Bisque firing of all mugs
- Processing and drying of the collected wild clay
- Preparation of glazing demonstrations and test pieces
- Preparation of glazing station

Materials

- Bisque-fired mugs
- Transparent glaze
- Glaze buckets
- Brushes
- Glaze tongs
- Wild clay
- Protective table coverings

Space set-up



Findings

Eight participants attended the fourth workshop session. We began by cleaning the bisque-fired mugs and preparing them for glazing. After a short demonstration on how to do so, participants glazed their mugs one by one.



While waiting for their turn, participants worked with the wild clay they had previously dug and filtered themselves. They were free to make whatever they wished. This unstructured making time produced a variety of personal objects: pendants, a moon, a paperweight, a miniature version of Dokhuis.



The keepsakes

Some participants shared that when shaping the wild clay for their keepsake, they noticed how unpredictable and difficult the clay was compared to the stoneware clay we had used to shape the mugs. By handling the two different types of clay, they were able to experience these differences.

Another local topic was discussed during this workshop. A group of neighborhood residents had shared flyers with a proposal known as ‘The Peak’: a plan to build an artificial mountain with housing and recreational facilities on the site of a former amusement park along the Maas. Participants debated the idea with amusement and scepticism.



Towards the end of the session, I introduced the idea of holding a feast during the final workshop, using the finished mugs for the first time. My initial plan was to prepare soup myself. To my surprise, one of the participants immediately offered to cook instead. Others suggested contributing food as well, arguing that I was already doing enough by organising the workshops and firing the ceramics. What began as my

proposal gradually became a collective plan, with participants taking responsibility for shaping the gathering themselves

Reflection

The mugs had required participants to follow a process that I had designed. Although there was room for personal variation, the overall form of the object remained largely my idea. The keepsakes were different. It emerged from individual design and imaginations. Faced with a lump of clay and no instructions beyond "make something," participants created objects that reflected their own interests and ideas. It was fun to see what they had come up with.

Freire (1970, p. 76) argues that people should not merely receive the words and instructions of others but develop the capacity to name their own reality. The keepsakes felt like a small material version of this principle. They were expressions that emerged from the participants themselves. Each object represented a personal decision about what they wanted to shape.

The session also marked a subtle shift in ownership of the workshop process. Until this point, I had largely occupied the role of organiser, provider and Dokhuis as facilitator of the space. The participants attended, learned, and made. However, when the discussion turned towards the final feast, participants began assuming responsibility for the gathering themselves. They offered to cook, and shared ideas to bring homemade dishes, transforming the event from something I was hosting into something we were organising together.

Looking back, this moment may represent a small but meaningful transition from participation towards commoning. Commoning is not simply about joining an activity designed by someone else, it involves taking responsibility for the continuation and maintenance of a shared practice. By volunteering, the participants were not only helping me. They were actively shaping the social structure of the final gathering.

Workshop Day 5 – Presenting the Finished Mugs, Sharing a Meal, and Reflecting

Purpose and Format

The final workshop focused on celebrating the completion of the ceramic process, sharing food and reflecting on the experiences of the previous weeks.

I presented the participants with their finished mugs after the glaze firing. They contributed the food collectively in a potluck format, bringing soups, bread, spreads and desserts, all ready to be served. The remainder of the session was dedicated to reflection, conversation, and documenting experiences from the workshop series. I had laid out paper placemats that could be used to document the reflection.

Preparation

- Final glaze firing of all ceramic pieces
- Organisation of reflection materials
- Preparation of communal eating space
- Collection and display of finished mugs

Materials

- Finished ceramic mugs
- Food contributed by participants
- Reflection sheets
- Large paper for collective reflection
- Pens, markers, and drawing materials

Space set-up



Findings

Five participants were present during the final session. The other participants collected their mugs separately at a later moment.



One participant prepared a large pot of lentil soup, which we ate together using the mugs that had been made throughout the series.



Participants connected the themes of the project to their own experiences and histories. One participant shared how her grandparents are part of a form of collective food production in a village in Turkey. Many residents had moved away and agricultural land became overgrown. She told how villagers started to work the land together and exchanged produce and labour without monetary payment. When her grandparents became too old to maintain their garden, others took over the work and were compensated with food rather than money. Through this story, the commons appeared not as an abstract concept but as a lived social practice embedded in everyday life.

Another participant described her experience of living in a communal housing project. She valued the sense of connection and mutual support it offered, while also recognising that participation is rarely equal. Some residents contributed more than others, yet she felt that this imbalance

was part of communal life. As she explained, one also benefits from the moments when others carry responsibilities that one cannot take on oneself.

The conversation also moved towards food, migration, and belonging. Participants discussed fruits that do not grow in the Netherlands but are common in the regions where they or their families originated. Talking about food became a way of talking about place, memory, and displacement. The tastes and ingredients people missed revealed connections to landscapes and ecosystems beyond Rotterdam.



Later that in the workshop, the discussion shifted towards changing gender roles and expectations surrounding care, work, and family life. Several participants reflected on expectations within their own background, where men have traditionally been expected to provide financially while women take primary responsibility for care. At the same time, participants noted that nowadays women are increasingly expected to combine caregiving with professional careers. This

led to a broader discussion about unequal distributions of responsibility, changing social expectations, and the challenges of balancing work and family life. While different opinions were expressed, the conversation remained respectful and reflective. At one point, I shared how my mother was the first woman in several generations of my family to build an independent career, and how this has shaped my appreciation for the opportunities available to me today. Some participants responded that they had not previously considered this perspective.



The mugs in the kitchen of Dokhuis

At the end of the session, participants selected one mug to take home and one mug to leave behind. The mugs that remained were given a permanent place in the open kitchen of Dokhuis.

Reflection

The shared meal created conditions for conversations that were more personal, political, and reflective than those that had emerged previously. Discussions about migration, communal living, gender roles, and family responsibilities revealed differences in background and perspective.

Participants did not always agree with one another. Yet, commoning appeared as the capacity to remain in conversation despite differences. The table became a temporary space where contrasting perspectives could be expressed, heard, and reflected upon. In this sense, the workshop suggests that commoning may be about creating conditions in which diverse experiences can coexist and become meaningful to one another.

For most of the workshop series, the commons had been a concept that I introduced. I brought up the term, posed the problem of enclosure and showed other examples of commoning. But the conversations demonstrated that participants already possessed experiences and forms of knowledge that resonated with the idea of commoning.

These moments remind me of Paulo Freire's concept of conscientização. Rather than learning through explanation alone, participants began recognising connections between a theoretical concept and their own histories and lived realities. The commons no longer required definition. It appeared in stories about grandparents, shared gardens, reciprocal exchange, neighbourhood relationships, and food traditions. The concept acquired faces, memories, and sensory experiences.

The ceramic mugs themselves played an important role in this process. They were not simply outcomes of the workshop but material traces of a collective journey. Eating from objects made with clay dug from the neighbourhood connected the conversation back to the place in which it occurred. By leaving some of the mugs behind at Dokhuis, participants created a small but lasting reminder of the relationships, stories, and forms of mutual recognition that had emerged throughout the project.

Inspiration Day

As a conclusion to the open call: 'Van idee naar buurt', Dokhuis asked the four selected of the open call to present their projects during an inspiration day. The event was intended to share our work with friends and family and to invite others to share their ideas for the next round of the open call.



The other open call participants and I made soup for the visitors.

People arrived gradually, and in an informal atmosphere before the presentations began, I set up a table with the results of the workshop: finished mugs, photographs, and the clay that participants had dug from the neighbourhood. When visitors gathered around the table, we began working with the clay together. I explained where it had

come from, the ground just outside, collected by the workshop participants and the conversation started moving on its own.



When enough people had gathered, we began the presentations. My presentation was last, and soup was served afterwards in the mugs that the former workshop participants

had made from their neighbourhood clay. There was time for questions: about the open call, about the experience of running a project, about what it was like to work in your own neighbourhood. Dokhuis facilitated the space; we filled it with what we had learned.

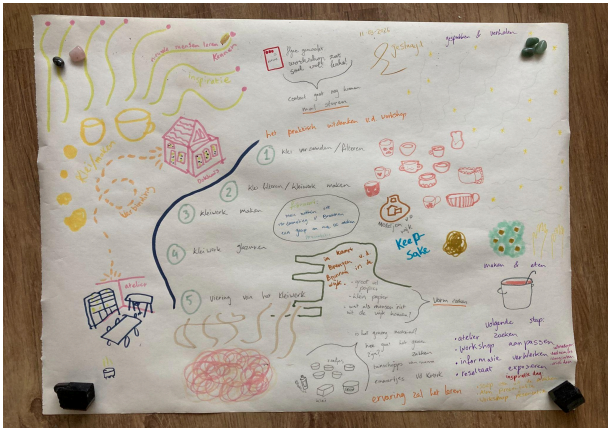


What struck me about this day was that Dokhuis had created a structure for passing knowledge forward. Not through documentation or reports, but through encounters. The next group of residents would not read about what we had done. They would hear it from us, over soup, with clay on the table.

Reflection meetings

Every few months our group of the open call would come together and update each other on our progress, share our struggles and support one another. On a piece of paper we would write out what we had discussed, but leave space on the

paper for the upcoming reflections. It was a nice way to document the progression of the project.



After the inspiration day we had one last reflection meeting together with Noemi and Inge. Sharing our reflections of the project with each other and giving feedback on our collaboration with Dokhuis.



The reflection sessions with the other open call participants were a pleasant way to shape the project. It was also nice that we were able to make use of Dokhuis's facilities and to have Noemi as our point of contact whenever we had problems or questions. I experienced it all as very successful!



Photos of our last meeting and the keepsakes that were made during the inspiration day

Overall reflection of the project

Looking back on the workshop series, I have learned a lot. More than any workshop I had organised before, this project felt like a collective undertaking. Participants brought snacks, shared stories, contributed ideas, and eventually took responsibility for parts of the final gathering themselves. The offer to prepare a soup, as well as other dishes, and the many conversations that emerged throughout the process all suggested that the workshop had become a temporary social space sustained by the contributions of multiple people.

The project made some of the forms of labour that often remain unnoticed more visible to me. Running the workshop involved much more than the two-hour sessions themselves. There was the digging, transporting, drying, firing, cleaning, preparing materials, and setting up the space each week. Because there was no kiln at Dokhuis, all firing had to take place at home. During one snowy week, I dragged workshop materials through the neighbourhood in a laundry basket because the pavements were covered in ice and snow.



(Click on imago for video)

During a conversation with Noemi afterwards, she suggested that staff or volunteers from Dokhuis could have assisted with transporting materials or other practical tasks. From reflecting on these moments I had struggled with asking for help. Throughout the project, I approached the work as something I needed to carry out myself.

In hindsight, this seems contradictory to the very ideas of commoning that I was exploring. Commoning is not only about creating situations in which others can contribute. It is also about recognising one's own dependence on others and being willing to receive support. In this sense, the project taught me that I was learning how to common just as much as the participants were. For future iterations of the project, I would like to find ways to strengthen and share the practical infrastructure that supports the workshops.

I am currently looking for my own ceramic studio out of my home. A dedicated workspace could reduce some of the logistical burden and create more room to focus on facilitation, experimentation, and collective learning. At the same time, I would miss out on connections that such places as Dokhuis can provide, like its connection to the neighbourhood. I have gained a lot of connections through the process of the open call. That would be more difficult to do on my own.

Drying



Clay must release its moisture slowly, from inside out. Drying is not a passive process but a necessary pause in which the shape becomes stable enough to survive the kiln. You cannot rush this stage. If you fire it too soon, the water still trapped inside will turn to steam and the object will crack, or shatter entirely.

While we wait for the clay to dry I want to share a story I have found in my living environment.

When I had just moved to Oud-Charlois, I spent a great deal of time walking through the neighbourhood. It was my way of getting to know my new place. On one of these walks, I discovered an information sign on the Frans Bekkerstraat. It marked the location of a medieval castle that once stood there, only a few minutes away from my block. The outline of the castle had been embedded into the street.

The castle had been built during the fourteenth century, with walls over a metre thick and a ditch surrounding the structure. The sign told a myth: "A 'brutal lord' is said to have thrown his 'kind-hearted wife' from the tower. As she fell, she cursed her husband and the castle. Coincidence or not, within a month the castle was destroyed in a raging storm surge..." It made me curious to know more about this brutal lord and this unfortunate woman.

I began searching through archives. What I found surprised me. The castle had been constructed by Willem

Zonderlant, but I had found nothing about a wife. What I did discover was that the land that Zonderlant had built his castle on was not his own. It was the land of Beatrijs van Putten. Without her permission he had built the castle on her land. The situation caused a conflict and disorder between the two. She used her legal rights as landowner to force Zonderlant into a feudal relationship (Hoek, 1961, p 260).

Silvia Federici (2014) argues that the enclosure of common land was accompanied by another form of enclosure: the enclosure of women's knowledge, labour, and autonomy. During the transition to capitalism, many forms of knowledge associated with women were systematically devalued or criminalised. Care work became invisible. Community knowledge was dismissed. Women who held authority outside accepted social structures were often portrayed as dangerous, irrational or threatening. This enclosurement of women was in later centuries brought into practice through witch hunts.

The story of Beatrijs van Putten predates the witch hunts Federici describes. But the pattern is familiar. A woman with legal authority over land is not remembered for her ownership, her negotiation, or her political leverage. A myth about a brutal lord and a murdered wife is. Stories, I realised, are never neutral. The stories that remain visible are accompanied by others that have been removed, simplified, or pushed aside.

One other detail in the myth turned out to be true: At the time the castle stood, the rivers of South Holland still shifted restlessly. During the storm the land was flooded by water, breaking down the castle. Clay is formed from sediment carried by rivers like the Meuse. During these floods, for centuries, the water deposited clay across banks and floodplains. The surge that destroyed Zonderlant's castle

covered the site in a thick layer of clay. Later generations reclaimed the land again with dykes and drainage, and built Oud-Charlois on top of it. (Hoek, 1961, p 263). Underneath the concrete, asphalt and brick that I take my walks on, clay is still present. It makes the city look as though it has nothing to do with soil at all.



Archaeological digging done in 1960 (Groeneveld, 2026)

Occasionally clay reveals itself. A patch of disturbed ground. Whenever I find it, I collect a small amount and bring it back to my studio. What interests me is that the clay still carries the history of the place it came from.



*Clay that has come to the surface of the ground.
(Click on imago for video)*

Firing



Firing clay changes its chemical structure. As the clay heats, water and organic materials are burned off. The minerals melt and fuse together, turning porous clay into a durable, stone-like structure that cannot be undone. When the kiln is cooled off, it can be opened. How the ceramic comes out is a surprise.

At the start of this project, I wondered whether Dokhuis was a place where commoning could happen. However I soon realised that it was already there and even sooner I had become part of it. I have made new friends there and go back regularly to take part in other workshops. I stop by to use the co-working space. I have even been asked to collaborate on future projects. And the mugs are being used.

Broken mug

Once I noticed the ear of the mugs had broken. And later one of the keepsake's. So I took them back home to glue them. Caring for it feels like a natural extension of having made it. As a continuation of what had started there.

This is also where the "multiple roles" I described earlier did not simply end with the last session. Freire's teacher-student and student-teacher

are not roles you occupy only inside a workshop, they are a relationship, and relationships continue. Being the one who notices the broken handle, who is close enough to bring the glue, is still a form of being in dialogue. A dialogue that no longer needs words.



Broken mug and keepsake

Soep-Port: The Conversation Without the Clay, Dokhuis, February 2026

One of my Dokhuis-workshop participants, Parel, works with participatory practices as an artist. She hosts a recurring event at Dokhuis called Soep-Port. Once a month, Parel brings together familiar and new neighbours over a warm bowl of soup at Dokhuis for an open conversation around a personal question. The aim is not to reach conclusions but to share perspectives, guided by a set of

principles: postpone judgment, avoid giving advice, be mindful of how much you speak, stay curious about differences.

Parel invited me to bring up a question to a next Soep-Port session, which I gratefully accepted. The Dokhuis workshops had shown me that the richest conversations emerged sideways during the making. But I also found out how difficult it was to give full attention to those conversations while simultaneously managing clay, buckets, timing, and technique. Soep-Port offered a space where conversation was the only thing on the table.



Together with Parel, I prepared a central question: *How do you interact with your living environment?* Along with a set of supporting questions to draw on if the conversation needed deepening. The conversation was documented and photographed by two participants who are combining all the Soep-Port sessions into a cookbook.

Nine people gathered and we ate soup from the mugs made during the workshop series. I told them about my

research before the conversation had begun, the mugs were objects from the ground we were about to discuss.

Arrival

We began with a check-in: *What did you notice on your way here?* The answers ranged freely. One participant noticed the sun and the feeling of early spring. Another said the sun looked the same size the whole way, but sometimes felt as if it was coming closer, as if she could walk into it. One noticed how green Charlois is. One noticed the cold of the Maastunnel and the calm that came after emerging on the south side. I had taken the ferry from Katendrecht to Oud-Charlois and found that looking at the water had calmed me down. It was only my second time taking it, and I had just discovered it is free for students.



These small observations already said something about how differently people inhabit the same city. The tunnel. The green. The water. The size of the traffic lights. Each

person's route to Dokhuis had been a different kind of encounter with the living environment.

Defining the living environment

What is a living environment?

Participant C said she had lived in her current place for four years, always with the sense that she would not stay long, so she had kept herself from connecting with her neighbours, because she would leave anyway.

Participant D had just moved to another part of Rotterdam, and was still in the process of discovering her new surroundings.

Participant F sees her plants as her living environment. She spends a lot of time taking care of them. Someone noted that how your plants are doing often reflects how you are doing. Participant F agreed, hers are doing perfectly, she said, but she is sometimes afraid to go on holiday, because no one else will care for them the way she does. Everyone immediately offered to take care of the plants. Then Participant F said: it's sad how we forget that we are part of the living environment.

Participant E had moved to Rotterdam a few years ago, from Norway. She didn't feel connected to her new place. She noticed how there was much more nature and light where she came from. Though the days are shorter in winter in Norway, the snow reflected light and affected her mood in a positive way. She concluded that when you move, you need to ground yourself. Still, she finds Rotterdam welcoming. People smile at each other in the street.

From use to reciprocity

The central question opened slowly: *How do you interact with your living environment?*

Participant A said that noticing the water brings calmness; it is constant and always present. Noemi, who lives next to a bridge, said the same. It brings her stillness.

Half thinking of clay, of digging, I had asked: *Do you feel like you can use your space?*

Participant C said she does not often actively use her living environment, and rarely even greets it.

Participant D said she uses her living environment for poetry, writing about her experiences of it. Writing is like breathing, You are supported by your environment. It's the same with clay. It requires collaboration and co-creation.

Parel described how, through the funding: 'Opzoomer mee', she is grateful to be able to propose ideas for neighbourhood initiatives.

Then Participant D answered with a question: *What does "using" mean?*

I had asked the question the way I relate to my own environment in a direct, material way. You find clay, you take some, you make something. However for most people in the room, "using" their environment did not mean taking anything from it.

Participant C turned the question around: *How is the environment interacting with you?* She spoke about the first

years in her new apartment. There were ongoing constructions around her building that had made it difficult to meet neighbours.

Slowly, the frame shifted, from action to relation, from use to reciprocity. This shift is, I think, the same shift I was reaching for when I asked what it would mean to include the more-than-human in dialogue. That evening's conversation never explicitly turned toward plants, soil, or animals. But the question of *how does your environment interact with you?* asks something close to what Kimmerer asks of a forest, a river or a worm. Not what you can take from this, but what is this already giving, and have you noticed?

What happens when you move

Participant D, who had just moved within Rotterdam, asked: *What happens when you move? What happens to the space you leave behind?* Everything is a living environment, she said. If she can write about something as alive, then everything must be alive. Is it only the place where you live, or also what surrounds you?

Noemi said she used to live in a building that was later demolished. When she goes back to that place it feels like an empty void. After it came down the Ziggo-provider had called to ask whether the address needed fibre-glass internet. It felt abstract.

Participant B, who had recently moved back to Rotterdam after teaching in The Hague, spoke about how her teaching had been shaped by location. There, she had developed a lesson about the sea, for children who had never

seen it. Now that she was back in Rotterdam, she wondered how that would change her lessons to this location.



Participant C said that a building next to hers was being demolished, and she found herself wondering where all the energy of those houses goes. People take their memories, she said, but what about the energy?

I shared something of my own: that seeing my childhood home, after it was sold, and noticing the changes, hurts. The house had moved on without me. I had to grieve the loss of that place. Afterwards, as a student I had moved so many times that I didn't even want to attach myself to a new place anymore. Only now, after four years in Oud-Charlois, it feels like things are changing. After my boyfriend moved to my city of Rotterdam it took him two years to feel at home. It is like a mourning process. You can feel grief over a place.

Participant D said quietly: maybe the environment doesn't know that you're there.

What people miss

Participant D said she misses representation of the natural environment. Participant C misses small interventions. Parel misses third spaces in Charlois: cafés, restaurants, nightlife. Participant E misses communal outdoor spaces, where you can simply join something that is already happening.

Reflection

Looking back, I realise I had walked into the evening with a question shaped by my own way of relating to the world: direct, material, hands in the soil. This kind of direct, resource-based relationship was not how most people in the room related to where they live.

The conversation showed that some had barely begun to feel rooted in their surroundings. And through these questions, this relationship to their places got an opportunity to be explored.

'How do you interact with your living environment' turned out to be the right scope for the exploration. Open enough to hold poetry, plants, grief, moving, change. Without asking anyone to have a relationship with their surroundings if they did not have.

That evening we exercised relating to our environments a bit more. Some sharing they left with the following questions and perspectives:

What are the borders of my living environment?
How does our living environment shape us?
Where do we feel connected and responsible?
What does using the environment mean?
How can we take care of each other and be soft with one another?
How can I co-create with my living environment?

None of these questions arrived as conclusions. They were, if anything, new generative themes. Proof that the "thematic universe" Freire describes does not close once a theme has been explored. It opens onto the next one.



That evening the answer to '*How do you interact with your living environment?*' raised another six questions. and sent nine people home carrying a piece of it each.

Feasting



*Ceramic is completed when it is shared.
The feast is a moment when making is
reflected up on, and celebrated.
Objects gather people together to be
appreciated, and create opportunities
to inspire, and speculate on new
makings.*

At the beginning of this research, I described my discomfort with the temporary nature of many artistic projects and institutions. As a freelance artist and educator, I moved between projects, institutions, and places without always feeling rooted within them. I wondered whether artistic practice could help create stronger relationships with living environments and the people who inhabit them. My experiences led me to the commons as a way of thinking about continuity, collective responsibility, and belonging.

The central question of this research was: *How can an artistic practice focused on ceramic making and story sharing foster shared reflection and speculation about our living environments?*

This research suggests that speculation works differently in a temporary festival setting than in a neighbourhood centre: in Borkel en Schaft it appeared as playful disruption, while at Dokhuis it emerged through duration and familiarity.

In both places the act of making provided an entry point into conversation. Some of the most meaningful stories

arose when we shaped the clay together. Processing a rat infestation while becoming one. Noticing a difference in looking around during a daily walk. Working with clay occupies the hands while leaving space for stories, memories, questions, and observations to emerge. And after the making, communal farming, migration, plants, grief and more questions were shared at a table while eating together.

Working with Dokhuis began as a workshop series, and has developed into an ongoing relationship. I return regularly, participate in other activities, use the workspace, and have been invited to contribute in past and future projects. The workshops showed me that collaboration requires not only creating opportunities for others to contribute, but also accepting help when it is offered. In a sense, I am still learning how to practise commoning myself.

And yet, I remain aware that my position has not fundamentally changed. I am still a freelancer. The project still depended on institutional support, available space, and the labour. The relationships I have made during this research feel rooted, and begin to exist outside the structures that made them possible. Perhaps commoning is not the opposite of institutions, but a practice that can sometimes emerge within them.

The feast is the moment when the work becomes shared, when the objects enter the world, when the table is set and people gather. What happens after that? It depends on who stays, who returns, and who is willing to bring the next question or the glue when something breaks.

I began this thesis with my feet in the clay and my head in the clouds. I end it with both still there, but with a clearer sense of what happens in between.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 — Dokhuis Workshop Documentation

Participant reflection sheet feedback (Session 5, selected responses):

Participant 1: Top: Fun workshop, accessible, good group size, 5 weeks is a good length of time, nice location. Tip: Learn a different clay modelling technique per lesson; lessons outside office hours.

Participant 3: "I loved finding clay here in the neighbourhood. The process of claying, modeling, and glazing was great to do. I would have liked to clay longer. I felt like a little girl again."

Participant 4: Top: Sharing food, laughing, getting together, helping each other, sharing ideas, sharing experiences, searching for clay together, sharing recipes, eating together.

Appendix 2 — Soep-Port Documentation Record, February 2026

This appendix contains the preparatory materials for the Soep-Port session held at Dokhuis on 25 February 2026.

The full account of the conversation and its findings is in chapter Firing.

Soep-Port principles

These principles were established by Parel Strik as the guiding framework for all Soep-Port sessions:

- Postpone your conclusions and judgment
- Avoid giving advice
- Be mindful of your contributions (WAIT: Why am I talking?) for example: does what I want to say align with the conversation?
- You may respond in English or Dutch if necessary
- Take a break when needed. Stand up, walk around
- We are exploring diverse perspectives, not searching for the right answer

Prepared central question

How do you interact with your living environment?

Opening question (to start the conversation)

What did you notice on your way here?

Prepared sub-questions

Not all sub-questions were asked during the session. Some were answered naturally within responses to other questions; some new questions arose during the conversation that were not prepared in advance.

- What would you define as your living environment?

- How would you describe your living environment?
- How do you feel in your living environment?
- How accessible is your living environment?
- How has your environment changed over time?
- Can you gather all your needs from your living environment? Are you missing something?
- Where do you feel responsible?
- What happens when you move?
- Does a changed living environment also change your needs?
- Does it feel safe to interact with your living environment?
- What does using your living environment mean?
- What do you miss in your living environment?
- How does the living environment see me?