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Reworlding: Repositioning Participatory Design
to Tackle Socio-Environmental Challenges

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PD report on community driven transformation

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Abstract

This report is a reflection on the ongoing process of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) PhD adopting artistic tools and ethnographic methods. It is a reflection on, simultaneously, the fragmentation and conflict encountered within the field - an agricultural context in Belgium undergoing an environmental transition - as well as on the unpredictability and messiness of research situated in-between national and local institutions. How to navigate between not only different worlds of doing PAR juxtaposing the linearity of academia with non-linearity of farming temporalities, but also in a patchworked and fragile environment? In the report, I will argue that translation, seen as a constant effort of revealing patterns and relationalities between disparate realities, could be a helpful design strategy. Building on that, I will discuss three auxiliary methodological approaches - visiting (Arendt, 1992, p. 43), clouding, and accumulating - disclosed by translation and encountered tensions, as well as explore the potential of a translating device - an almanac - combining them together. The report will, thus, disclose different capacities and scales of working within transition processes, reflect on the different ways of doing PD in conflicted contexts, showcase some of the preliminary findings, and discuss the possible next steps.

1 Introduction

1.1 Main points and outline of the paper

The scope of this PhD, a Participatory Design and Action Research, revolves around the tensions that the increasingly urgent need for environmental transitions reveals. Its focus lies within the agricultural sector, and the primarily investigated case study is the ongoing basin-wide transformation of Herk and Mombeek valley as part of the Water+Land+Schap programme, led by the associated partner in the Reworlding project, AWB. Water+Land+Schap aims to provide a win-win strategy - retain agricultural identity, strongly associated with the region, while waterproofing the area, troubled in the past years with floods and droughts, and making it robust in biodiversity (Architecture Workroom Brussels, 2018). The PhD also investigates similar cases, current and past, from other countries or parts of Belgium, and explores the tension between the rightfulness in advocating for collective climate action within environmental circles and the individual stories of loss and sacrifice that this profound transformation might instigate.

Socio-environmental transitions, with all the implications they entail - either a profound transformation or, in extreme cases, an irreversible loss of an established way of living - can bring significant tension to the communities they concern. However, when they are just another challenge to be added to an array of unresolved issues and fuel long-standing conflicts, it can make the negotiation fraught with difficulties. Flemish farmers, as it seems, are slowly "facing the limit of resilience" (Head, 2018, p. 24). Constantly layering legal uncertainty caused by top-down and erratic decision-making (Verstraet, 2024), climate volatility, growing market demands, and accelerating land prices makes farmers' profession increasingly difficult. (Choplin et al., 2024) Furthermore, their ability to take action is extremely limited, as, despite their hands-on experience and intimate knowledge of the (eco)system, instead of co-leading an ecosocial change through dialogue, farmers still take the backseat in decision-making. This not only drives them to either disillusionment, polarisation, or protest, but also

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firmly establishes the common narrative portraying them as enemies of environmental change, while the reality tends to be more nuanced and complex. On the other hand, environmental policymakers, often acutely aware of the challenges farmers face, quite rightly advocate for taking urgent climate action, finding themselves between a rock and a hard place. Being limited by lack of resources, strict timeframes, and silo decision-making models, often leads to favouring top-down decisions and low hanging fruits over undertaking cross-sectoral action from the bottom-up and properly investing in long-term agricultural support.

Encountering a wicked problem, where further debates do not seem to add any knowledge or provide ideas for compromise, and where exists a high fragmentation of perspectives, irreconcilable opinions, and paradoxical bottlenecks, can result in feelings of powerlessness, where one's own possibilities for action seem extremely limited. (Schaminée, 2018, p. 31) The reality of doing Participatory Action Research with unattainable actors, constantly shifting regulations, and changing contexts, while also navigating the patchy nature of doing PhD in-between different institutions, can make it easy to get lost in the many interests and expectations. Moreover, entering a context deeply immersed in discord as a stranger, far removed from both farming and Flemish reality, in the wish to mediate in a participatory process, adds to the complexity. How to have hope for reworlding - connecting worlds of farmers, policy and design by translating between them - in such circumstances?

This PhD attempts to work with, not against, these complexities - stay with the uncertainty a multiplicity of perspectives, opinions, entry points, and scales entail, and adopt a curious, receptive, and accumulative approach. It does so by adopting artistic methods and design thinking (Schaminée, 2018, p. 13) that help illuminating underlying motivations and limitations driving actors, providing tools for revealing and striking relationships, as well as creating new narratives contributing to a reimagination of the status quo. Revealing relationalities between actors, sites, and contexts, building trust during research, shifting between institutions and roles, decoding hidden meanings and metaphors, navigating between strangeness and familiarity, and reimagining legislation to incorporate situated insights and knowledge, are all tasks of translation. The encountered fragmentation in the farming community hinders co-design, however, when approached with curiosity, time, and patience, it reveals heterogeneity and multiplicity - the world of farmers is a world where many worlds fit. On another note, since farmers are already quite adept at navigating the accelerating volatility, an understanding of their current situated practices and everyday resilience strategies is crucial and might significantly enrich environmental transition processes. The miscommunications between policymakers and farmers, lack of a common language despite sharing the same concerns, requires yet another kind of mediation than the aforementioned concerns. Finally, inter-sectoral and transnational researches provide a unique richness, yet are complex, hard to navigate, and might result in disjointed and piecemeal insights.

Translating - tracing porosities and leakages between perspectives, engaging with fluidity, and enabling different forms of communication - could provide different ways of dealing with conflict. This research adopts translation as an overarching design strategy allowing to maintain, enhance, but also navigate complexity and contradiction transitions entail. Building on outlining translation, the report offers three other supporting PAR tactics aligning with reworlding components - visiting (Arendt, 1992, p. 43) as retracing, clouding as reconnecting, and accumulating as reimagining - as well as a design tool gathering and developing those strategies - an almanac.

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1.2 Fragmented agricultural ecosystems

There are several overlapping and interdependent factors that make farming in Flanders increasingly harder, particularly in river basins like Nete or Herk, as well as in regions with intense agricultural activity, such as Haspengouw. Perhaps the immediately perceptible one in light of the context of transition - a process usually leading to a major identity shift or, in extreme cases, disappearance (like in the Kleine Nete valley where, after decades, farming might completely vanish from the landscape (De Keyzer, 2025)) - is a sense of nostalgia, often paired with feelings of disillusionment. A yearning for the past can, simultaneously, rob from dreams for the future, as well as lead to dangerous romanticisation (Fisher, 2014). A deep sense of community, togetherness, and support, whether manifested through memories of farmfields full of people or family coming down to help during harvest (Ceunen, 2011, p. 3), for some farmers or villagers not only provides a stark contrast with the complexity, loneliness, and globalisation attributed to modern farming, but can also spark grief and mourning for an easier past. Perhaps more importantly, it points to the different scales and kinds of unpredictability, some more navigable and tangible than others. Many interlocutors remark on the straightforward nature of farming in the past, the shorter work season, but also current volatility and lack of any certainties, financial, legal, or climatic.

The farmer was just a farmer, now he is a scientist, a manager, an investor. (note from the fieldwork)

The necessity of change also brings out feelings of betrayal, anger, and disillusionment. Farming in Flanders accelerated in scale due to the *Nooit meer honger* (Never again hunger) policy implemented after the II World War, subsequent land consolidation, and has never really slowed down. This has seriously affected the Flemish waterscape, as the intensification of agriculture entailed land reclamation on a massive scale. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that after years of draining and intensifying, some farmers are perplexed by the sudden change of direction, intrusion of environmental legislation on top of (and often in contradiction to) agricultural policies, regardless of its legitimacy (De Keyzer, 2025). Transition alone, however, would probably be manageable were there was a clear communication. However, transitions are usually surrounded by a high level of legal and economic uncertainty; plans are often revealed late in the process, which creates a sense of being stuck in an administrative limbo.

The worst is the uncertainty. There is still no plan. (note from the fieldwork)

What further seeds the divide, according to some farmers, is the fact that rewetting projects often wind up on the doorsteps of small-scale or conventional farmers, rather than the ones working on an industrial scale. This not only makes picking sides in the conflict increasingly harder, but also leads to quite paradoxical outcomes: that farmers often do not think that their work can benefit biodiversity, while even organic farmers may, at times, stand against environmental policies.

I also find navigating these policies hard. Because I understand where they are coming from and I agree, but I know it is not how they should be done. (note from the fieldwork)

Furthermore, as a result of limited participation, top-down legislation, and uprooted and detached policies, farmers often feel misunderstood and unheard. Compensation for loss and victimisation are far more prevalent stories than reward for pioneer work, as policies are often constructed in such a way that they limit or devalue voluntary work,

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which leads to discouragement and reluctance (Pfannes, 2025). Continuing layering of policies, inefficacy of protests can lead to polarisation, as far-right thrives on discontent and fuels sense of abandonment, (European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2022) or to taking action to the streets. The latter, however, merely electrifies media narratives and leads to further misunderstandings. The legal, climatic, and economic uncertainty, high workloads, stress, and isolation, make farmers less satisfied with their quality of life than an average Flemish person. Many find it hard to see or share the beauty of the profession, which increases loneliness and widens the gap with society, increasing the sense of unappreciation.

I don't have time for dreams. (note from an interview)

Policies, on the other hand, despite best intentions, are often quite detached from the reality on the ground. They prove to be extremely layered, chaotic, and incomprehensible, rather than flexible, requiring fast adaptation, or contradicting already existing legislation. Moreover, legislation is often quickly introduced and even more quickly retracted, resulting in feelings of disappointment and anger (Verstraet, 2024). The intricacies and paradoxes not only wreak havoc for overworked farmers who often have no time to verify them but also give headaches to agricultural advisors. Implementation is often opaque, vague, yet prescriptive, denying farmers' agency. Furthermore, due to limited resources and preference for visible and tangible action, quick wins and the so-called low hanging fruit initiatives are usually favoured over long-term investments such as agricultural advisory. This myopic approach to policymaking coincides, or perhaps fuels, the strategy many farmers themselves take - amounting to fixing immediate problems rather than thinking of the big picture. More fundamental and secure solutions would also address the concerns of many young farmers entering the field discouraged by the legislative and economic instability their predecessors struggled with (Verstraete, 2025). Agricultural and environmental issues are often considered separately and independently, creating bottlenecks and paradoxical situations, where one legislation outrules the other, while the farmer is supposed to enact both (VILT-redactie, 2025). Ecosystems, on yet another note, care not for such abstract divisions in the first place, working across and interdependently. As such, in order to understand current water regulations, one should take into account not only legislation concerning water directly, either on national level (from water boards) or European (such as the newly released Water Framework Directive) but also keep tabs on regulations concerning manure, nitrogen, or even Mercosur deal, which may have a significant impact on, for instance, soil quality.

On the one hand, climate change, although urgent, is only one in an array of issues farmers are facing on a daily basis. On the other hand, what the abovementioned complexity and scale of challenges also reveals is that farmers are uniquely equipped to cope with layering uncertainty. What appears to heavily disturb their ability to respond accordingly is the process of decision-making and resultant legislation which merely accelerates volatility rather than diminishing it. Legislation is rarely informed by struggles on the ground, leaving farmers alone to cope with changing regulations, both agricultural and environmental, while also tending to local concerns. When all the externalities work against each other, it not only requires a great deal of flexibility, but also pushes one to make choices when no good option is available (Nold, 2025). Could legislation respond to rather than counteract the situated reality of farmers? Could it attune itself better to unpredictability, seasonality, and fluidity, while still providing solidity, structure, and security, allowing for both quick fixes and long-term initiatives? Farmers have an innate knowledge of land, soil, water, rain, clouds but, so far, there is no place for hearing the stories from the apple orchard, the vineyard, or the barn. The communication between the ground and the decision-making table is significantly hindered and requires

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mediation; the silo model of policymaking needs to evolve into one akin more to communicating vessels, where each issue influences another one, rather than acting in isolation. How might environmental transitions be reimagined into a collective, bottom-up endeavour if some of those approaches are decoded and translated into decision-making? How could personal understanding of resilience and situated strategies attune legislation and make it more grounded? How to make the drivers motivating farmers and policymakers known?

2 Entering the field

In order to gather those insights as a Participatory Design researcher and engage in reworlding, one has to enter the field - embark on retracing of actors and tensions - which, given the unattainability of one's interlocutors and the difficulty of commencing and maintaining dialogue, feels as an almost impossible task. Farmers, as I was told, scarcely ever attend meetings, perhaps in conviction that their opinions will not make a difference anyway, while organisations are often anxious or unable to be confronted with them beyond quite classic feedback meetings. As a result, sessions aimed at farmers often end up being filled with policymakers and nature conservation representatives instead. Many policymakers and advisors that I have talked to feel that an individual and personal approach, consisting of a farm visit and honest conversation, would be the best, yet there are no resources for this, both time- or money-wise. PhD offers the opportunity to engage with actors in the long term and with a frequency public or non-profit organisations often cannot afford; however, in order to start the conversation, one has to locate the source of information - a willing farmer or a well-connected mediator on the ground - which is not that easy. Adding to that, the realisation of one's own foreignness, by some perceived as a barrier impossible to overcome, at first made the mediation task sound like an oxymoron. Furthermore, entering an unknown context as a stranger where collaborations are already being built makes one quite reliant on the openness of others and chance encounters. How to help translate in a conflict when not speaking the language of the farmers? How to gather personal, intimate, and situated insights and stories when facing a communication barrier?

At the same time, while working across perspectives and positions contributes valuable insight and nuance, it can also bring contradiction and a sense of piecemeal incompleteness. During this PhD, I am simultaneously undertaking ethnographic methods consisting of shorter interviews and extended stays on farms, later analysed through artistic practise, completing a secondment at AWB, providing insight on the policy-making process, as well as attending an international academic programme. As such, it entails working across different scales - micro, meso, and macro - in various directions - bottom-up and top-down - and with different public organisations. Attempting to combine various roles and perspectives and produce coherent insight can result in a failure and merely make the patchiness of the conflict and communication barriers more visible. How to manage those sometimes conflicting approaches and build a consistent yet heterogeneous narrative?

I will argue below that the Participatory Action Research invested in creating synergies and relationships between those different inputs is an act of translation. Translation within this PhD is an overarching design strategy, inspiring different tactics, helpful in the process of reworlding. In order to start engaging in translation - building lasting and meaningful relationships - when facing so many complexities, one has to embark on visiting (Arendt 1992, p. 43). Visiting entails an examination of the world from another's perspective, rather than assuming that understanding is built by an appropriation of the

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other's perspective (Vermote, 2024, p. 18) As such, it is a variation and offspring of translation tactic - it attempts to create thresholds between different worlds, languages, and actors and provide an entrypoint to the lifeworlds of farmers and policymakers through reciprocity and empathy. How to start the process of translation through visiting?

2.1 Preparing for visiting

Early in the research, it was quite difficult to see a clear entry point, as well as a red thread connecting the different positions I was to take during my research. Rather than assembling various pieces of one puzzle, it felt more like attempting to cluster disparate elements from foreign projects, resulting in a mishmash. This perhaps aligned in my mind with the distance created by the language barrier - the sense of being in-between (at times, bordering on outside of) academia, secondment, and fieldwork exacerbated the sense of strangeness. In order to get closer to the farming context and engage in the first act of visiting, I began archival research. Analysing similar case studies and parallel realities pointed me towards fascinating cancelled pasts and broken futures, but not much closer to the present struggles. Archiving possesses a high dose of serendipity - not necessarily a flaw on its own - but also distance; one comes across documents haphazardly, following a unique pathway, while remaining removed from the contexts investigated. I could have, of course, simply driven around the countryside and tried to walk into farms in order to speak to farmers; however, an approach like this, resemblant of Zofia Rydet's method in her *Sociological Record* project, has never seemed quite right to me. While working on the project, in the end gathering some 16,000 photographs of the Polish countryside, Rydet was travelling across villages, knocking on doors, and coming in decisively, often foregoing awaiting invitation. With her unique charisma and charm, however, she was usually able to win the sympathy of her unsuspecting hosts in a couple of minutes, and convince them to have a photograph taken, even if she surprised them in the middle of their dinner. Led by empathy, no doubt, desperate to archive the lives that were soon to disappear without a trace, she might be forgiven for trespassing. (Photographer's Gallery, 2025) In my case, however, I was certain that engaging in brief, unexpected, and imposing visits was not the right way forward; that I would need to negotiate my way in, offer something, come regularly, and engage with the lives of farmers, if they were to open up to me. Given the difficulty in meeting farmers, this amounted to walking in the dark and trying multiple doorways at hazard.

Perhaps though it was exactly this sense of walking in the dark that made me, in time, attuned to even the smallest signals of potential cooperation or insight and what in the end prompted me to take slightly desperate measures. When I was offered to participate in one of the Water+Land+Schap meetings addressed to farmers, but held in Flemish, I still accepted without hesitation. Several hours of failed live translation later it transpired that no farmer was present. Thus, when I was offered participation in another meeting of this kind, my first instinct was to politely refuse. In the end, quite reluctantly, I went and asked to be introduced before one of the lectures. Even though, as I found out later, I was misrepresented as a person working on water management from a technocratic perspective, it was exactly this misunderstanding that made one farmer approach me and start asking questions, as they were keen to explain to me their standpoint, drawing from agroecology. Another key person for the project simply very kindly answered my email which I sent expecting no answer, and, unexpectedly, pointed me towards farmers living in the area and suggested an entry point through WWOOF (a network facilitating homestays on organic farms), which became a pivotal moment in the research.

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Getting into the field can be a very lengthy, unpredictable, and challenging process, during which one needs to remain open to a variety of possibilities and pathways, knowing full well that perhaps none of them will lead to an entry point. This sense of having to release control and allowing oneself to be guided by chance outcomes and trust of others reframes the process of PD into an exercise in patience, humility, and receptivity. If the realities of farmers remain, so far, hidden and obscure, they may never resurface in conventional fieldwork undertaking interviews and desk research. They may require the researcher to dive head first in unfamiliar waters, get disoriented and lost, and wait on the threshold to be invited into farmers' worlds. (Head, 2018, p. 290) Staying with such uncertainty (Morton, 2010, p. 59) and uncomfortability, embracing failures, miscommunications, and dead ends, and accepting them as necessary parts in growing understanding and communicating, draws attention to the concept of linguistic hospitality (Ricœur, 2006, p. 10) and translation. Both concepts see difference as part of cultivating understanding, rather than an obstacle, and point to other understandings of a shared language - communication built through reciprocity, conviviality, and time, requiring visiting with curiosity and attention. Translation as a design strategy focuses on the benefits of not speaking the language of one's interlocutors, making one more curious, attentive, patient, and quiet. A basis for poetics of relation lies in willingness to face unknown forms of communications and to become affected by others.

2.2 Participatory Action Research as translation

As such, the Participatory Design process in this research is an act of translation. Within this context, translating is, simultaneously, a strategy to build understanding and trust between me and farmers, as well as farmers and policymakers. One of the possible pathways forward in bridging the gap between the knowledge of farmers and the detached language of policymakers lies in retracing the everyday realities of farmers. For farmers, not only are their uncertain futures contingent with everyday temporalities, blending the usually split reality of daily life and climate change, but the everyday is also a far more tangible and relatable scale in contrast to the abstract language of legislation. Farmers often have a much more realistic and pragmatic assessment of policies, as their daily life continues to be significantly impacted by them. (Head, 2018, p. 49) Finally, if climate crisis is the daily reality of farmers, then in order to understand how to reimagine transitions with them, it is necessary to retrace and participate in their everyday, mundane, domestic, and often unnoticed practices - deconstruct crisis through daily relations. Translation as a design tactic might also help nuance farmers as a community, rather than maintain the pretence of homogeneity which not only makes them almost unapproachable but simplifies their problems to black-and-white narratives. Focusing on more intimate, small, and personal stories, collecting them to reveal the multiplicity of perspectives, both on farmers and policymakers' side could potentially counteract such imaginaries and pluralise them. Recognising diversity among farmers is crucial for policymaking; legislation should become more attuned to seasonal shifts, smell of soil, shades in the vineyard, and shapes of clouds hovering above farms.

On the other hand, translating is also a way to combine and reconcile the different perspectives, scales, and institutions that inform my research - moving between academia, AWB, fieldwork, and personal background and practise - as well as think how those different components could mutually inform one another. All these contexts engage with participatory methods in quite different ways, entailing different capabilities and mindsets; all are enriching the process, however moving between them and constantly reassessing my position can be difficult. While getting insight into the decision-making process through cooperation with AWB is extremely useful, as it facilitates contact with coalitions on the ground, it can also create false expectations,

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not only among farmers but also in me - translation, despite promises, has limits to its possibilities. A more conventional, desk-research approach, on the other hand, while often providing necessary distance to dissect and analyse data, can create an illusion of being far removed and abstract from the field. On another note, my personal insights and background, informed by my foreignness and artistic inclinations, has perhaps made me more appreciative of and attentive to failures, miscommunication, and fiascos. Hence, while the focus on successful implementation and sharing good practises among designers and policymakers working on Water+Land+Schap that I have noticed throughout my secondment at AWB is, beyond dispute, needed and valuable, at times I did not feel that it can always resonate with some of the farmers that I have encountered in my field visits. Farming and creating artistic works are not linear success stories; probably, both me and farmers are used to talking about and learning from failed crops, sowing mishaps, and incorrect predictions. Perhaps it is also a personal trait that made me focus on the personal, domestic, and even curious, bizarre, or unusual stories, rather than hard data, which resulted in developing a design tactic that I will describe below. I will argue that reworlding is, very often, an act of self-translation, too - creating alliances and constellations in places and actors unlikely or simply unseen to others.

2.3 Building on translation

Weaving between different ways of doing PD in-between institutions, countries, and scales seen as translation requires a set of auxiliary tactics and practices. What those other strategies or tools could entail? Below, besides revisiting visiting more in-depth, I will propose two other approaches - clouding and accumulating - as well as discuss a design translating device combining all those tactics - an almanac. Visiting, clouding, and accumulating in many ways align with the tactics crucial for the project - respectively, retracing, reconnecting, reimagining - while the almanac, by gathering them together, could potentially aid in reinstitutioning, and, in consequence, reworlding.

2.3.1 Retracing as visiting

Visiting as an approach became a cornerstone during farm visits, as it points towards mediation undertaken through interacting with domestic landscapes of farmers and participating in their daily routines. As such, it quickly drew my attention to reciprocity and resulted in offering help in farmwork, which led to either arranging my visits through recommendations of other farmers, or through WWOOF. A conventional ethnographic work often risks mere extraction of data without giving anything in return. Participants are to offer their time, while the researcher may not be expected to actually deliver anything in return. WWOOF-ing and offering assistance during stays counteracts this, as well as brings a sense of empathy to research and hope for future co-design. Within environmental transitions, farmers are often represented yet rarely invited to the table, resulting in a deep lack of self-articulation of their realities. Perhaps this is why, although I have an artistic background, quite useful in participatory processes, I refrained in the beginning from producing visual outputs; I did not feel comfortable expressing myself visually having so little knowledge of the people I was to interact with, afraid to merely project my own assumptions. Now, after several visits, archival research, and becoming more familiar with the context, I can finally start combining gathered stories and later verify, correct, and co-create with farmers. I will come back to the farms that I visited and discuss with farmers the stories that I have put together. Hopefully, these individual sessions will prove rich in valuable feedback and help shape the almanac significantly, while also providing inspiration for farmers and drawing them closer together.

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Photo taken during one of the farm visits. Source: Author.

2.3.2 Reconnecting as clouding

What translation and visiting also attunes to is spotting metaphors and reading between the lines. (Robert, 2024, p. 9) In that respect, it takes a lot from the concept of thinking with water as outlined by Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis (2013). In the beginning of the project, I assumed a more missionary approach of looking for room for water on farms and homes - assuming that farmers might treat water with hostility, as an unwanted entity provoking floods and droughts, and robbing them of their identity as key part of the environmental transitions. That entailed asking about water bodies, which usually gave me quite pragmatic and practical answers, related to irrigation, wells, and drought. That contrasted heavily with all the other insights I was gaining, revealing a sense of fluidity, ability to live with transitions, not against them, and receptivity to changing circumstances - even if, at times, it meant going with the flow of market demands. The most insightful and illuminating stories were shared in moments of unscripted relaxation and informal togetherness, when trust was being slowly established. At other times, the most revealing answers seemed at first unrelated or ambiguous, releasing illuminating insights only after careful examination. At some point, it became clear to me that this field requires the ability to decode meanings. “Beyond simply asking ‘Where are these waters located?’” (Chen et al., 2013, p. 9), I realised I should have been on the lookout for what water means and carries with it - being fluid, receptive, interconnected, and disoriented. Thinking with water to understand potential and current effects of transition on farmers, requires noticing how it already influences ways of being. (Chen et al., 2013, p. 9) Thus, I started looking for leakages - remarks, points, signals, which revealed a situated, attuned, and fluid knowledge about living with transitions - and tried becoming more receptive myself.

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Photo taken during one of the farm visits. Source: Author.

Receptivity became an inspiration to develop a design tactic for fieldwork and data analysis - being affected by, rather than affecting farmers, and looking for "ignored, invisible, under-articulated, or unintelligible" (Chen et al., 2013, p. 13) traces of relationality and underlying motivations fueling the conflict. It also reframed the research and attuned me to temporalities of farmers, revolving around harvest and seasons, rather than the academic intense and hectic activity.

No one will discuss environmental transitions when you have to pick pears. (note from the fieldwork)

What receptivity changes as well is the process of doing PD - it does not follow a milestone-driven linear path, but rather goes back and forth, it stumbles, errants, and dawdles. Staying with uncertainty, multiplicity, and unpredictability translation and visiting entail calls for non-linear inquiries. In order to better understand the nuanced motivations driving stakeholders, researchers sometimes need to go off the beaten path, allow themselves to become lost and disoriented in multi-directional lines of thought. Clouding, taking inspiration from clouds, perhaps less tangible and elusive bodies of water, is a design approach without a clear horizon, fragile, and highly susceptible to externalities, requiring a great deal of receptivity and curiosity. Clouding undertakes multi-directional inquiries and embraces uncertainty, thus acknowledging entanglements between disparate worlds and obscure actors. When attempting to enter through multiple doorways, hovering over the threshold, and not fully knowing who your host will be, one can lose confidence as there is very little control over what data comes your way. However, in fragmented and fragile contexts, where pieces of information are scattered over sites, actors, scales, and institutions, a researcher should embrace the uncertainty that entails. Preparing for a multiplicity of viewpoints to disorient and entangle in messy interactions, rather than sticking to the plan, facilitates working with

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unpredictability. Sowing seeds of cooperation and future relationships is always guesswork and only time will tell if they will bear fruit. (Farmer's Blog)

Letting oneself be guided, getting occasionally lost, and embracing disorientation informs Participatory Action Research in a novel way. Coincidentally, clouding as a method transpired itself thanks to chance collaboration with a fellow Reworlder - a result of cross-pollination of ideas, fields, and observations (unpublished). This shows how important is the openness to go astray and engage with concepts and thoughts going beyond one's research in order to get a better understanding of it. When co-developing clouding, I realised my understanding of the context I am investigating has surfaced through slow and nebulous inquiries, trials and errors, and continues to grow, escaping a false promise of ever reaching a full capacity. Reconnecting in an opaque and obscure context also requires the ability to decode meanings which brings an interesting tension with informality and empathy. In order to thoroughly understand some of the stories one might feel the need to record interviews which contrasts with the wish to refrain from scripting interviews and going with the flow of the conversation. If decoding is, in itself, a kind of translation, too, it requires analysis, but also (re)visiting, interpreting gestures on the spot, while reflecting on them from distance, taking remarks and stories through filters. That is why I decided to retain as much as I could during conversation and simply take notes with reflection afterwards.

2.3.3 Reimagining as accumulating

Looking for hidden meanings and decoding metaphors makes one more willing to take in all the knowledge that comes one's way. Perhaps partly inspired by my personal practise drawing from counter cartographies or, simply resulting from the archival research that I am still undertaking as part of this PhD, analysing and intaking various miscellanea from the field, however ephemeral, intangible, or unrelated they may seem feels a right approach in polarised and conflicted contexts. While archival research can reveal surprising parallels, illuminate future possibilities, and reveal latent dreams and fantasies, it is always a partial and incomplete view, leaving many narratives under the radar and unarchivable. Retaining and representing only a handful fragments and the loudest voices can often merely strengthen a prevalent narrative. When undertaking multi-directional inquiries, without a clear horizon in sight, one either needs to immediately sift data, or retain everything and let it brew. In my view, this type of research requires the ability to collect and retain a multitude of perspectives, details, and stories, allowing them to sizzle, mingle, and pollinate. In a sense, then, the research on possible future sponge landscapes itself should act like a sponge - absorbing knowledge from different places, times, and scales, and slowly releasing it whenever necessary.

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Photo taken during one of the farm visits. Source: Author.

Accumulating can be understood as a way to gather insights from multiple sources in order to dissect them, patch through to one another, and form temporary constellations of actors, contexts, and sites. As a strategy, it draws importance to side-tracked thoughts, trivial pursuits, and the many concepts surrounding the research, not forming its core, validating them all as insightful. Everyday realities, full of quirky details and unobvious traits might seem mundane, however they reveal a great deal of situated insight on how co-designing transitions might work. At times, chance encounters and going off the beaten path reveals more knowledge than sticking carefully to a plan. All threads and lines of thoughts encountered within the research contribute to it, interweave, and reverberate - regardless of their origin. Affirming archivability of even the most trivial of insights circles back to the importance of listening to the many worlds of farm(er)s if one is to understand how to co-design with them a world where they all fit.

An inspiration for accumulation as a strategy came from my secondment at AWB through working on the sponge landscape exhibition. Sponge landscape, a reality that AWB advocates for through the Water+Land+Schap project, which could serve as a win-win strategy for farmers and the environment, would be a retaining, absorbent, and interconnected ecosystem, inviting all actors to participate in equal measure. Transformation of a drained, cracked, and fragmented reality into an ubiquitously wet and shapeshifting entity, provides an apt metaphor for reimagining in the context of reworlding - not only bringing insights together but animating them and activating latent symbiotic relationships. Accumulating might also reveal insights for reinstitutioning - juxtaposing farmers' knowledge, different contexts, policy language, and personal insights to imagine a more trans-sectoral and trans-disciplinary approach to legislation.

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2.3.4 Translating and almanac as reworlding

Building on this I will argue that doing PAR with farmers is a matter of translating akin to farming practise of grafting - pollinating influences, borrowing insights and engaging in obscure relationality, and letting trust build slowly. Translating can be supported by visiting - entering the field with empathy and patience - clouding - adopting a quiet, receptive, patient, and unpredictable stance as a researcher, following multiple trails - as well as accumulating - retaining mundane insights, allowing understanding to grow unhurriedly, allowing oneself to become disoriented in the multiplicity of views and worlds coming together. Staying with uncertainty, being open to failures and misunderstandings, and affirming one's own strangeness, can attune to looking for confluences, relationality, and fluidity. Embracing and valuing various insights and knowledges points one to look for insights on co-designing transitions through mold, rot, frost, music inclinations, homes layouts, or recipes.

How to bring those insights, strategies, and practises together? While translating connects as an overarching design strategy and triggers three different approaches it needs perhaps a device, making a thread between those different tactics. This translating device could be akin to a patchwork, a representation that is constantly tended to and mended, bringing disparate fragments together in an act of path-finding, and facilitating messy entanglements and unexpected alliances. Going through it might resemble fieldwork - seafaring between islands of farms, collecting the various languages of facing uncertainty and conducting different variations of PAR. What could this representation look like and draw inspiration from?

3 Almanac

3.1 Potential of a reimagined farmers' almanac

This translating device, in order to aid in reworlding and serve as, simultaneously, a form of a record, a conversation starter, and a tool sparking reimagination, should collect stories of actors and sites and bring them together through tactile relations. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 485) It should be a continuously growing piece - maintaining it would be an effort of constant change of arrangement, improving stitches, reweaving lost constellations, and sewing in hidden details. This patchy representation could make sense of the intricacies underlying the conflict, provide an understanding of a micro scale of farmers, construct and deconstruct stories, and translate them into a new imaginary of practises. It should simultaneously encompass fiction, trivia, and storytelling, with hard data, interviews, and article fragments. To go beyond an extractive representation, it should be a way to retrace stories, reconnect to the sites, and reimagine farmlands as a place of ecosocial change. It could be non-linear and fragmentary, yet illuminating and detailed. Bringing stories of both hope and grief (Head 2018), it could perhaps serve as a compass in uncertainty - a source of affect and sense of togetherness. I will argue that a reimagined farmers' almanac could serve as such a living repository.

The etymology of the word almanac points to either calendar (from Andalusian Arabic) or climate (Arabic). Although it may first bring to mind the US series of popular almanacs, such handbooks, containing farming wisdom, are still circulating in Italy (under the name *Barbanera*), as well as in Flanders, where the *Duikalmanak* was famously an inspiration for the tear-off calendar *De Druivelaar*, extremely popular until this day. Almanacs are usually sets of yearly weather predictions, containing tips for gardening

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and farming, recipes, as well as data spanning from times of tides, moon phases, or medicinal advice. Almanac's etymology and specificity, combining speculation, triviality, and humour with seasonality, science, and practicality, serves as a promising tool to reimagine into a growing record of Flemish farming. Interestingly enough for this case - an attempt of digging deep into obscure insights - the *Duikalmanak* combines in its name the word almanac with the word *duik*, translating to *to dive*.

An almanac, an ecosystem cross-pollinating practices, times, and actors, could serve, simultaneously, as a repository of retracing practices - a record collecting domestic portraits - providing connections - sketching parallels between scales, temporalities, and worlds - reimagining - cross-referencing stories to think differently on transitions - and reinstitutioning - translating situated insights into policymaking. Ordinary ways of being, practises, memories, dreams, articles, policies, could be curated and animated into an entangled narrative in order to find ways to navigate the conflict farmers, water, and policymakers are part of.

3.2 Creating the almanac

3.2.1 Form

How could the almanac work as a physical object? To trigger relational and non-linear thinking, while providing each story an equal share of space to speak on its own, it could have a circular format - without a clear beginning, inviting investigation from multiple angles and sides. If the almanac is not only envisioned to grow constantly and evolve, but also to be rearranged by its readers, its binding could be flexible and soft. It could host a multiplicity of formats, typefaces, images, and designs to reflect the heterogeneous and shifting reality of farming. One insight might be contained within a single card or a zine, however they could come into conversation as well as grow through grafted additions. Despite this fluidity, the almanac would not be devoid of a structure - stories could be grouped together into categories or possess a set of keywords and links, allowing cross-referencing and jumping between insights like in a hypertext.

If the almanac is envisioned to both counteract and enrich the language of policies, as well as, for instance, media narratives, its stories concerning farming could be written with greater attention to detail, reflecting quirks, peculiarities, and specificities of particular farms and farmers, taking readers into these different lifeworlds. Other insights, such as articles, climate data, interviews, or quotes, could then come into interesting relations with fieldnotes and multiply viewpoints and narrators, as well as scales. In order to encourage reading and interaction, the stories could be concise, accompanied by one-liners, tips, hints, recipes, images, and drawings. Similarly to *Duikalmanak*, containing, as mentioned in its subtitle, "all that is good, not that which is not good, along with other things", the almanac should treat all insights as archivable. While anchored in real sites and reflecting multiplicity, the almanac should also encourage thinking across farmlands, ecosystems, and countries. My fieldnotes, on the other hand, could also open doors to my personal observations and thoughts, revealing the inner workings of the translation process and the beauty of visiting across languages. I believe that the almanac should be polylingual, moving between strangeness and familiarity, micro- and macrocosms. In order to spark reflection and relationality, some of the stories, beyond building a hybrid between a poem and encyclopaedia, could serve as a game - some cards might work as a tarot deck. The almanac could either grow in a digital version, or have an online component calling for and showcasing stories, for instance in a newsletter format.

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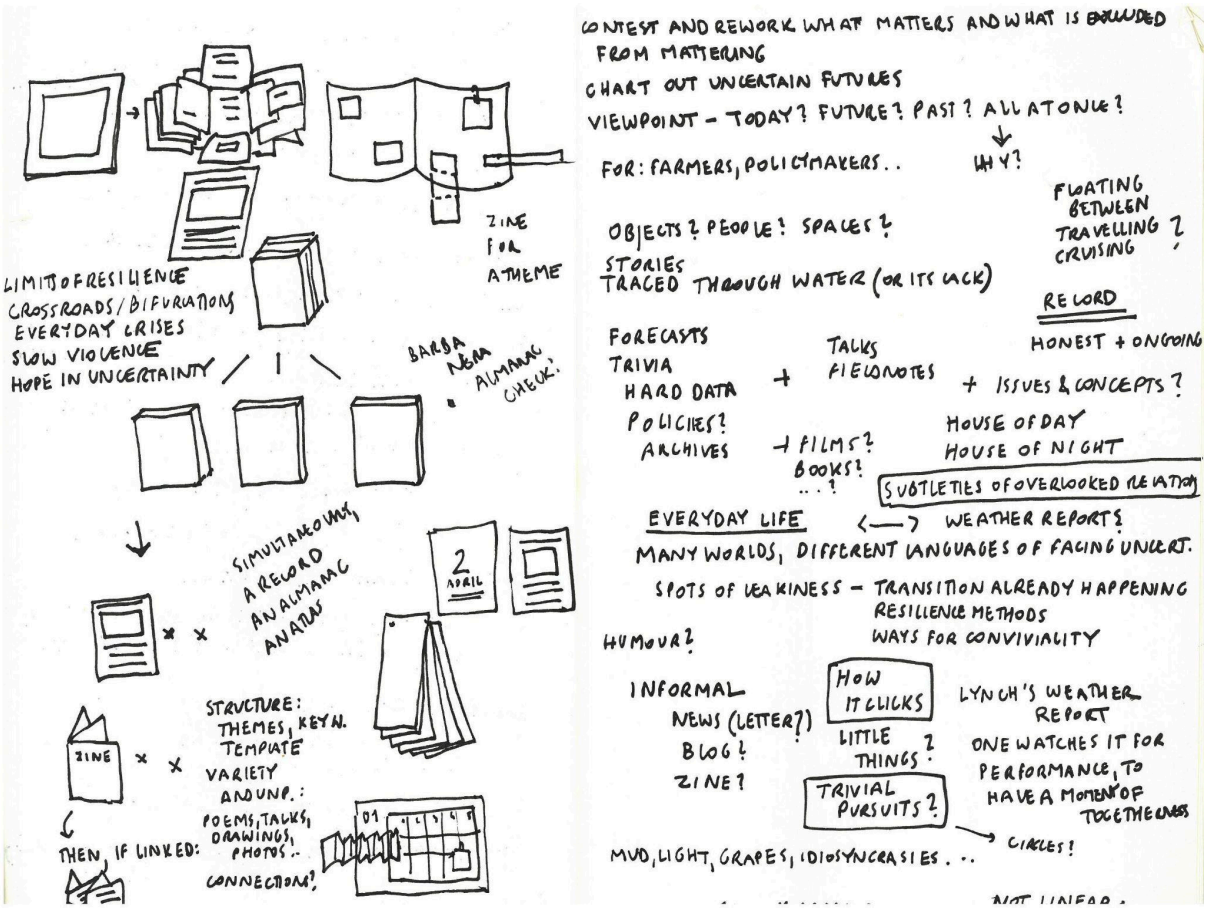

Scan of sketches of the almanac. Source: Author

3.2.2 Content

If the almanac is, in itself, a sponge, revealing interconnectedness and activating relations, its stories should concern not only farmers, but also everything around their farms. It should give attention to loamy soils, November frosts, deliveries of produce in Brussels, drops of dew on grapevines, cherry trees, and kitchen tables - all those little things building a sponge puzzle. Apart from fieldnotes, stories, memories, dreams, and hopes, the almanac could encompass farmers' knowledge and policymakers' struggles. It could incorporate other case studies, archival matter, fragments of newspapers, recounts of farmers' protests or blog entries. Some content could involve monthly reflections, cooperation and mutual support tips, or adverts asking for farm assistance. In a bow to *De Druivelaar* calendar, the almanac could possess a humour section, gardening tips, and moon phases, as well as revive old month names, but it may also introduce agroecological knowledge, horoscopes, speculative weather forecasts, and precipitation data, or introduce new phrases and words, reflecting more the current unpredictability and volatility. The almanac could be divided into categories such as insights concerning slow violence (Nixon, 2011) - hardly noticeable delicate changes within farming ecosystems - as well as discussing moments of confluences - parallels between past, present and future temporalities, moments of conviviality or cooperation tactics. Some of the sections covered by each entry could be recurring, like keywords, links, images, while others might alternate.

What kind of data could it hold, exactly? It could tell the story of when I finally made a connection with a farming family through cooking and discussing food. It could reflect if

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an openness and porosity of a household reflects the fluidity of its owners. It could discuss how picking different fruits requires different sensibilities and reflect on farmers through that. It could draw a parallel between cherry and peach trees I visit in Flanders with the cherry and peach trees growing in my grandmother's garden. It could disclose struggles of an agricultural advisor and their ideas on policymaking. Or it could think about why farmers enjoy pondering the nature of things. And what it all brings to policymaking.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Hope for reworlding

So far, policymaking, with its abstract and generic legislation, is the inverse of my research, focusing on an almost personal understanding of resilience and situated sensitivities. Policymaking language is still not a lan*d*guage (Maurovich, 2023); it does not originate from the mud, light, or clouds, it does not take into account the daily confrontations. The almanac might potentially bridge this gap and unsettle policymaking. However, given high receptivity and unpredictability of the research, the creation of the almanac might lead to an unforeseen direction. Rather than give insight for policymaking, it might reveal the common predicament - that situated, detailed, and unique knowledge is untranslatable into governance. This, however, points to a different idea of hope, as Lesley Head suggested in her *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene* - one that "is messy, fraught and uncertain" focusing on "the life and world we have, not the world as we wish it to be." (2018, p. 11) The almanac takes inspiration from this kind of hope - while it may provide a compromise or potential for reinstitutioning, first it aims to equip with a more ordinary and unspectacular hope. It may simply open floodgates and reveal more stories hidden within farmers, sites, policymakers; as a conversation piece shown during visits, it may provoke change or reflection. Through its format and generosity of stories, insights, and trivia, it might reveal a latent - hidden, yet present - community, bring actors together, and provide a more poetic, layered, and nuanced portrayal of farming.

4.2 Next steps

The almanac is a crucial tool within my work adopting Participatory Action Research, providing a device capable of involving actors in the co-creation of their narrative. Through its soft and flexible format, as well as the suggestion of incompleteness and expansion, I hope farmers and policymakers will engage in creating stories, correcting or completing insights, deconstructing narratives, and rearranging data. More importantly, I hope the almanac will give something back to the ecosystems that revealed their secrets to me - that farmers might learn of an inspiring practise, bond over shared struggles, or take action. The almanac will grow regardless, inviting more actors to its already quite established ecosystem capable of illuminating connections and links - such as seed suppliers or community kitchens. How could it evolve? Who else to invite to this ecosystem? These are some of the questions that will guide the next months.

While going unprepared and without a script for farm visits, having no clear expectations, but merely offering time and assistance seems to work best for this Participatory Action Research endeavour, being directionless, walking in the dark, and constantly meandering can be hard. Being unsure of the goals or exact pathway can, at times, exacerbate the sense of being out of place, especially when it is paired with the

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constant shifting between contexts, institutions, and scales. However, as one picker told me, the fact that I cannot fully explain where my research is going may just mean that I am in the right place. Disorientation, "feeling out-of-place," can be vital to "renewing our sense of orientation and to discovering other ways to relate to place[s] that escape habitual assumptions." (Head, 2018, p. 290) Within the reality of transitions, fraught with volatility and uncertainty, approaching shifting contexts with openness, curiosity, and vulnerability, however hard that may be, feels like the right approach.

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