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SUOLO PRST SOIL

GIJS DE BOER Plantcare and Power Tools

A gijs.garden report

GARDENS, CARE, TRUST, CONTROL

There was mould on the soil of my plants. The other day I had given them nubs of plant food, to get growing, but now those efforts seemed in vain. Luckily it turned out pretty easy to scoop out the mouldy layer from the soil, like peeling film from a jam. It felt good to take care of my plants, to protect them. But when I googled for the cause, I read that the mould wasn't a problem. That actually, it allows the nutrients to travel to my plants. The mould wasn't competing, it was taking care. I wasn't taking care, I was blocking it.

It's one of many interactions with my plants where I realised I had to deal with an inherited modernist idea of what it means to care. A masculine one too. A protective 'I got this, let me handle it' attitude. In trying to care for my plants, I assumed a role based on control. Control of their growth, the organisms they interacted with, their sad moments – and then I cut off an old leaf.

I recognise my attitude in responses to ecological crises. Geo-engineering, green tech and eco-design are here to fix it for us. And I've started to distrust this control paradigm. Not just because it's based on a power hierarchy that strips the care recipient of agency and keeps them dependent. It also just fails. It assumes the knowability of the world, so it can intervene in the best way. And then I scoop out the mould and kill my plant.

In teaching, collaborating, making, I learn ways to hush my inner control freak. Ways of caring that respect and even support the agency of the other, instead of overruling it. Timothy Morton talks about a 'care less' attitude 1, but in a way that I interpret as meaning something like 'trust more'. I want to get to this mode when relating to plants. Not just care, but care based on trust rather than control.



[1] Garden Map compass.

The Tool Garden

Crossing the dimensions of care and control creates a nice garden plan for my online *gijs.garden*. Four corners, four ways of relating to plants. In the garden tour that is this essay, each of the corners plays a narrative role. Starting from the clear dystopia of controlling but not caring relations, to the more hidden dystopia of caring but controlling relations (think me and the mould); then to the unlikely ally of a romantic but distant relation, and towards the utopian caring and trusting corner.

Care relations never grow by themselves. When you peek into each corner, you can make out a small ecosystem of things – from logos to garden plans to tools for plantcare. On *gijs.garden* I gather instances of material culture that I see as Care Tools: things that not only reflect but also structure our relations with plants. When I use a particular Tool – like a Rake or a Pot – it casts the plant in a certain way, and gives me a certain role. So how do the things around us condition the kind of plant-relations that may grow, as a kind of synthetic soil?

I plant these Tools in the garden based on how much they seem to invite humans and plants to interact (neglect-care axis), and on the agency granted to the plant (trust-control axis). Let me now take you on a tour through each corner. We'll find different types of Care Tools and see what they may teach us about creating conditions for trustful care, where plants and moulds and humans alike may flourish.



[2] Wintergarten Villa Tugendhat with Rake.

I. Rakes and Weeds

How to have plants in a modernist house? In a place all about light and space, where to leave dirt and brown leaves? For the 1930 Villa Tugendhat, Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich had a solution. The modernist marvel got a designated space for plants. Next to one of the outer glass walls they added a second wall, which cleared space in-between to house a *Winter Garden*. Humans could remain unbothered, while plants live inside a sort of widened double-glass window. I wonder if you could still smell them. In winter, the tropical plants frame the barren trees outside like a filter on a lens.

Here in the dystopian corner of gijs.garden it feels a bit like at the Tugendhats. There is a golf course, an icon of a wired globe, a doormat. A Blue Marble, some pulled weeds, a roll of astroturf and a green bin. A can of insecticides, a vertical farm, vitamin pills and a gas-fueled weed-burning torch.

Look at the golf course lawn! A flawless field rolled out even over desert sands; an augmented reality mat for sunny games and covert meetings. Like in Teletubbies, nature is a set, a virtual backdrop for soft drama to play out. The rolling slopes have to be as spotless as a greenscreen, or else they would foreground themselves, breaking the illusion that the set is not living.

A Rake, like a doormat, produces a distinction between dirt and clean. It draws the old leaves and young weeds out from the plants and flowers that were planned, planted. It may look like Rakes practice care, but as long as planned plants are proxies for something we humans want, like a nice view or free veggies, it's selfcare in disguise. Rakes – the logic of Tools in this corner – draw boundaries between organisms for our use and organisms outside of that. They make some plants resource and others weeds. Meanwhile they cast humans as rakers, the emperor who decides. But in either option, plants are objects: part of the earth that doesn't need to be saved on Noah's arc, that wouldn't think nor feel, that just create the conditions for us and all other animals to shine.

The logical endgame of this way of relating is something like a *Global Farm*, where natural elements are optimised to produce what humans need. A cooler climate? An engineering problem. Calming beauty? Served by a thin slice of plants in front of the window. Why does this feel off?

When three astronauts went on what would be the last manned trip to the moon, some 50 years ago, they looked back at their home planet and took three photos with their on-board Hasselblad.

One would become famous all over the planet they were looking at: The Blue Marble. It was an emancipatory image, centring Africa and removing all meridians and borders shown on usual representations of the globe.

But the image feels different now. Maybe it's because first the Eames couple and then Google Maps smoothed the conceptual leaps from seeing the whole globe to navigating to the nearest coffee shop. Timothy Morton explains how such felt "quantum jumps" serve to guard different ways of worlding.² The Marble and the forest don't map onto each other easily. It's why the green hues over the continent of Africa didn't feel like plants. Until you could see how familiar textures of clouds, waters, algae, fractally scale up and seamlessly lift you from how those waves feel, sound, smell, and shake you.

Blue Marble puts me into God-mode. Presented with the issue in front of me – say, a conflict between economy and ecology – it makes me think of how to organise things better. The Rake Tools of this garden corner keep plants at a shaft-length distance, but without leaving them much room to do as they please. Power Tools. Plants are kept in check so tightly they might as well be a render, or removed so far that their only trace is visual.

This place is an 'easy dystopia' because life held still is not alive. It answers perverse desires for cleanliness and control, but even a pure modernist me would feel uneasy staying here for too long. Let's visit the corner where this conflict is resolved in a way to live with plants without getting our hands too dirty.



[3] Sunken Garden with Pot.

II. Taming Pots

One of the most iconic Victorian gardens is located near Victoria, Canada. Jennie and Robert Butchart came to these hills to produce cement in 1904, but when the limestone quarry was exhausted 21 years later, they were left with an ugly pit. How to turn a bleak post-industrial society green? Jennie envisioned a paradise: she had horses cart in top soil, gathered plants and grew it all into the *Sunken Garden*.

It's spectacular in a way that doesn't resolve quite easily where to locate the wonder. With 151 blooming flower beds it's a lush landscape, an amalgamation of insect seduction in intense colours and shapes. An idyllic, utopian, dream-like place. Still, the hand of the author is never hidden. It's almost too visible to immerse myself, to really enter the myth. The borders of flowerbeds, paths, trees and fields are just so clear-cut. There is an honesty to this

"Nature". Through a Window, desires colour our view, plants go wild, and our breath turns dew.

Even in this nostalgic vision there's a future baked in. Follow the longing and we get to *Holocene Park*. Walled off reserves keep wilderness as was, effectively fencing off humans in urban zoos, powered by vertical farming and other forms of nature instrumentalized to the extent that they don't jump the fence. The Wild can only exist in a pure form if we humans live in a place that is not just tame, but also reified as purely cultural. Across the street from the New Garden is Huis Sonneveld, another modernist architectural marvel, with a great view of the garden but no plants behind the Window.

Perhaps it's necessary to fall in love. But Window tech remains an Unlikely Ally. Unlikely, because in this corner there is attention but not much care. Plants just do their thing. It's refreshing for modernist me. Windows are allies, because they invite a mode of relating that is attuned to plants. Daydreams of immersion, kept in check by a wish to long. Just to taste the tease of what Joanna Macy calls the "erotic affirmation of the world of phenomena" 4. I feel their majesty, and yes, fall in love. But it's not enough. It even feels easy, avoidant, privileged.

An analog photo suggests a temporal distance that allows for longing to arise, but I don't want to trade proximity for trust. Window Tools purify, just like Rakes, but rather than disposing of *nature*, Windows wash the lurker away in its overwhelming power. To be overgrown and turned green. Salvation at the expense of objectification. The hidden hierarchy. Perversions are fine but when eroticism turns to exoticism, when I *other* the world to escape in it, pleasure becomes consumptive. Plants as stalked-on projection screens for fantasies from behind a foggy Window.

The overgrowing New Garden grew less inviting to the general public than to illicit encounters between those who dwell well in the shadows. Reason enough for the municipality to start weeding out. The garden has since been redesigned. A care relation ceases to be a relation when it dismisses either its plant or its human. Tempting, but with an escape into the wild I get off the hook too easily. How to care while caring less?

IV. Front Swamps

High care low control. What does that mean? The theory is clear: an ecological view of plants does not see them as separate from humans, but intertwined kin, entangled in a molecular cycle where one breathes in what the other breathes out, to infinity. Trustful care then transcends the division between figure and ground. Not a caring-for as if we're separate, but a caring-with where its subject and object fuse. When we take care of ourselves, we care for our lifeworld, and vice versa. Sure, but how to *feel* that way? *Live like it?* Now it's just a wordy caption to a still growing artwork.

It's slippery: let the plant just grow and I'm back in the New Garden evading myself. Prune it clean and I have followed my will to power back to

⁴ Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, 1991.
⁵ Elvia Wilk, *Death by Landscape*, 2022, p. 46.

the Sunken Garden. We need material conditions that implicate the human in a care ecology. The engagement of Pot Tools, but with the wonder of Window tech. Enter the mystery garden corner, where uneasy crossbreds may light the way.

It's still a muddy mess, but there are some early bloomers. A plastic chair on a veranda, a Hockney painting of a jungle-garden, an icon of hands held underneath a floating branch. A bamboo-shaped trellis, a rhizome diagram, a selfie from space. There's a hot smelly compost container, Babylonian Hanging Gardens. A portrait composed of fruits, a theory on degrowth, white birches in a coal mine.

A Front Garden is a strange zone between inside and outside, public and private. Many Dutch neighbourhoods feature them, perhaps as green buffers to compensate for the usually see-through terraced houses. Their compositions are as varied as the interiors, from patches of grass to tiled makeshift bike parkings to little Versailles. But don't get fooled to think they are frontal backyards. Front gardens are house garments. They dress our homes, and through it, our dire reputations. We're implicated, we have skin in the soil.



[6] Front garden Breda (Google Streetview) with Trellis.

Let's take the Front Garden, as a human-plant arrangement, as a Tool prototype. In the subtle move of placing a Winter Garden on the other side of the wall, it starts to frame not the outside but the inside. Any Front Garden care is not disinterested altruistic planet-care, it's spoiled with selfcare. It can still be left rather wild, but unlike the public New Garden, its wilderness is bound by the projected thoughts of the postman who has to pass through. Even a wild look is a look. It organises vanity to work for plants. True, that also invites control, Raking the yard clean between blooming flower beds. Still, the need to manipulate this piece of land is loosened by the fact that it is outside. Unlike a Pot, a Front Garden organises plants in a space where they go with the flow of the environment, make mystery root connections and have mouldy encounters.

Arcadia was a land where humans and non-humans lived harmoniously. That's the myth. I like to believe that a spirited Avatar-world is the endgame of Front Garden care mode. Yet I should hold back nostalgic visions of going 'back to the land'. Elvia Wilk writes how "there are toxic materials in the soil and the air – corporations and governments have put them there – and this is now the baseline (...) there is nothing to go "back" to." 5 How to fall in love with an intoxicated earth? A taste of,

artificiality, a vulnerability to the idealised expression of flowered hills. It's not pretending to be nature proper, and not pretending not to want admiration for how well shaped and kept. For how strong the grip, the mastery. Let 65 thousand flowers bloom, and fifty gardeners sweat.³

The high care high control garden corner is like the Sunken Garden: clean, but very green. Here we see a monstera, fertiliser, and a picket fence. There is a tulip, a Persian carpet, and a peacock made from flowers. A supermarket basil plant, a hand holding a sprout, some tie-wraps, a bonsai, and an artwork with electrodes pinched on a leaf.

There's a saying sometimes attributed to Descartes: 'God created the Earth but the Dutch created Holland'. Building dikes and draining polders came with a way of relating to nature as a 'cultivated landscape'. As someone born on this soil, I grew up with the Anthropocenic condition that Man mingled with the Earth as a given. One consequence often drawn from facing the Anthropocene is responsibility: we spoiled it, now we should fix it. If everything is touched by humans, if there is no outside to our sphere of influence, if everything is a garden, we better be a good gardener.

A Tool that invites both care and control is like a Pot; it makes a plant manageable, tame. Plant pots were ancient ways to transport species, but they carried in them the idea that a plant is an individual. This allows for a new living arrangement where humans and plants coexist in the same house. Humans provide rain and food, plants peace and optics. Something lush in the organic shapes of the plants contrasting the clean lines of the new floor and old windows. Something juicy in the green of the leaves melting with the white of the walls into a softer shade.

Rather than a Global Farm, the final *telos* of Pot Tools is Planet Garden. Human and technology fuse in the role of a gardener, tending and taking care of Nature. This requires lots of monitoring, and lots of maintenance. Toxins and invasive exotics back to where they came from. Healthy and harmonious ecosystems in. Part of me is susceptible to this mode. It feels like taking long due responsibility. After centuries of wreckless tool-swinging, now justice reigns from above, so we better put those tools to use for reparative ends.

The dystopia here is hidden in the paternalistic role baked into this mingling. Unlike in the Winter Garden, humans and plants intertwine, but they don't intertwine evenly. Humans as gardeners make sure plants flourish and protect them from all that may hurt them, but within the borders of their beds and Pots. When geo-engineers care for our geo, they also perpetuate a hierarchy that strokes our ego. Pots are Power Tools too. See, where are the weeds in the Sunken Garden? The mushrooms, the yellow leaves? Do all these plants even *want* to grow here?



[4] The New Garden of Nieuwe Instituut with Window.

III. Wilding Windows

Construction sites often turn into unintended scenes of urban rewilding. Between concrete slabs and drainage pipes: a blossoming bouquet of plants usually considered weeds. This was the model and aesthetic for *The New Garden* of the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. As far as design goes, Hans Engelbrecht and Frank Bruggeman introduced some building materials and sand heaps in 2015, and plants did the rest. In a few years time, the garden was filled with a wild range of plants.

The low care low control corner here feels like the New Garden: a bit unkept. There is an overgrown shed, a landscape painting, an analog camera. Many wildflowers and some nettles in between. There's a smelly pond with an orchid, botanical drawings, a green-roofed Hobbit house. There's a what-ever-emoji as well, a photo of earth 'rising' from the moon, there's a thorny red rose.

From the painter of the *Wanderer over a Sea of Fog*, here we see Caspar David Friedrich's 1825 view of the *Ruined Monastery of Eldena*.



[5] Caspar David Friedrich, 1825, Ruined Monastery of Eldena

In the romantic end of it all, plants grow over houses until it's hard to say where rock ends and brick begins. There's still a little shed in the painting. Like a new sprout, it emphasises both the age and size of its elder. The monastery fell under the weight of wilderness, and a wanderer found a home. The house is not very well-kept, nor are the plants. But they do grow freely. Wilderness undoes the idea of weeds anyway.

Rather than being tamed, plants in this corner are all made wild. Tools that push us here work like a Window. They frame a *view*, like a landscape painting. The framing gaze feels almost as present in the paint as the famous *rückenfigur* of the Wanderer. It's probably not surprising when you hear that Friedrich added much of the greenery according to taste. He thought that "a painting must stand as a painting, made by human hand, not seek to disguise itself as

what Britney Spears calls, *Poison Paradise*. Sure, one's toxin is another's food: their CO₂, our O₂. But only well-dosed toxicity is intoxicating, a good bitter.

Unlike in Holocene Park, I can't be innocent in Poison Paradise. The way through petro-modernist traces leads from biting the apple towards loving the mould, the dirt, the rot. As much as I want to let it all grow, utopia requires dosing this uncanny. Caring well means killing well ⁶. Trustful care takes shape not as dominating or pleasing, but expressing and answering desires like dance moves. To live with the toxic swamp, Care Tools need to do more than help eradicate it, tidy it or just look at it. Front Gardens need to organise a space to negotiate desires. Tressels for play, challenge and cohabitation. Only through mouldy encounters, by getting dirty and flirty, we can get to the kimchi, the wine, and the tempeh.



[7] Plantcare Tools Compass.

Towards taste

We've come to the end of our tour. We learned about the importance of proximity from the distant Winter Garden, commitment from the Sunken Garden, trust from the New Garden, and positionality from the Front Garden. How to get to hot swamp flirts? I'm learning.

In urban Rotterdam, I don't have the luxury of a front garden. However, it is allowed to lift some tiles to create a facade garden. We made one in front of the studio. The plants catch lots of stray plastic that we try to pick out. I wanted a climber around the studio entrance, but despite regular watering the wisteria died. The soil quality was suspect. We tried jasmine and I tried to care less. It seemed to grow resilient, tough love answered by fragrant flowers. The supermarket basil plant grew tougher leaves. We don't know what it sucked up from the soil, but when studiomate Jack mixed them in with lemon and avocado for a pasta, it smelled like pastry and tasted quite like paradise.