ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN SITU

The salamander and the reclamation of a post-industrial landscape

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a young teenager, let's say about 14 years old, I had a friend called Michael, and his father was a native of the city of Maastricht. Michael's dad had these amazing pictures of underground sites in the surrounding area, and I was always fascinated by them.

One day, I had the chance to visit the St. Pietersberg together with Michael, his dad, and his little sister. The journey began in a small Belgian place called Ternaaien, and from there we went up the hill. As we walked up, I felt like we were entering a completely different world. Suddenly, we stood before the enormous entrance to the ancient underground quarries that dominate the St. Pietersberg. Entering the vast, underground halls of the mountain, I immediately felt at home, and ever since then, I've felt a certain bond with the St. Pietersberg that keeps me drawing back.

I've spent many hours and days walking in the surrounding area, but there was always this one place I couldn't visit: the ENCI cement factory, located right in the heart of the St. Pietersberg. This minor gave me an incredible opportunity to finally access that location, to explore, research, and be a part of the transformation.

I want to thank the Limburg Real Estate company for giving us the opportunity to walk, explore, and research the old ENCI factory site, and all the guest speakers who came along and gave us wonderful insights. I also want to especially thank Krien Clevis for creating this incredible minor, where I learned a lot, and for her warm personality, always bringing great enthusiasm and a positive attitude. Furthermore a special thanks to all my fellow artists during this minor for being such amazing group of people, and working togheter with them gave me great joy.

GEOLOGY, HISTORY AND INDUSTRY

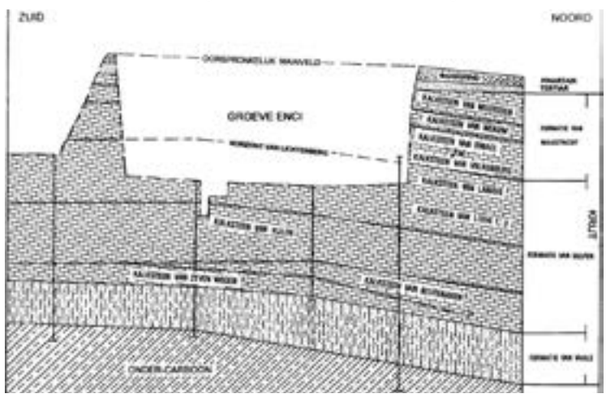
GEOLOGY

The site of the St. Pietersberg is often mistakenly called a “berg” or mountain in Dutch, but in fact, it is actually a plateau. The St. Pietersberg in Maastricht is an extension of the Ardennes, and due to tectonic activity, it was pushed up. Erosion during the Permian, Triassic, and Jurassic periods created a relatively flat landscape.

During the Late Cretaceous period, the area was submerged by a shallow subtropical sea full of marine life. After a long period, the sea began to retreat, and from that moment on, it once again became part of the mainland. Erosion of the plateau and the surrounding area often gives people the impression that they are in a mountainous terrain, but the highest natural point of the area is in fact 101m above sea level (N.A.P.). The limestone plateau in the area was formed during the Late Cretaceous period and makes up the beautiful layers of the St. Pietersberg.

These layers of limestone are often interrupted by thick layers of flint/silex, which occurs in beautiful straight lines. The limestone in the area was formed layer by layer from deposits of calcareous skeletons on the floor of the Cretaceous Sea. Zuid-Limburg is the only area in the Netherlands where limestone can be found close to the surface; in Dutch, we call this “dagzoomen.” The rest of the surface of the terrain is covered by a thick 5-meter layer of Loess.

The ENCI site, which is the main focus of the minor, is also home to one of the most famous and distinctive rock formations in the geological world, called the Maastrichtian. This formation, which was first described by Andre Hubert Dumont in 1849, was formed during the final stage of the Cretaceous period and plays a significant role in the study of Earth’s history.



HISTORY

Since I was 14, I have been walking around the St. Pietersberg and its surrounding area, and I can proudly say that this is one of the most interesting landscapes in the Netherlands.

Human activity is widespread in the immediate vicinity. The oldest human activities we know of can be found on the Cannerberg, not far from the plateau of St. Pietersberg. Together, they also share the Geer Valley as neighbors. A complete settlement of the Linear Band Ware was discovered on the Cannerberg not long ago. The Linear Band Ware culture represent the oldest farming communities in Europe, and in 2013, a 3.5-hectare settlement was found on the Cannerberg. These people chose this location due to the fertile loess soils that the region is rich in.

On the plateau itself, there is a site that has always caught my attention: the Celtic oppidum near the old Château Caestert. The area of the St.Pietersberg was once the domain of Celtic tribes. The Celts were an Indo-European people who played an important role in European history. One of these Celtic tribes, the Eburones, had a large domain that extended from the Meuse to the Rhine. These Eburones most likely built the oppidum we can now observe. An oppidum was a fortified settlement located in a strategically chosen place in the landscape, and according to some researchers, it also served as a (ritual) meeting place and trading center.

After the Romans arrived, the society of the Eburones quickly changed. They transitioned from small settlements and oppida to cities with forums, temples, theaters, etc. The Romans established a strategic settlement near the St. Pietersberg, close to the Meuse, which eventually grew into the city of Maastricht as we know it today. Much has been speculated about Roman activities on the St. Pietersberg, but to date, no concrete evidence has been found. It is believed that a Roman military camp may have been located at the top of the plateau, near the open field at the Castertweg. There is also speculation that the Romans may have started the underground extraction of limestone, but again, no concrete evidence has been found for this.

INDUSTRY

It was during the Middle Ages that the area saw a high frequency of human activities. Due to the presence of limestone, locally known as “mergel” in Limburgish, the St. Pietersberg became an important concession area for mining activities. In the Middle Ages, a vast number of churches, monasteries, houses, and other buildings were constructed in rapid succession, creating a huge demand for building materials.

This demand was especially high from the Liège region, where many religious institutions were active. Fortunately, there was a suitable type of rock located nearby that could be exploited cost-effectively. The region around Liège also had significant expertise in mining techniques, and when combined with the knowledge present in the religious institutions, an industry developed. This gave rise to skilled craftsmen known as “blokbrekers” (stone cutters).
Initially, there were several quarries on the St. Pietersberg operated by various private and public groups. Over time, some of these quarries expanded and merged into one another, resulting in an enormous underground network of tunnels stretching for hundreds of kilometers. (Silvertant, 1999, pp. 13–14)

By the 19th century, the demand for mergel declined significantly as less labor-intensive building materials such as brick became more popular. Once, the South of Limburg was a major region for mergel extraction, but today only one company remains active called Kleijnen in the village of Sibbe.

The underground extraction of mergel was not the last time the area was exploited for mining purposes. The ENCI (Eerste Nederlandse Cement Industrie) was founded in the 1920s for the production of Portland cement.
After the Second World War, Europe slowly began to recover from devastation and entered a period of reconstruction. This effort required vast amounts of building materials, one of which was cement. The ENCI became the heart of the reconstruction effort in the Netherlands, and the St. Pietersberg was excavated at an astonishing rate, resulting in the enormous crater we see today.

The ENCI factory was of great importance to the local population, as it was one of the largest employers in the area. The company also had a vibrant community life, organizing many activities for employees and their families.

In 2018, ENCI ceased its activities on the St. Pietersberg, bringing an end to decades of extraction at a location with high natural and historical value. In August 2020, the site was officially closed. In 2021, the ENCI factory grounds were acquired by Limburg Real Estate (LRE), and the surrounding area came under the management of Natuurmonumenten. This marked the beginning of the transformation and redevelopment of the site, which now includes five national monuments and eighteen municipal monuments.

A BEAUTIFUL ENCOUNTER

On October 15, 2024, my class and I were given an assignment to work with the technical camera. A discussion arose about what would be a good location to take photos of nature. I suggested visiting the ENCI quarry, and the class agreed. We all went to the site together and started looking for a suitable spot to photograph. I had already completed the assignment the week before, so I wandered around the quarry with a classmate. We were standing near a pile of silex that had been gathered here and there, when I suddenly noticed a small creature slowly moving between my feet.

Based on the knowledge I had at the time, I quickly concluded that it was a salamander, although I didn't immediately know which species. I had seen many kinds of animals and insects on the St.Pietersberg, and of course amphibians like frogs, but never a salamander. It was a moment I won't forget anytime soon. During one of the guest lectures in our minor, we met speakers for whom animals played an important role in their (artistic) research. That inspired me to focus on the salamander in my own research, as this small creature had made such a lasting impression on me.

In some kind of way, the salamander and I have a lot of things in common. First of all, we both feel at home on the beautiful plateau we call the St. Pietersberg. Both the salamander and I dwell, crawl, and bloom in this lush terrain.

Screenshot of the video i made in 2024

ARTISTIC RESEARCH

The Plateau of the St. Pietersberg is home to some fascinating flora and fauna. Among the more well-known inhabitants are the owls that reside on the northern side of the ENCI quarry. However, as an artist currently working on this project, I find other, less famous creatures of the area far more interessting.

The creature I'm referring to is a vertebrate amphibian belonging to the order Caudata, resembling a blend of a frog and a lizard. Of course, I'm talking about the beautiful salamander. With over a hundred different species, salamanders come in a wide range of sizes, shapes, and colors. On or near the ENCI area of the plateau, two types of salamanders are most commonly observed: the Alpine newt and the fire salamander. The one I personally spotted in the quarry last year was an Alpine newt; the fire salamander tends to be more catious to be spotted.

The Alpine newt, which includes four subspecies, is native to the European continent and typically grows to a length of 7 to 12 cm. It has a dark to blueish-grey coloration, often marked with tints of red, especially on its belly or throat. Alpine newts thrive in both high-altitude and lowland forested areas. Being semi-aquatic, they spend much of their lives on land, travelling to water only during the breeding season, seeking out ponds, lakes, or puddles.

The fire salamander is also native to Europe. This striking black salamander with popping yellowish and/or orangish spots grows to a length of 13-20cm, and is despite its wide distribution in Europe, now a threatened species. It typically inhabits high-altitude regions between 250 and 1,000 meters and is most often found near streams. Occasionally, they are also been seen in caves or other underground habitats. One particularly remarkable aspect of the fire salamander is its ability to produce a dangerous toxin known as Samandarin. Despite various studies, this compound remains relatively poorly understood.

Another fascinating discovery about the salamander is its highly regarded symbolic meaning, often associated with transformation and regeneration. This makes the salamander the ultimate symbol for my artistic research at the ENCI, where transformation also plays an important role.

"The salamander is so cold that it puts out fire on contact."
Pliny the Elder, Natural History, Book 10, Chapter 86.

My research methods mainly consisted of observations (fieldwork). I explored nearly the entire quarry site in a systematic way, searching for signs of these salamanders, from the quarry walls to the small pools of water scattered throughout the area. In addition, I made use of photographic documentation and consulted relevant sources.
The first few times we were allowed to openly visit the ENCI quarry, I took my chance. I explored every building and every corner of the facility, hoping to spot this beautiful creature once more.
One of the things I did with great care was trying to reimagine the day I first encountered it. I went back to the exact location (black circle on the map) where I had once seen it. Unfortunately, there was no sign of the salamander that day. So, over the next few days, I focused mainly on the ENCI facility itself.

The main reason behind this shift in focus was the noticeable decline in human activity on the site. I thought this might be the perfect opportunity to see if the salamander had returned to this particular area. I could imagine that a creature like the salamander would have avoided this part of the site before, due to all the industrial noise and movement.

One of the things I remember clearly from the day I spotted the Alpine newt is how close it was to the old boundaries of the factory—just about five meters from the perimeter. Another striking detail was the presence of high piles of silex, clearly dumped there by humans, as they were not naturally occurring. These piles had strange holes in them, and I imagined they might be doorways to the salamander home.

One day, I was walking from the Slakhal towards the far end of the perimeter, because I had noticed the week before that similar man-made silex piles were present on the north-western side of the ENCI factory (black circle on the map).

When I looked closer, I saw the same kind of holes I had seen last year. On April 7th of this year, we went on a walk with Phil Kahls, a biologist from Maastricht University. I had the chance to ask him about these silex piles and the holes I had found. Phil told me that these piles serve as microhabitats for salamanders. These microhabitats are small, specific environments within a larger terrain that have their own unique conditions and support particular types of organisms that inhabit them. According to Phil, these microhabitats provide shelter, stable temperatures, and moisture for the salamanders that dwell there.

Unfortunately, during this whole minor, I haven't found a single salamander. It was like chasing a ghost. But the traces of the salamander are there at the old ENCI factory site, and that was a joyful feeling.
For me, this was a clear sign: the salamander has reclaimed the ENCI factory site as its habitat once more. These remarkable creatures show their resilience by reclaiming this industrial landscape.

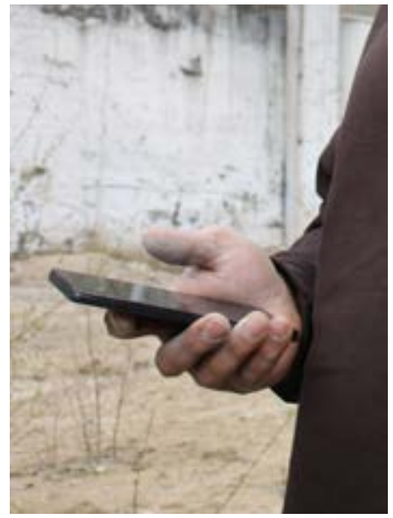
During the three days we had the workshop with our group at the ENCI site, we were guided by Kamila Wolszcak. I experienced the workshop as a very valuable and positive experience. Kamilla is an artist with a deeply empathetic approach, both in her work and in how she connects with the people around her. I wanted to use these three days to create a work that would allow my research to flow into an artwork I could truly be proud of. Although I am a photography student, photography is not the only visual art form I practice. These days offered a great opportunity to further explore and develop my skills within autonomous art.

During the workshop, we were allowed to choose a spot either inside the Slakhal or outside of it, to help strengthen the context of our work. I decided to go outside and search for a location that felt right to me. We were also encouraged to look around the ENCI site for materials that could be used in our work. After some searching, my eye fell on a spot next to the Slakhal, a square, sandy area that immediately sparked possibilities. I also felt it was important to give something back to the site in some way, which is why working outdoors felt like the good choice.
On the first day, we began with a group meditation session led by Kamilla. During that moment of stillness, I became acutely aware of how incredibly silent the area is. Only at the edge of the vast quarry could you hear birds and signs of life, everywhere else, it was just us and our breath. It felt as though humanity had made an intervention in nature through its industrial activities at the ENCI quarry, and now we were sitting in the quiet remains of that. This struck me deeply, and with that feeling, I wanted to begin making my own interventions in the landscape.

I took a chair, walked to the location, and sat down right in the center of it. I wanted to fully merge with the surroundings and experience what the landscape would bring out in me. On one side of the area stood a crumbling brick wall, barely still upright. On the other side, the Sint Pietersberg rose up, with the halls of Slavante visible just above the location. At the far end of the terrain, a mound of sand had been pushed into the corner.
In my mind, I imagined the salamander reclaiming the ENCI quarry as its home. I felt inspired to begin working on landscape interventions with this vision in mind. I quickly turned to the ancient Celts as a direct source of inspiration, especially since this region was once part of their domain. The Celts often built large, circular structures that held deep symbolic meaning. The circular form symbolizes not only eternity but also renewal and restoration.

With some plastic bags and a blue bucket i found on the terrain, I went in search of various materials that I could find and use for my work(s). The site offers a range of materials, but I focused specifically on those that I found particularly interesting. First, there was a lot of industrial waste scattered around, from rusted chains to parts of machinery. Sometimes, the industrial waste was incredibly close to the silex piles, where the salamander has its microhabitats. In addition to the many industrial materials I found, I also looked for natural materials such as flint, moss, sand, and so on. These materials form the foundation of my works. After a few days of searching, taking inventory, and sweating, I finally found all the materials I can use.
These materials are:
CONSTRUCTION WASTE: In the immediate surroundings of the area where I work, there is a lot of construction debris, mainly consisting of cement. This waste most likely comes from a building that once stood here. The fact that it's made of cement gives it symbolic value for me, it has undergone a transformation. It started as limestone and has now become waste material that I collect.
INDUSTRIAL WASTE: Here too, I've consciously chosen materials that have gone through a transformation. What caught my eye was the industrial waste scattered around the site, many pieces are rusted from exposure to the elements. The traces of transformation, time and decay make them meaningful to me.
MOSS: Moss interests me not only because it grows almost everywhere in the quarry, but also because of one striking characteristic: like the Alpine newt, moss blooms in moist environments. This creates a natural connection to my research theme and work.
SILEX: Silex forms the main building material for the microhabitats where the salamander resides
CLAY: In the area where I work, I found a type of grey clay. This clay was not used during the ENCI operations and was considered waste. For that reason, I find it interesting to give it a new purpose.
GLASS: On the other side of the area, there is a corner where various waste materials have been gathered. I noticed a pile of safety glass. After World War I, there was a shortage of glass, and during that time, people started mining flint (silex) to convert it into glass. I want to use this glass as a symbol for the silex that occur in the plateau ´s geological layers, something we can see everywhere with the naked eye. I find the transformation from silex to glass fascinating, and I want to express that symbolism in my work.
WHITE PEBBLES: In the same waste pile next to the site, I also found a pallet of white pebbles. They appear unused, almost forgotten. It feels like it's finally time for them to be given a purpose

I want to create interventions in the landscape and, in combination with the surroundings, I aim to make an immersive work. I want to walk from one piece of work to the next, telling the story of myself and the salamander along the way, i will also show the video with the footage of the salamander is spotted last year. At each work, we will pause in the beautiful landscape, discuss it, and then move on to the next piece. The reason I want to walk from one work to the next is that I have always been a guide to many on the St.Pietersberg, and with guiding comes talking.
Ultimately, everything will come to a closure at the massive mound of sand in the corner, which I would like to use as a symbol for the St.Pietersberg. By integrating the location and materials into my work, I want to make the cycle of transformation visible and celebrate the resilience of nature.
In total, the area I work in will comprise four installations. At two of these installations, the "circle" has been broken. This will serve as a reminder of the human activities that have intervened in the landscape as we know it today.



Inventory of some of the industrial waste i found

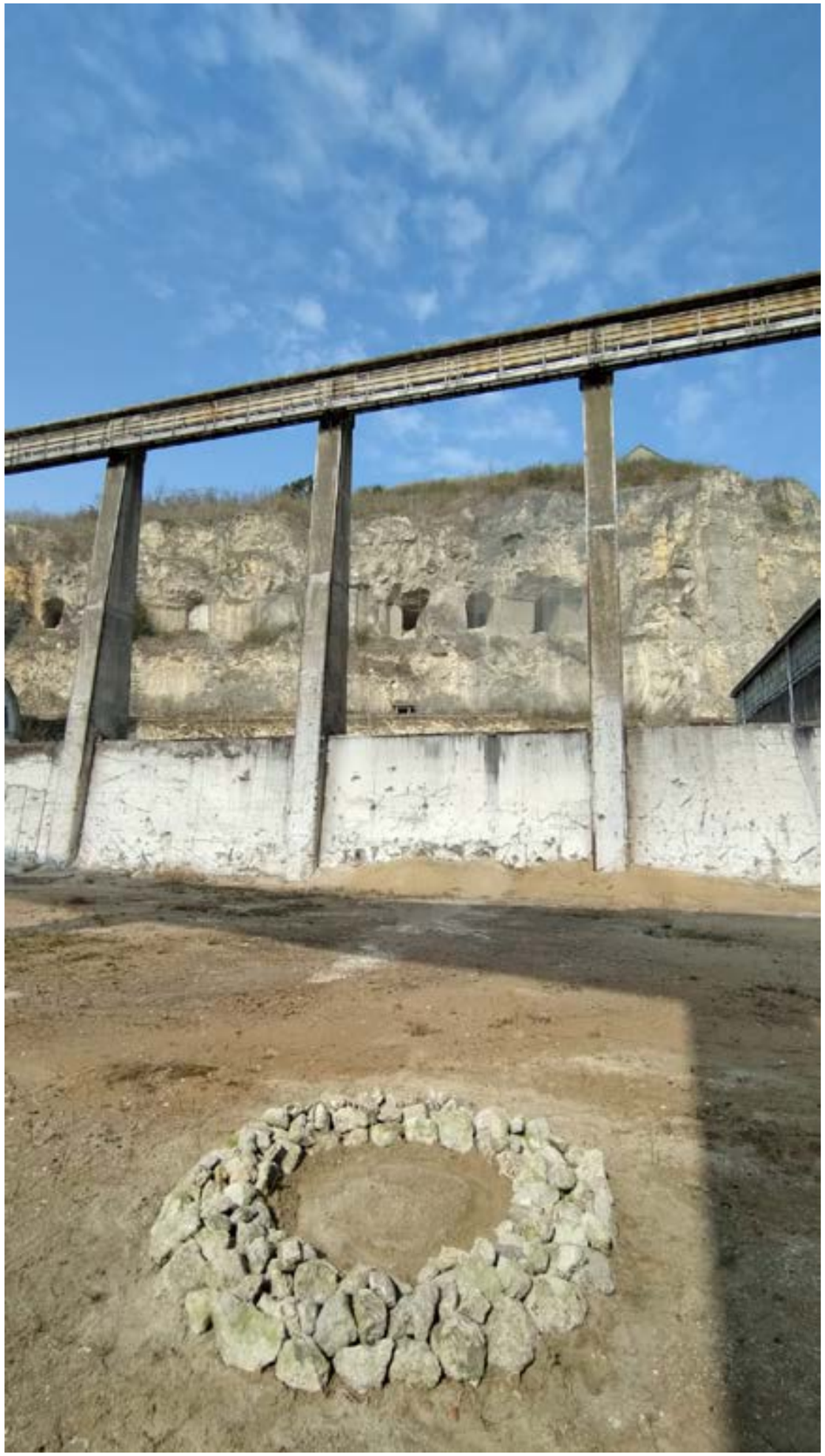


Photo credits: Lukasz Bernat, Rachel Ensink and Jesse Stassen

For my final piece on the exhibition day, April 22nd, I would like to create a work similar to the one shown here. This particular piece gave me the most satisfaction, and most of my colleagues agreed. I would like to work with the same materials, as they represent both the natural and artificial layers within the ENCI quarry, and the vibrant colors strongly attract people's attention. I also intend to make the work larger than its current 1-meter diameter, my goal is to expand it to at even more.

The works are titled CIRCUM, which is Latin for 'circle', but it also means 'around'. This is a direct reference to the salamanders that have made their habitat in and around the silex piles, as well as a symbolic reflection on what is happening in and around the industrial landscape.

The work I create, in combination with the location, will give you an immersive experience. You feel small within the space, surrounded by the layers of the quarry. Just like the salamander that now inhabits this post-industrial landscape, you feel equally small in this enormous crater left behind by the ENCI.

Conclusion

During the minor, I gained many insights, far more than I had before about the subject area. I also realized that I've actually been using walking and obserav-tion as a research method for years. This simple, yet eye-opening realization made me more aware of my own strengths. It was also incredibly nice to use the ENCI headquarters as our base of operations. The combination of being in the old main building of the factory and heading straight out into the terrain from there felt almost epic. I even saw myself as a pioneer, as we were allowed to explore the ENCI area without any restrictions whatsoever. That gave us the opportunity to work in a very open and diverse way.

Through my research in and around the ENCI, I discovered that the salamander has quietly returned to the post-industrial landscape as we know it today. This beautiful creature has begun to reclaim the area where it once dwelled. There-fore it serves for me as a perfect symbol of the transformation of the site.