

Wandering Through the Past in Search of Regenerative Futures

Anna Bitkina, curator of **State of Wander**

Royal Houses at a Time of Ecological Crisis

Historical palaces and castles, with their opulent collections, manicured gardens, and vast parks, remain enduring symbols of Europe's aristocratic legacy. From Versailles to Schloss Schwerin, these sites reflect not only wealth and artistic achievement but also histories of labour exploitation, colonial extraction, and environmental control. Their collections, shaped by anthropocentric academic and scientific traditions, often speak of conquest and displacement rather than simple aesthetic appreciation. The surrounding landscapes, designed to project power, replaced complex ecosystems with controlled ornamental designs.

In the context of trans-local and global climatic and geobiological changes caused by human activity—often rooted in the domination of humans over other species—these sites raise pressing questions: how can historical museums address the environmental and social histories embedded in their collections? What role might they play in challenging dominant narratives of wealth, power, and human mastery over nature?

Based on research relating to the collection of Paleis Het Loo, **State of Wander: Towards Environmental Restoration** presents a framework for addressing these questions and exploring possible answers. It seeks to challenge the Eurocentric mindset and examine the role of royal privilege in shaping capitalism, perceptions of nature, and European ecological history. Paleis Het Loo in Apeldoorn—once a Dutch royal summer residence and hunting lodge—is now a national museum. As a site of cultural and natural heritage, it preserves 17th-century baroque gardens, stables, taxidermy specimens, hunting collections, floral textiles, collection of paintings, ceramics and glass, and a plant collection including both local and imported varieties.

Originally built on rugged heathland for royal hunting and gardening, Het Loo exemplifies how aristocratic culture shaped landscapes for sport, leisure, and display, reinforcing visions of nature as something to be ordered and mastered. Today, these historical values are increasingly being reassessed in contemporary debates on sustainability and interspecies coexistence.

State of Wander also contributes to ongoing discussions about global climate change rooted in Western epistemologies. The origins of climate change cannot be understood without tracing them back to the 16th century—to colonial expansion, extractive economies, and large-scale transformations of land, workforce, and ecological systems. Against this backdrop, **State of Wander** invites a critical re-reading of the museum as a site where histories of power, ecology, and representation can be reimagined. This comprehensive examination of the past helps to highlight the importance of preserving our environment as we move forward. **State of Wander** is also driven by a search for new lenses for the cultural and spatial analysis of existing human-made environments

and representations of nature embedded in urban structures or presented in museum collections.

Paths of Inquiry

Emerging from an in-depth collective curatorial and artistic research process initiated in 2023, **State of Wander** presents **10 new art projects** by Dutch and international artists and thinkers. The research developed from the group's investigative engagement with the collections and landscapes of Paleis Het Loo and was conducted in close collaboration with specialists from the museum's Department of Collection and Research and other divisions of the institution, including Annette de Vries, Renske Ek, Willem Zielemann, Paul Rem, Niels Coppes, Hanna Klarenbeek, Kristin Duysters, Saskia Minjon, Charles de Smet, Hans Schuite, Olga Tijink, Johan Splint, Niels de Kruijf and others.

A major part of the research was based on the bodily and sensorial experiences of Paleis Het Loo through which we wandered for many hours in a company with museum curators and other experts. Covering kilometres through the historical rooms, parks and gardens of Paleis Het Loo, we delved into exploration, curiosity, and the search for meanings beyond the conventional paths of understanding. Over the course of 7 months the group developed a cognitive apparatus to rethink European ecological history by addressing different formats of nature display, elements of museum exposition and everyday life rituals in traditional historical collections.

The research for **State of Wander** was guided by multiple interwoven strands, establishing a framework that directly informed the exhibition's artworks. During monthly meetings at Paleis Het Loo, the team traced the historical continuum of Western humanist thought and natural sciences—from Renaissance hierarchies of nature to 17th-century Cartesian logic framing the environment as a resource to be controlled. These inquiries were connected to contemporary posthumanist perspectives, emphasizing interdependence among living organisms and advocating a collective, planetary approach to ecological responsibility.

The estate itself became a central site for investigation. By navigating its gardens, buildings, hunting enclosures, and administrative structures, the group explored how land and natural resources were historically governed, appropriated, and displayed. Archival materials—from landscape paintings to surveillance technologies—revealed mechanisms through which authority was recorded and maintained. This research informed **Rob Voerman's** architectural structure **W**, which embodies alternative spatial, ecological, and economic logics, and **Edward Clydesdale Thomson's** **home/host**, where hidden technological networks and robotic systems extend questions of power, control, and inclusion into contemporary infrastructures.

Spatial and visual studies also shaped rooftop **prospective boxes** by **Clemens Driessen and Teodora Cecilia Buccilli** drawing on their mutual interest in sovereign space. Visitors are invited to reconsider European ideas of perspective and territorial control, experiencing the palace grounds from a vantage point informed by both historical design and posthumanist reflection. Simultaneously, the investigation of natural history

collections, hunting infrastructures, and human–nonhuman relations underpinned works such as **Terike Haapoja's Foreign Beasts and Other Rarities**, **Jan Christian Schulz's Biophony of Het Loo**, and **Bryony Dunne's Tables of Power**, all of which explore the material and conceptual entanglements of species, ecological hierarchies, and human authority.

Colonial histories and decolonial perspectives were another critical thread, informing **Caitlin Berrigan's 1,311 Diamonds** and **Gayatri Kodikal's Searching for Lost Seeds**, which confront the legacies of Dutch colonial power, royal wealth, resource extraction, and the slave trade. These works materialize historical research in immersive, sensory, and spatial experiences, tracing the entanglement of empire, trade, and ecological change while inviting visitors to reconsider the museum and estate as sites of ongoing investigation.

Marianna Maruyama's perfumes **Diana** and **Common Origin** and **Antye Guenther's Salt of Interest** further translate research into sensory and material interventions. Maruyama evokes historical narratives through scent, connecting mythology, hunting, and human–animal relations, while Guenther's evolving salt formations respond to the estate's conservation practices, highlighting ecological processes and the temporal transformation of material history.

Across the exhibition, the artworks act as extensions of the research, translating historical, ecological, technological, and colonial inquiries into perceptible experiences. Each project connects directly to a strand of inquiry, creating a network of relationships between past and present, human and nonhuman, material and conceptual. Together, they transform Paleis Het Loo into an active site of research, reflection, and critical engagement, where visitors encounter the estate not only as a museum but as a living framework for investigating histories, ecologies, and futures.

Exhibition Experience

State of Wander transforms Paleis Het Loo into a living research platform, linking the museum's historical expertise with contemporary critical thinking and experimental art practices. The projects interrogate the palace's environmental and cultural heritage, proposing new visual languages that reveal the social, political, and ecological logics embedded in its collection. In doing so, the exhibition contributes to discussions on planetary change and challenges inherited assumptions about human domination over nature.

The exhibition unfolds across the palace's historical rooms, its architectural extensions, and outdoor spaces—including gardens, stables, and surrounding forests. Site-specific artworks form an interconnected meta-narrative, exposing hidden ecologies, power structures, and historical legacies, and demonstrating the collection's potential for critical reflection on the present.

State of Wander is conceived as a field research trip or an art expedition, guiding visitors through histories, ideologies, and complex political, economic, and environmental processes. It invites an intellectual and analytical journey across cross-continental, cross-

generational, interspecies, and inter-class and -race relationships. Beyond its aesthetic impact, the exhibition engages visitors through vivid bodily, spatial, sonic, and sensory experiences. Stretching from the museum's interior to its surrounding landscapes, **State of Wander** encourages active reflection on environmental concerns and our entanglement with more-than-human worlds.

Toward Regenerative Futures

Conducting an inventory of the historical logics of Western thought not only illuminates the past but also shapes our understanding of nature and its restoration today. This inquiry emphasizes the need to preserve the environment while exploring new ways of interpreting human-made landscapes and museum displays within urban and institutional contexts. By critically reassessing the museum's holdings, **State of Wander** opens spaces for (un)learning and contributes to scholarship on human interactions with nature. Drawing on interdisciplinary research and decolonial perspectives, it traces the roots of contemporary ecological challenges, expands historical awareness, and provokes political and environmental imagination. Ultimately, **State of Wander** fosters cross-disciplinary dialogue, reimagines cultural heritage beyond traditional hierarchies, and cultivates an ecological consciousness attuned to the responsibilities of the present and the possibilities of the future.