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# **Text, talk, things, and the subpolitics of performing place**

MarleenBuizer<sup>a</sup>, EstherTurnhout<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Centre of Excellence for Climate Change Woodland and Forest Health, Murdoch University, School of Environmental Science, 90 South Street, Murdoch WA 6150, Australia

<sup>b</sup>Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, Wageningen University, Droevendaalsesteeg 3, 6708 PB Wageningen, The Netherlands

## **Abstract**

This article tells the story of how a group of Dutch and Belgian citizens organized themselves to promote an area that they valued, to put it on the map, to raise awareness about its qualities, and to protect it from urban and industrial development. Our theoretical perspective focuses on the performative and political aspects of this place-making process and the discursive and material practices involved. We connect this to Beck's concept of subpolitics.

Our findings show how the group performed this place not only through text and talk – giving the area a name, using their knowledge and expertise to raise awareness about its values, lobbying and cooperating with decision-makers –, but also through things – installing art objects and information signs that articulate certain characteristics and values of the area. Our findings demonstrate the struggles involved in these performances. The group involved multiple perspectives on what the important values and characteristics of the area are and on what strategies would work best in trying to influence decision-making and protect the area. However, the use of expertise as the main strategy to gain influence excluded the more critical and activist strategies and privileging archaeological and historical values and characteristics came at the expense of attention on agricultural and natural values.

Our findings make clear that performing place cannot be taken to be homogeneous and that it inevitably involves multiple perspectives and demands. The struggles, power relations and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that this multiplicity implicates reveal a form of sub-politics that involves both politicization and depoliticization. Also, it is a form of subpolitics that is more diverse and ambiguous than Beck's conceptualization presupposes by its emphasis on the role of outsiders as a homogeneous group.

**Keywords:** Subpolitics; Depoliticization; Place-making; Discourse; Practice; Materiality; Performance

## **1. Introduction: the making of the Grensschap**

Around the border between the Netherlands and Belgium, in between the Dutch municipality of Maastricht and the Belgian municipalities of Riemst and Lanaken, there is a remarkable area that you can visit. It goes by the name Grensschap and roughly covers 6 by 11 km of a varied, mainly agricultural, landscape. Art objects, benches and information signs demarcate this area as a place of special interest. Although the objects seem like a typical way for tourist offices to attract visitors, this particular area is intriguing for two reasons. First of all, the signs are there not because the tourist office or any other municipal organization considered the area important, but because it was not considered important. Similar to many border areas, governments used it for developments that they considered unwanted elsewhere, such as industry, a golf course and a wind farm. Second, the area is interesting because it was actually demarcated and provided with information signs, not by a tourist office or a local government but by a small, relatively well-educated local group of Dutch and Belgian citizens. They shared a connection with the area because they lived in or around it or travelled through it on a regular basis. Also, they shared a concern about what could get lost if developments in the area continued. They criticized governments and developers for treating the area as a "no-man's land" or "a blind spot" (for example see Grensschap, 2009b). They wanted to protect the area from further urban and industrial developments and they felt that they could achieve that by making it into a place

of special interest, worthy of protection, in their own words (Grensschap, 2009a): a 'land-scape' rather than a 'international border' where two areas were 'standing with their backs towards each other'. They realized that first of all, they had to transform the strong presence of the international border in their own minds, into a place-based experience that reached further and beyond the border.

A growing body of border research recognizes the complex and varied character of present border situations (Kramsch and Hooper, 2004; Paasi and Prokkola, 2008). In Europe in particular, many of these situations are strongly influenced by attempts to develop cross-border regions in the scope of policies to establish 'a borderless Europe'. These attempts happen in the context of long histories in which nation-states have mobilized their borders to accentuate state-hood and national identity.

However, in the daily livelihoods of local people there has been much less cross-border interaction than the EU would hope (Strüver, 2004). This has led various authors to contrast state-or region-led initiatives to establish cross-border institutions with the everyday lives of local people in border-areas.

They emphasize that EU border rhetoric is often at odds with the daily experiences of these border people, who continue to speak of 'them' and 'us' (Van Houtum and Strüver, 2002; Strüver, 2004; Paasi and Prokkola, 2008). This article adds to this literature by describing a rather different type of cross-border project. Rather than a wider institutional ambition to form regions, the starting point of the Grensschap case was a shared concern among a small group of local people about a rural area that was important for them in their daily lives, but which they saw to be threatened by urban and industrial developments on both sides of the border. That their initiative was (initially) less driven by state- and region-led ambitions to form a 'borderless EU', raises the question of how border politics have been performed in this particular context. Our case is concerned with how a group of people mobilized the border not as a demarcation line but as a point of departure to turn the area into a coherent place. It is also concerned with how these (sub-)political performances interacted with EU political strategies and with the formal political institutions.

In the Grensschap case, the area was not labeled from the outside, for instance through government policies or other efforts to 'brand' a place as a site of cross-border cooperation. Nor was it simply a means for local elites to acquire funding resources from the European Commission (Kramsch and

Hooper, 2004). Rather, it was demarcated, interpreted, described, and promoted through the concrete performances of a group of local people, through language and texts, through activities such as field excursions, the creation of maps and through installing art objects, to persuade other people to see or experience the area through their lens. The Grensschap case tells the story of a group of citizens with a strong connection to a particular area and a strong sense of responsibility as regards its future. It narrates how this group attempted to actively promote the area and put it on the map. We use a theoretical perspective that highlights the subpolitical and performative aspects of place making.

Our analysis is based on various field trips together with municipal officials, members of the Grensschap and for larger groups, active participation in the event that gave rise to formation of the Grensschap, a series of ten in-depth interviews during the process of designing and planning the concrete outcome of the project, three in-depth interviews after realization of the art-objects – the so-called ‘landmarks’ – and attendance at a group discussion about ‘lessons learned’, between members of the Grensschap and the councilor involved. We also attended the formal event at which the ‘landmarks’ were presented to officials and politicians. The interviews took between one and a half to two and a half hours each and were based on a semi-structured format. Based on topics introduced by us in open questions, the respondents were encouraged to share stories and anecdotes and talk freely about their views and experiences. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were sent to the respondents and they were asked to read these and give feedback if they felt they needed to. The respondents included Belgian and Dutch, officials and citizens, the councilor involved, people still active in the group and people who had gradually become less active (Buizer, 2008). In the present article, the names of the respondents are pseudonyms.

## 2. Place, politics and performance

This section will introduce the theories and concepts that have informed our analysis. In particular, it will conceptualize the activities of the people involved in ‘The Grensschap’ as the performance of a place and it will discuss the politics, discourses and materialities involved in this performance.

The notions of place and place identity feature prominently in various branches of literature. While human geography (Paasi, 2003) and environmental psychology (Proshansky, 1983; Manzo, 2003) stand out as the disciplines in which they have been debated most often and perhaps most elaborately, authors from sociology (for an overview see Gieryn, 2000), cultural anthropology (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992) social psychology (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000), planning (Graham and Healey, 1999; Buchecker et al., 2003; Hillier and Rooksby, 2005) and environmental studies (Cantrill and Senecah, 2001) have dealt with issues of place. Place is predominantly conceptualized as a relational category, constituted in the interaction between people and places (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000; Stedman, 2003; Manzo and Perkins, 2006). Place is best seen as a “meeting place rather than as always already coherent, as open rather than bounded, as an ongoing production rather than pre-given” (Massey, 2005: 34). Such a relational conceptualization of place does not mean that people do not look for a sense of foundation, something that they feel marks the place. This sense of foundation is often sought in nature or natural elements, which are mobilized to make statements about place, make claims and enforce their position (Massey, 2005).

How place making is being done differs from place to place. As Gieryn (2000: 469) states: “people and groups [...] actively accomplish places, and the process is never the same from here to there”. This quote demonstrates that place making allows room for interpretations, struggles and debates, that is, for politics. Harvey (1996: 265, italics in original) expresses the political character of place as follows:

“Political struggles over the meaning [...] of place [...] abound, most particularly over the way in which places, their inhabitants and their social functions get located, named and discursively represented. (...) The assignment of *place* within some socio-spatial structure indicates distinctive roles, capacities for action and access to power. Locating things (both physically and metaphorically) is fundamental to activities of valuing as well as identification. *Placing*, and the

*making of places* are essential to social development, social control, and empowerment in any social order”.

Harvey talks about places as being made or done and emphasizes the (discursive) politics involved. Place making becomes a means through which to distinguish self and other or what belongs to the place and what does not. For example, as we have already pointed out in the introduction, (cross-border) regions have recently started to articulate their *regional identity* in order to acquire a place on the global map. Although this regional identity has often been presented as a neutral articulation of features that had always been there, these processes are highly political: narratives of what a place is about and the nature of its (regional) identity are inevitably expressions of power (Paasi, 2003). As defining an inside always goes together with defining an outside, place making goes hand in hand with the exclusion of meanings and people. Trudeau (2006), for instance, has recently described an example of what he calls the “exclusionary power of landscape”. In his analysis, a controversy about a slaughterhouse was framed in terms of what ‘belonged’ to the particular landscape in terms of the operationalization of ‘the landscape’ in land-use zoning ordinances. This ‘land-use logic’ implied that the slaughterhouse could not be framed in terms of a social justice logic, which could have led to acceptance of the slaughterhouse. Manzo (2003) sums up various contributions in which places were created or altered in such a way so as to pull up boundaries between people with different racial, gender or class backgrounds. And she concludes that “much more needs to be done to connect the literature on people’s relationships to places with the literature on the politics of place” (Manzo, 2003: 57).

Places are not made once and for all in the sense that place making processes will in the end deliver a finished product: the place. Instead, places are always emerging, in the process of becoming. Rather than made, places are performed in practice. A performative perspective on place making highlights the practices involved in performing a place as well as the context specificities, contingencies and temporalities involved in these performances. It is also attentive to the power relations, including the more subtle, nuanced and hidden forms of power, involved in performing places (Thrift, 2003).

Therefore places “need to be thought of as brought into being through performances and as a

performative articulation of power” (Gregson and Rose, 2000: 434). The politics of performing places and the resulting dynamics of in- and exclusion are not necessarily hierarchical, top-down affairs. The participation of non-state actors in horizontal, or even bottom-up processes is an increasingly important characteristic of current forms of governance (Stoker, 1998; Hajer, 2003; Turnhout et al., 2010; Turnhout and Van der Zouwen, 2010). Beck’s theory of subpoliticization also emphasizes the increasing role of non-state actors in political decision-making. However this is not a homogeneous process. Dynamics of depoliticization and politicization are an important aspect of subpolitics. While Western political systems are becoming increasingly depoliticized, Beck argues, politicization can be found in other spheres, such as the private sector, science and everyday life (Beck, 1994: 18). In other words, depoliticization in the formal political systems, goes hand in hand with politicization in another domain (Buizer, 2008). We understand politicization here as the opening up of alternative options for interpreting social reality and for social action, and depoliticization as the reverse: the impediment of such alternative options (cf. Muntigl, 2002; Palonen, 2003).

Beck argues that citizens no longer rely on the formal decision-making authorities to handle the risks they experience and take action themselves instead. He expects positive outcomes: “Subpolitics (...) means shaping society from below (...) there are even opportunities for courageous individuals to ‘move mountains’ in the nerve centres of development”. (Beck, 1994: 23). Beck’s examples include citizen-based initiatives in various fields including technology, medicine, law and the organization of work (Beck, 1997). Subpolitics is different from ‘politics’, Beck emphasizes, because agents from “*outside* the political or corporatist system are allowed to appear on the stage of social design” (1994: 22). Dualisms such as ‘from below/from above’, and ‘outside/inside’ are important in this line of thought and we need to ask how these are relevant categories in the Grensschap case. Although Beck did not include the performance of place in his conceptualization of subpolitics, particularly not when it occurred at a small local scale, we add this as another new site of political action. In the case of the Grensschap, citizens were involved in performing a place with the explicit intention to influence politics and decision-making about that place. In this article, we focus the attention on the politicization *and* depoliticization mechanisms involved (cf. Buizer, 2008). We will show for example



how the group used expertise to legitimate their ideas about what the Grensschap area is about and what its values and characteristics are. In effect, the group politicized by adding another site of political activity and alternative options for action, and yet their particular use of expertise simultaneously depoliticized the issue.

Discursive strategies are an important part of performing place. For example, the earlier quotation from Harvey (1996) points to the struggles over meaning involved. According to Dixon and Durrheim (2000: 32), a discursive perspective reconstitutes places as socially accomplished “through talk: a social construction that allows [people] to make sense of their connectivity to place and to guide their actions and projects accordingly” (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000: 32). But a focus on ‘talk’ or discourse does not tell the entire story of how places come to be performed. Materiality – things or artefacts – as well as actions and practices – the things that people actually do – have a crucial role to play (cf. Crouch and Parker, 2003; Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000). Law and Mol (2008) use the example of boiling pigswill – as a means to avoid an outbreak of foot and mouth disease – to explain this:

“boiling pigswill was not a politically contestatory discursive practice. (...) And yet it was practised a lot. By setting boundaries as well as making long-distant links it practised ‘globalisation’. And it practised metabolic conservation, too. It did these things, intertwined together and in tension” (Law and Mol, 2008: 141).

This is not the place to go into great detail of the boiling pigswill case. But in relation to the present case, Law and Mol’s approach implies that we should not just look at the words used and at the discussions in which place making occurs, but also at the materialities and practices involved and particularly their political salience and implications.

To conclude, a perspective on place making as relational, political and performative allows us to investigate situations in which citizens develop a dynamic relation with a certain area, to analyze how they perform a place in discursive and material practices, and to demonstrate the subpolitics, including the politicizing and depoliticizing mechanisms involved.

In the next section we will describe how the Grensschap performed a place. We distinguish three phases in this process: (1) naming and mapping; (2) the use of expertise as a political strategy and (3) the actual production of texts and the placing of objects in the landscape.

### **3. Step by step: the making of a place**

#### **3.1. Naming and mapping a former “blind spot”**

Until 2003, the gently undulating, mainly agricultural area in between the Belgian municipalities Lanaken and Riemst, and the Dutch city of Maastricht, did not have a name. Also, maps on which the area could be seen as a whole were not available. Policy makers of the city of Maastricht characterized it as a ‘missing link’ in their ‘green belt’ around the city (Report of the executive board, 14/10/2003). Some called it a ‘blind spot’ – an area that did not get a lot of attention and served as a convenient spot for urban or industrial expansion. In an interview, one of the councilors of the municipality of Maastricht, a former activist of a Dutch environmental NGO, recalled how the area slowly became more and more encroached upon without any apparent vision or plan:

“I started to wonder whether the government was steering anything at all. So when I became councilor I strived for a certain amount of control, a counterweight into the other direction” (Councilor Peter).

Prompted by a co-financing proposal from one of the research budgets of the national Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Food Quality, he readily agreed with the suggestion of some of his ‘green’ officials to organize an event in which various involved people as well as officials from the three municipalities and from the two provinces and representatives of neighborhood councils, farmers, officials and other active citizens from both sides of the border, would engage in a dialogue on the future of the area. During the event, they had a long walk in the area, debated its qualities, thought about future activities and, crucially, decided to meet each other more often.

The event gave rise to the formation of ‘the Grensschap’. Even although the initiative involved an area of three municipalities and two provinces, the emerging cross-border group that wanted to have a greater influence on the nameless area was rather small: a core of about 15 people. It consisted of people who lived in the Western neighborhoods of Maastricht or in one of the Belgian municipalities, who owned a farm in the area, who worked as officials in one of the Dutch or Belgian municipalities or in the province, or who represented an environmental organization. It would be problematic to categorize this group as a citizens’ group only: first of all because they did not represent the citizenry at large through any formal institutions, secondly because a few of them had positions in government, even though their Grensschap activities were a hobby. Most of the participants had obtained higher education and already had previous connections with local governance, either as a member of a political party or as an activist. In the latter capacity they had protested more against government decisions than worked with government through their expertise. These characteristics meant that the group members had good access not only to decision-makers but also to other community members. However, the group’s activities were primarily instigated from the capacities of its members as citizens; as people who lived in and with the area. A few of them even had a view on the area from their homes, others experienced it when traveling from their homes to work or friends, some went there regularly for specific purposes, for example to study its plants or butterflies.

The name Grensschap was chosen for both the area and the group. They started to explore the area on foot. The establishment of the group drew these people much more often into the area, across the border: mostly to learn more about it from others, or to share their own knowledge. Initially, the prominent presence of the Albert Canal on the Belgian side of the area was reflected in the name (Grensschap Albertkanaal), but later this addition to the name became obsolete. The Albert Canal became one of the features of the area, rather than merely a re-emphasis of the lands’ border. In Dutch–Flemish language – ‘grens’ means border and ‘schap’ refers to a community or organization. As the group stated on their website (Grensschap, 2009b):

“The name is a neologism, with associations with terms such as county (‘graafschap’), landscape (‘landschap’) and neighbourhood (‘nabuurschap’).

Where the old county of Vroenhoven was unified in the person of the count, the Grensschap is unified by its borders and its citizens, organizations and governments on both sides of the border, which care for the area. The name denotes the organization as well as the area”.

Mark explained why giving the area a name has been so important:

“For Maastricht the area was an edge because it was located at the border. For Lanaken it was even more an edge because it was located at the other side of the canal. Lanaken established its industries at the other Maastricht-side of the canal. And Maastricht has grown, so the open space has become smaller and smaller. We start reasoning from that open space. We gave it an identity. That was also the creative, artistic side of it: giving the area a face. Giving it a name was a first step. Now we are bringing it further. Now you have all these neighborhoods as satellites of the city. But if you look at the area as a whole then these are not satellites of the city anymore, but satellites of the open space”.

So the name Grensschap was intentionally used to give the group and the area that they wished to protect a common name. By adding ‘schap’ (hood), the elements of ‘community’ and ‘landscape’ were both emphasized; it also implied that they thought that this new political actor should be involved in decision-making. The Grensschap people wanted the place to be considered as a center (an attractive landscape amidst a city and towns), rather than an edge. In one interview, Mieke emphasized the relationship between the place and the people:

“In my artwork I wonder what creates a place. I think it is the affirmation. Something has to be there, something that triggers you. And (in the case of the Grensschap) there were some people who responded to the signal and activated things in the landscape. Reasonable people”.

Although Mieke does not explicate what it was in the landscape that ‘triggered’ and ‘gave a signal’, she implies that there were sufficient elements that could be mobilized to perform a place.

Apart from giving the area a name, they also demarcated it spatially. Because existing maps typically ended at the international border, no spatial map existed in which the whole area was represented. The members of the Grensschap made a map of the area (see Map 1), which contained the name Grensschap and also indicated where the area is located. A closer look at this map reveals that in fact, the area is not demarcated precisely. There is no clear border that indicates what lies inside and what outside the Grensschap. Rather, it reveals a general location of the area. In the map, the border between the two countries appears not on the edge but in the middle, not as an age-old and physical geo-political dividing line but as a symbol of unity.

So far, place was performed largely through naming and mapping. The process of place performance continued with the mobilization of knowledge and expertise to promote the area's values and qualities.

### **3.2. Expertise and political strategy**

The members of the group often met in the field. During these meetings, one member would guide the other members as well as occasional visitors, and tell them about what she or he knew about the area's history, geography or natural qualities. Meetings were held on a monthly basis and dealt with topics such as: the agricultural history as observable from the historical farms, meadows, hedges and remnants of historic causeways ('zouwen'), steep edges of fields ('graftern') and sunken lanes ('holle wegen'); natural history including geomorphology and biodiversity; civil-technical history such as the creation of the Belgian Albert canal in the thirties and forties of the last century; archaeological excavation sites; and the role of various wars in local history. These meetings and excursions during which group members shared their knowledge and expertise and articulated the particular qualities of the area, can be considered as political because by mobilizing expertise and knowledge about the area's qualities, they provided a counterweight to economic activities and put the place on political agendas as something worthwhile conserving. At the same time, it served as a neutral cooperative strategy to influence policy and decision-making. 'Expertise' and 'knowledge' were key terms for the Grensschap. Each member was considered knowledgeable about a certain topic and was expected to share this knowledge. At times, this could lead to a dominance of technical and scientific facts and

jargon. Not everyone appreciated this. Miranda joined the group after repeated insistence of one of the initiators who wanted her to become part of it because of her background as an architect and knowledge of urban planning. She related the difficulties she had at first in understanding what the others were talking about. Still, she continued to join in the activities because of the active spirit and enthusiasm within the group:

“If they had spoken Russian, I would have understood as much. [But] the enthusiasm was contagious. It was a nice group with a good atmosphere. And everybody was positive, they would say ‘it is so nice you have come again, will you become part of the group?’”

The Grensschap’s use of expertise as their main strategy to influence policy and decision-making implied that critical statements were rare, on the website or in other written material of the group. Rather, their energy was directed at giving insight into archaeological and nature qualities, historical battles, the water systems, and the ways in which small-scale agriculture could support an open, cultural landscape. They expected a greater impact from the dissemination of these insights than from being critical. The excursions were an important means to achieve this objective. The focus on knowledge and expertise enabled various officials to become active in the Grensschap, something they felt they would not have been able to do if the group had engaged in protests against the municipal policies. With a more cooperative, expertise-based and non-controversial approach they felt they could. As a result, they could bring in their knowledge of the area too, as well as their knowledge on grants and the related application procedures, something that the other group members would not have access to.

This strategy of ‘going along’, rather than ‘protesting against’ was carefully guarded within the group. “We are neat, reasonable people”, a member of the group said to underline the strategy of the group and differentiate it from activist groups. For those members of the Grensschap who had been activists in former times, this meant a change of strategy. Instead of protesting, they now had to use expertise as their main strategy. However, not everybody wanted to adapt to this. One of the group members was appreciated for his knowledge about the area and his energy ‘to go for it’ but was also unwilling

to give up activist and critical strategies. When he engaged with these activist activities, such as starting lawsuits, other members of the Grensschap let him know clearly that they did not want to be associated with that. In the years that we followed the group he never entirely left, but he became more of an outsider.

### **3.3. Of texts, talk and things**

The story so far elaborates on how the Grensschap actively accomplished this particular place (cf. Gieryn, 2000). To a significant extent these involved words. Naming the area the Grensschap had triggered a paradoxical role for the border as a binding element. Texts were also key ingredients of the website and the e-letter MaLaRia, an acronym referring to the main city and towns involved:

Maastricht, Lanaken and Riemst. Discussions on the conservation of the area with policy makers were largely to do with talk and the same goes for the discussions within the group. Expertise, knowledge about the area, its characteristics and its history, both in text and in talk, also played an important role in consolidating the identity of the area. But much more went on than just talk and text. First of all, there was the map, an important visual contribution to place making. Second, there were the excursions, which the group saw as opportunities to communicate their knowledge to other citizens, and which involved concrete physical encounters between people and the area. Third and finally, material art-objects were installed to signify and demarcate the area.

In 2003, the Grensschap, even though not German, won the ‘environment prize’ of the German city of Aachen. The Grensschap was praised for its positive role in the establishment of cross-border collaboration and subsequently became the center of attention. This achievement triggered the group to invest more energy in realizing tangible results and they started to focus on acquiring funds from the European Union. This served the interests of the Dutch and Flemish provinces of Limburg too, since these had committed to co-finance the project on the condition of financial participation by the EU. While from the outside, this seemed like a typical EU-cofinancing project (with high visibility of the EU and Dutch and Belgian governments), for the Grensschap people the initiative primarily revolved around other meanings and motivations – their concerns for the area and their desire to exert some influence on its future. The funds were intended to install a set of fourteen ‘landmarks’. A

booklet containing the landmarks proposal speaks of the ‘wholeness’ (heelheid) and ‘unity’ of the area that needs to be restored. The authors of the booklet want the visitors of the area to experience and see the unity of the area and how it is formed by what they call green (flora and fauna), red (geology and hydrology and the related engineering), and bronze (cultural history) values (information brochure “Landmarks van het Grensschap”).<sup>2</sup> The idea was that with the installation of the landmarks, the area would be recognizable for visitors and able to withstand outside pressures:

“The landscape in this region has considerably influenced historical developments. However, the valuable traces of this past are not always visible any longer, or visitors do not recognize them as such. Therefore, the Grensschap [...] has constructed fourteen landmarks, at fourteen spots, in order to give meaning to the landscape, to make sure that people can actually experience it, and to make it defensible, able to withstand outside pressures. In the project, the border loses its harshness and rigidity. Instead of a line that separates, it now becomes a line that connects” (information brochure “Landmarks van het Grensschap”).

In 2006 the proposal was agreed and in 2008, the landmarks were installed. The landmarks each consist of three elements: (1) three trees of a species which used to be common in the area (European White Elm, *Ulmus Laevis*), (2) an erratic block, which can be used as a seat to overlook the landscape, and (3) a boundary pole which integrates a rotating information cube (see Figs. 1 and 2 for two examples of the landmarks).

The fourteen landmarks can be considered the final step in place performance. In addition to the name and the map, they signify the area and articulate its values and characteristics. The erratic blocks turn the visitor’s eye to certain places rather than others and the information cubes tell certain specific stories while excluding other possible ones, a point that will be taken up in Section 4. At first sight, these elements in the landscape are, in the words of Law and Mol (2008), not signs of politically contestatory discursive practice. Rather, they are part of the Grensschap’s strategies to avoid explicit contestation. But as the above quote explains (words such as ‘defensible’ most expressively so), the



landmarks served political objectives. Rather than protesting against building activities, the Grensschap installed objects and provided expertise to influence decision-making. As Jos explains:

“We had influence in the policy domains regarding nature and culture, but when these interfere with the economy you lose. [...]. I had hoped that, by emphasizing the importance of nature and culture, we could slow down economy a bit. But it is not like that. However, if at one spot our landmark will be finalized before possible plans to build houses, there may be a delayed effect of our initiative in that location.”

Installing the landmarks was a way to enable the area to represent itself. As Jos explains during a lecture:

“We used the cultural biography of the landscape to turn a defenseless landscape into something defensible by letting it speak for itself.”

With the installation of the landmarks, the performance of the Grensschap had been taken to the next level. In addition to creating a map and raising awareness by using excursions, expertise, lobby, leaflets, and a website, the group had now changed the actual materiality of the place. Because of their materiality and physical presence, the landmarks have become objects of human agency *as well as* agents of their own (Gieryn, 2002: 36). How long the fourteen landmarks will stand the test of time is not known, but the erratic blocks will probably stay there for a while. Whether the objects will indeed in the long run, as Jos said, provide a way for the place ‘to speak for itself’, and in that way prevent building and development, is uncertain too. And yet, in spite of these uncertainties, they did transform the place and for at least some time to come, the landmarks and the archaeological, historical, ecological and cultural values and characteristics of the place they articulate, will be something to reckon with in case of infrastructural or building development plans. In the next section, we will elaborate on some of the implications of the ways in which the Grensschap was performed.

#### 4. Performing the Grensschap: power and exclusion

There was agreement in the group about the importance of promoting the area's values and qualities. At the same time however, there were differences of opinion on what these values and qualities were, how exactly the area should be represented, and which knowledge and expertise was relevant for this. Clearly, performing the area would require deciding what the area would be made to be and would involve not only the articulation of certain values and characteristics but also the forgetting, ignoring and exclusion of others. Mieke's reflection on how the group talked about how to present the Neanderthal history in the details of a specific landmark signifies one type of exclusion that took place:

“Three out of four pictures about Neanderthals only had males on them. I said that it was way back in the fifties when Neanderthals were represented as males only. How dare you repeat that representation. I said you should make a sculpture of three Neanderthal females digging up roots, while caring for their young, exchanging the latest gossip (...). Women were very important for [...] language development and knowledge about what is edible and what isn't, what roots make you have belly ache and what roots you can store for another three months. (...)

One time I joked: O now I understand how Neanderthals died away. They did not have females! Jos then broke into laughter. But in the end it did happen, again!

The history of the Grensschap is a male one!”

The ways in which the Grensschap used expertise also involved other types of exclusion. First of all, it marginalized certain people within the group who preferred more activist strategies. Second, by affirming that articulating the Grensschap's values and characteristics was an expert matter, it excluded other ways of knowing places based on affect, experiences and aesthetics. Third, it privileged certain kinds of expertise over others. Within the group, different kinds of expertise struggled for dominance. This is demonstrated by the landmarks themselves: despite being presented

in the booklet as equally important themes of the area, cultural and human history, geology and hydrology, and fauna and flora do not get equal attention in the landmarks.

Table 1, which summarizes the Grensschaps new map with landmarks (Grensschap website, 2010), demonstrates that nature and agriculture received relatively little attention in the landmarks. Only 5 of the 14 landmarks explicitly deal with nature and agriculture in the accompanying explanations. In contrast, war history and archaeology ended up as very important with 11 out of 14 landmarks.<sup>3</sup> Some of the respondents acknowledged that attention on nature and agriculture had become relatively limited and regretted this. As Fred says:

“So far, nature has become a little bit overlooked. I think it should be more heavily brought in. Cultural history on the other hand gets a lot of attention. It has to do with how the group came about. The people in it know a lot about it. People with knowledge of nature are less well represented.”

Thus, through the exercise of (expert) power, the Grensschap now primarily represents the archaeological and human history of the area, with a particular focus on wars and (male) Neanderthals. Other possibilities, though not totally suppressed, are placed in a secondary position.

## **5. Performing place as subpolitics**

So far, we have shown how the people of the Grensschap were able to transform an area that had formerly been labeled a ‘no-man’s land’ into a recognized and recognizable place, worthy of protection. They did so by means of discursive and material practices: by using their expertise, by giving it a name, by creating a map, and by placing landmarks in the area that represent the area in a specific way and signify (a particular selection of) its different values.

At first glance, the creation of the Grensschap could be interpreted as another example of EU cross-border cooperation. After all, their landmarks and their website had been co-funded by the European Commission. However, this initiative started from local concerns about an area, concerns that were

only indirectly related to its border. The Grensschap people in the process conveniently made use of the resources made available by the EU for cross-border cooperation. Through the funds, the initiators could do something in addition to field excursions and discussions: realize something tangible. This they considered to be crucial. Continuing their efforts in promoting and representing the area was time consuming but by using the funds to establish something tangible they hoped that the area could start to promote and represent itself. On the other hand, the EU could imprint its name on the project and label it as another example of 'a borderless Europe'. Hence local and European political ambitions coalesced and reinforced each other in this particular instance.

In addition to the European dimension, the case study involved a subpolitical dimension. However, while for Beck subpolitics is about those outside the formal institutions having political influence, our case shows that the distinction between outside and inside is problematic. First of all, the mixed character of the group raises doubts about the extent to which they can be seen as outsiders. Second, although the installation of the erratic blocks had implications for wider society, they could not have been placed without formal approval from governmental institutions.

Despite this lack of a clear demarcation line between inside and outside, we feel that our case does reflect important aspects of subpolitics. The Grensschap's performance of place took place largely outside the formal political and representative system and it did shift the center of political action from formal consultation-based procedures (including an action-group style of protests), to expertise-based platforms. The Grensschap's activities had wider implications for the area, for politics and for society. The landmarks, largely attained through activities outside the formal representative system, and yet infused with power, are clear signs of the material and political consequences of the Grensschap's activities. They serve as the main subpolitical symbol of the group's vision for this particular place. This emphasizes the importance of materiality in place-based processes of subpolitics. At this point it is tempting to become anecdotal about the "Kesseltse kip": one of the 14 landmarks residing on a newly created hill (see Fig. 3).

By creating this hill, people had literally been able 'to move mountains', as Beck puts it (1994: 23), However, the seeming robustness of this performance tells only part of the story. Through text, talk

and things, the Grensschap tried to achieve their political ambitions to protect the area, but this coincided with the exclusion of certain people and perspectives. In their performances, politicization and depoliticization went hand in hand. Politicization occurred in the sense that other possible futures (than that of a no-man's land) have become the subject of political discussion and debate. This has been enhanced by the landmarks, which are located strategically and hard to ignore because of their physical presence. However depoliticization also occurred, because possibilities for deliberating and acting upon different views were also constrained. In spite of the group's emphasis on being an open group, people who were less qualified as experts, or people who preferred to take a more explicit critical stance and adopt activist approaches, would feel less comfortable in a group that put so much emphasis on knowledge and expertise, and 'being reasonable'. The landmarks contributed to depoliticization as well. Their materiality and physical presence gives them a certain taken-for-granted character in the sense that the values and characteristics they articulate and the way in which they represent the area – or allow the area to represent itself – are likely to go undisputed.

To conclude, subpolitics in our case appears as a place-based process; one in which a place was performed through hybrid arrangements consisting of citizens and government officials, hence not entirely *outside* the formal institutions. The Grensschap's performances involved discursive practices – naming, mapping, using expertise – as well as material practices – excursions, the landmarks – and, in the end, the initiative did move mountains. However, the results of our case of subpolitics were ambivalent. The area (at least temporarily) obtained a stronger position but the involved people did not all agree on how this was performed. There were different ideas in the group on the type of identity that should be created. This kind of multiplicity is not greatly acknowledged within the concept of subpolitics, which emphasizes the role of subpolitical outsiders as a static and homogenous group with similar perspectives, demands and ambitions. Rather than a displacement of politics in one sphere and an emergence of politics in another subpolitical sphere, politicization and depoliticization occurred simultaneously in that subpolitical sphere. Our article has demonstrated that multiplicities, the ways in which they are mobilized or suppressed and excluded, the associated politicization and

depoliticization mechanisms, and the exercise of power involved are important aspects of performing place and of subpolitics in general.

The Grensschap case has demonstrated the discourses, practices and materialities involved in the performance of place. It has shown the politics and power involved in these performances by highlighting the politicization and depoliticization strategies that were used by the group members. Finally it has pointed to the multiplicities, exclusions and temporality of their performances. Consequently, it has demonstrated how subpolitics can take the shape of place-based processes that involve hybrid arrangements of insiders and outsiders that use a variety of strategies to influence political debate and decision-making.

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Map 1. The Grensschap area as it is drawn by the members of the Grensschap. Drawing by Erik Meijs.

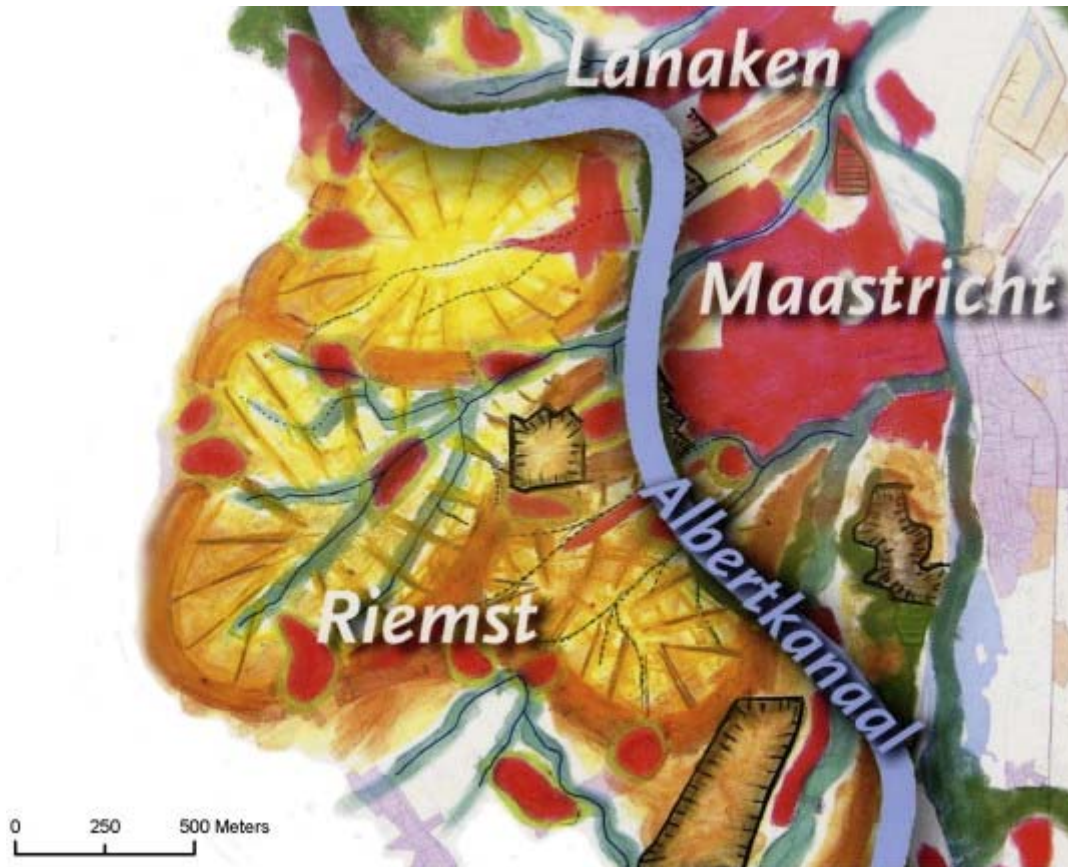


Fig. 1. Picture of new 'boundary' pole. New 'boundary' pole with rotating information cube with map of all landmarks.



Fig. 2. Picture of landmark 'The battle of Lafelt'. A picture of landmark No. 12, 'The battle of Lafelt' (see Table 1). It consists of a rotating erratic bloc in the form of a chair in the middle of a presentation of the surrounding landscape. The speakers placed in a circle around the block produce war sounds and allow the visitor to 'experience' the wars.



Fig. 3. Picture of landmark 'Kesseltse Kip'. The 'Kesseltse Kip': one of the fourteen landmarks, standing on a "newly created hill on a hill". The landmark sits on the hill that was formed out of the sand from the Albert channel. It is an 'orientation-point'. From here, the visitor can oversee all other landmarks. The Grensschap website reports on the role of the war in the building of the 'Kesseltse Kip ': it is slightly higher than a nearby hill in order to enable fire attacks in response to German attacks ([www.grensschap.eu](http://www.grensschap.eu)). We took this picture at the opening event of the Landmarks. Next to the newly created hill with the erratic block on top are the flags of the European Union and the Dutch and Belgian provinces of Limburg from whom the group mobilized a significant part of the funds for the landmarks.



Table 1. Overview of landmarks and their focus.

<b>Landmarks</b>	<b>Focus</b>
1. Belvédère	Neanderthal settlements, place of archeological findings
2. 7400 Years of agriculture	Continuous cultivation by farmers, as shown by excavations in this area
3. Battlegrounds Lanakerveld	Spacious plains, places of European wars from the 16th till the 18th century
4. Alva at the 'Dousberg'	The duke of Alva fought against the advancing armies of Willem of Orange
5. The Neanderthaler	Neanderthals came here to gather firestones
6. The 'Hezer'-waters	Three valleys with watercourses traverse the Grensschap. At this spot one watercourse was restored
7. The 'Daalhof' Roman road	Information point about the former Roman strategic road
8. The 'Chorobat' Roman road	Information point about the former strategic Roman road

<b>Landmarks</b>	<b>Focus</b>
9. The Roman Road	Information point about the former Roman strategic road
10. The geological bank	Two walls exhibit various layers of soil, including use of soils by people, animals and plants
11. The 'Kesseltse Kip'	Newly created hill with a view of the area as a whole, on top of the hill which was created in the 1930's to get rid of soil from the Albert Channel. Spot to remember victims of the Second World War
12. The battle of 'Lafelt'	Sound composition and indication of position of armies in an orientation circle
13. Lodewijk XV at the Sieberg	Place where Lodewijk XV overlooked the Lafelt battlegrounds in 1747
14. Kanne and surroundings/Second World War	A history of sheep and flowers. Former nature management has been restored since 2003. Place of war. Orientation point shows various historical events