

The Fold.

Reading Artefacts of Institutional Topology



RESOLVE Collective

Abstract

“The Fold”, is a game-essay informed by a series of in-depth interviews with a number of disparate actors, times, and spaces in the history and present of Het Nieuwe Instituut, a cultural centre in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.¹ Through a world of 8-bits and 8x8 pixels, the game-essay explores the transformative potential of ‘institutional space’. This is defined in the accompanying text, “The Fold: Reading artefacts of Institutional Topology”, as the organisation of social relations in (re)producing various kinds of territory and spaces through which those relations might be consolidated and preserved. The game-essay and text are the first offering of a methodology for spatially intervening in institutions, which we have described as “topological”; concerned with the folding and unfolding of institutional *parts* in order to identify meaningful opportunities to affect and disrupt. In the game-essay, different *parts*, or subsets of social relations within institutions, are made both proximate and disparate through a series of characters, spaces, and conversations, all centred around the institute’s contested merger in 2012: the original fold. As reader-characters make their way through a disorientating

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**1 - The game essay
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183

array of spatial and temporal folds they are encouraged to act, see, and think topologically. In an attempt to retrieve material, visual, and verbal artifacts and recover meaning in their deliberate obscurity, “The Fold” re-examines a past ‘fold’ in institutional space whilst aiming to prompt the imagination of future ones.

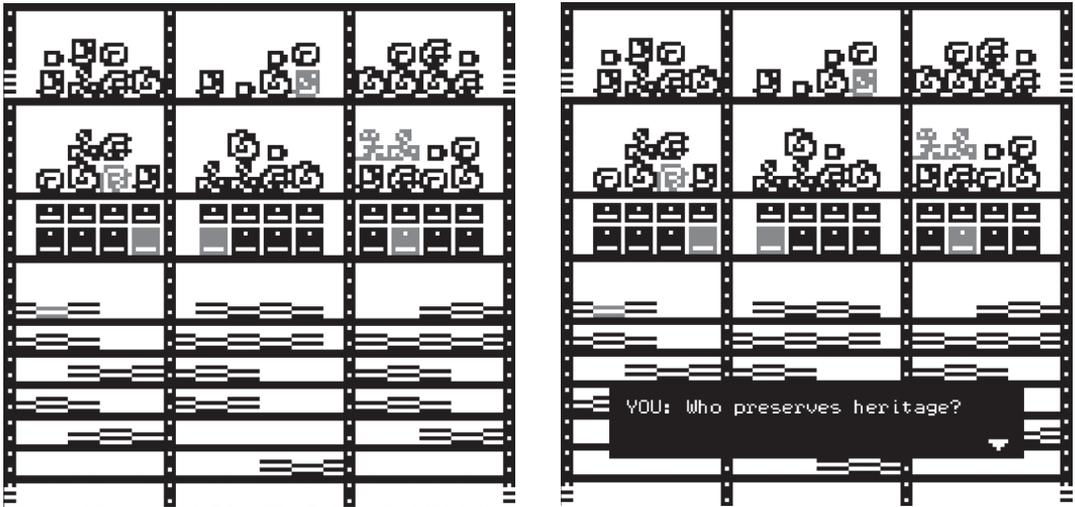
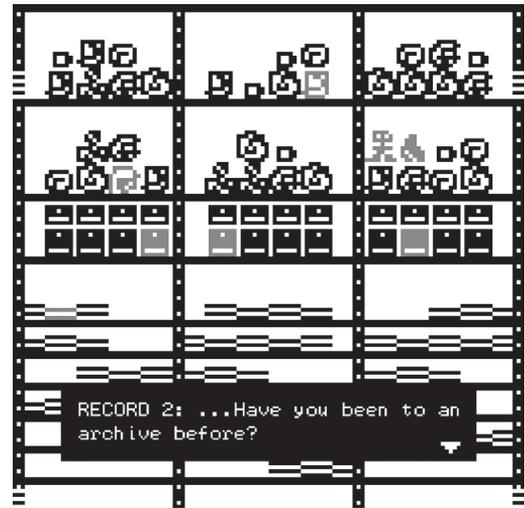
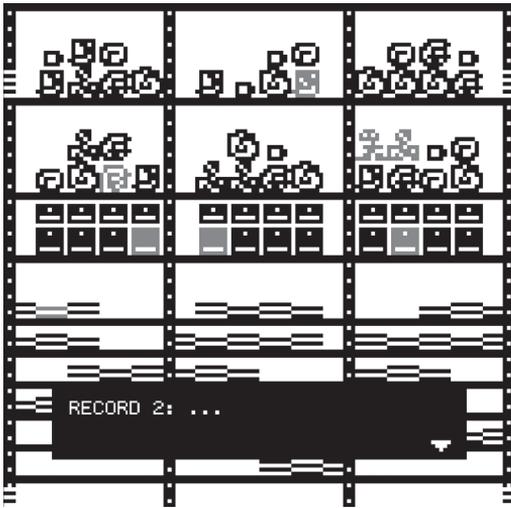


Fig. 1 - HNI Archiefgebouw, 2014, Post-Fold: “Who Preserves Heritage?” [Scene 1].

Fig. 2 - HNI Archiefgebouw, 2014, Post-Fold: “Who Preserves Heritage?” [Scene 2].

From school rooms to prison cells, institutional spaces have hardened our collective imagination of what the administration of resources, people, and power might look and feel like. Despite this, institutional space, bereft of panopticons, Pergamons, and Pentagons, remains somewhat hard to actually imagine. Rather than a categorisation of spaces that contain formal or informal institutions, the term ‘institutional space’ in this instance draws explicit attention to how the organisation of social relations produces various kinds of territory and spaces through which those relations might be consolidated and preserved. As such, ‘institutional space’ might describe, for example, the spatial arrangements of a house by their historical and contemporary position in the reproduction and reproductivity of the household as a discrete social unit (Smith, 1971). It may also describe a cultural institute through its operation (or inoperativity) in a wider network of cultural hegemonic instruments (Hoare, Nowell Smith, 1999; Khalili, Badran, 2020). However, unlike the description of formal or informal institutional spaces, the language used to describe ‘institutional space’ does not necessarily extend to how the idiosyncrasies of these institutions’ architectural settings might seemingly affect institutional behaviours. Architectural nuance may instead be



thought of as part of the construct, or what Otero-Pailos calls an ‘illusory experience’ (2016), of ‘institutional space’, rather than its determinant. Though the sentiment of this structural approach to space seemingly resonates with many contemporary spatial practitioners, especially those of us who work in built environment professions, the difficulty with which we then imagine and therefore affect ‘institutional space’, not just institutional spaces, is often more pronounced. In a field where form and aesthetic regime often exercise inordinate purchase over a vast array of spatial discourses, the transformation of social structures is regularly misconstrued as the replacement of load-bearing ones. Moreover, for many of us, actually attempting to confront questions of ‘institutional space’ risks derailing an already precarious disciplinary journey. How auspicious, we ask ourselves, are the careers of everyday architects whose concern is not the construction of homes but the deconstruction of ‘homemaking’? What job satisfaction is there really for urban planners interested in unplanning and sub-planning? Who are the property developers promulgating the difference between value creation and value extraction in their industry?

Fig. 3 - HNI Archiefgebouw, 2014, Post-Fold: “Who Preserves Heritage?” [Scene 3].

Fig. 4 - HNI Archiefgebouw, 2014, Post-Fold: “Who Preserves Heritage?” [Scene 4].



Fig. 5 - HNI Pond,
2015, Post-Fold:
"Et Tu Rotterdam"
[Scene 1].

Fig. 6 - HNI Pond,
2015, Post-Fold:
"Et Tu Rotterdam"
[Scene 2].

Sometimes, merely asking these questions introspectively signals a forthcoming metamorphosis. As they sediment in the minds of restless spatial practitioners, our weary eyes adjust to the ambiguous forms in front of our disciplinary phoropters. The architectures of institutes slowly morph into the ethnographies of institutions; and language too begins to shift. Our capacity to describe the grandeur of 'historic spaces' gradually becomes our propensity for interrogating ruling relations. The innocuous names of cultural spaces – the 'museum', the 'gallery', the 'theatre' – become bastions of ideological dominance. And before we know it we are left not with discrete, imaginable geometries that we might build, but rather a series of seductive, borderline inexplicable adjectives from far away cannons and disciplines, whose only apparent use is to critique: 'complete', 'austere', 'total', 'memetic', 'endogenous' (Foucault, 1977; Goffman, 1990; Dimaggio, Powell, 1983; Aghion, 2004).



Fig. 7 - HNI Pond, 2015, Post-Fold: "Et Tu Rotterdam" [Scene 3].

Fig. 8 - HNI Pond, 2015, Post-Fold: "Et Tu Rotterdam" [Scene 4].

And so, adrift in the great Analytic Ocean ('research', we've heard it's sometimes called), without so much as a spatial metaphor to cling too, we bob helplessly on the waves for what feels like millennia. When we are finally washed ashore, we wander the littorals cursing the decision to have ever disregarded the question of buildings in order to treat the question of systems, only to be left with, as prison architect par excellence Guillaume Abel Blouet once put it, "principles that are based on no reality" ["des principes auxquels la réalité se dérobe"] (Blouet, 1843: 1). Haunted by our former 'lives aquatic', we find solace with other communities of self-imposed, institutional castaways, each instilled with a recklessly Promethean ambition to solve a suitably Sisyphean dilemma: delivering new, 'disruptive' institutional spaces – coworking, intergenerational, hubs, pods – whilst unknowingly reproducing old institutions. Thus, without the tools to imagine this space, we are inevitably left without the space to imagine.

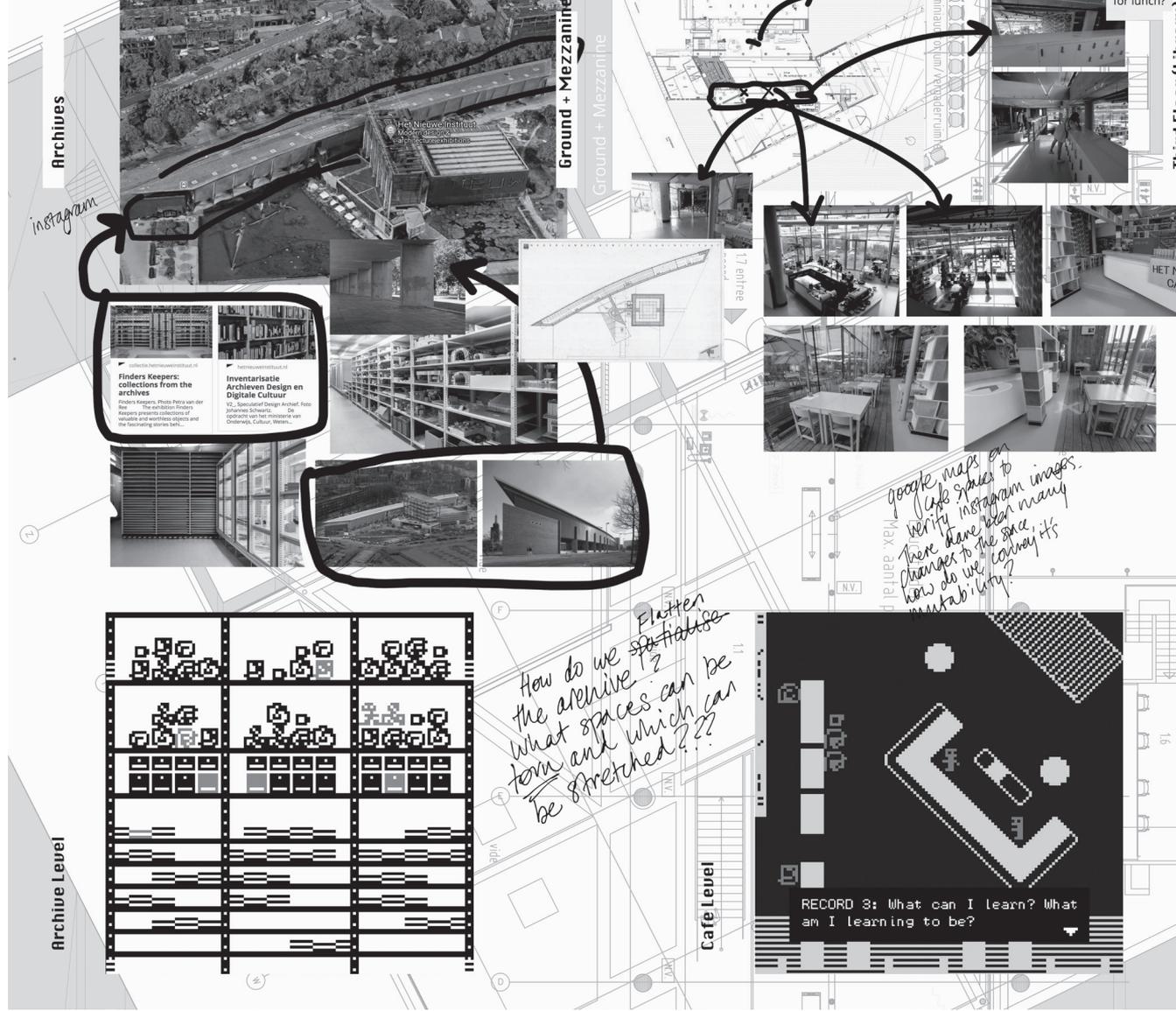
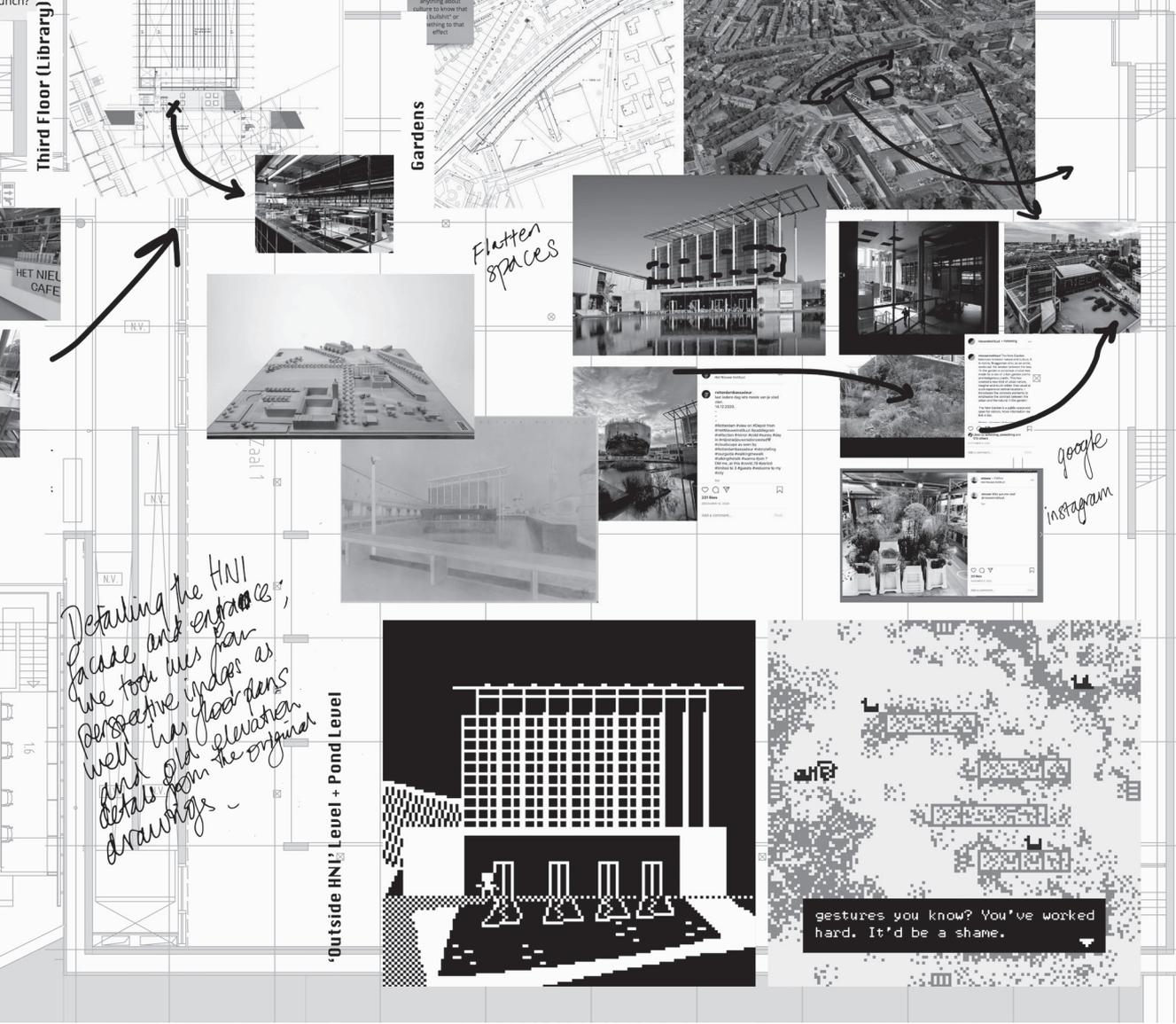


Fig. 9 - Mapping the levels from online materials on to 8x8 pixel frames in an attempt to 'flatten' the institute's geometries.

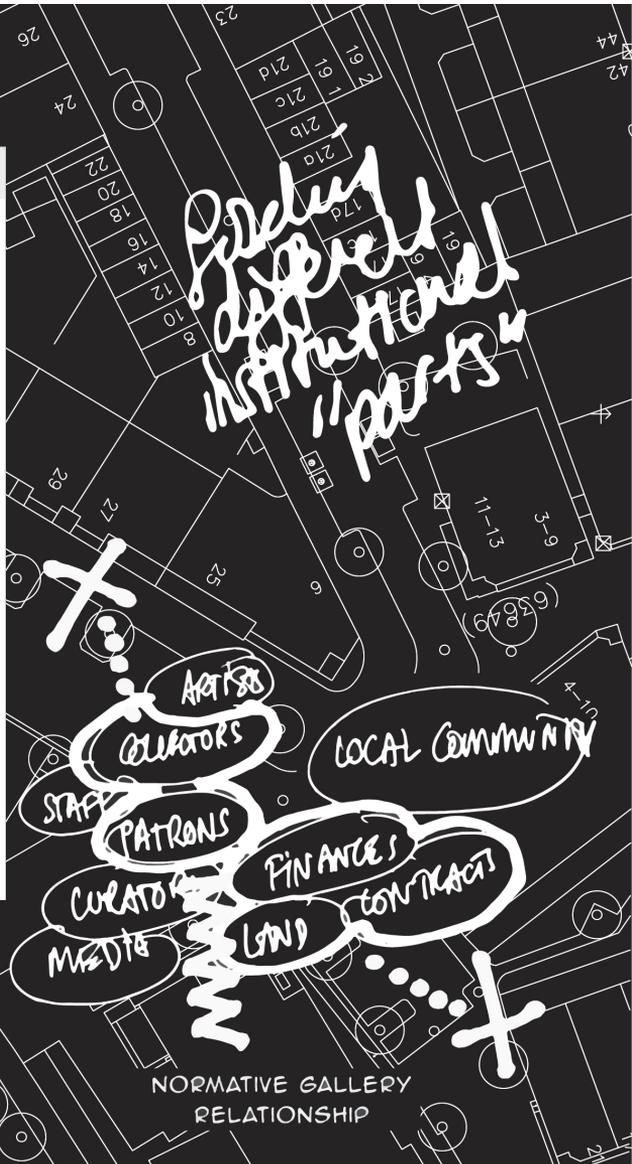
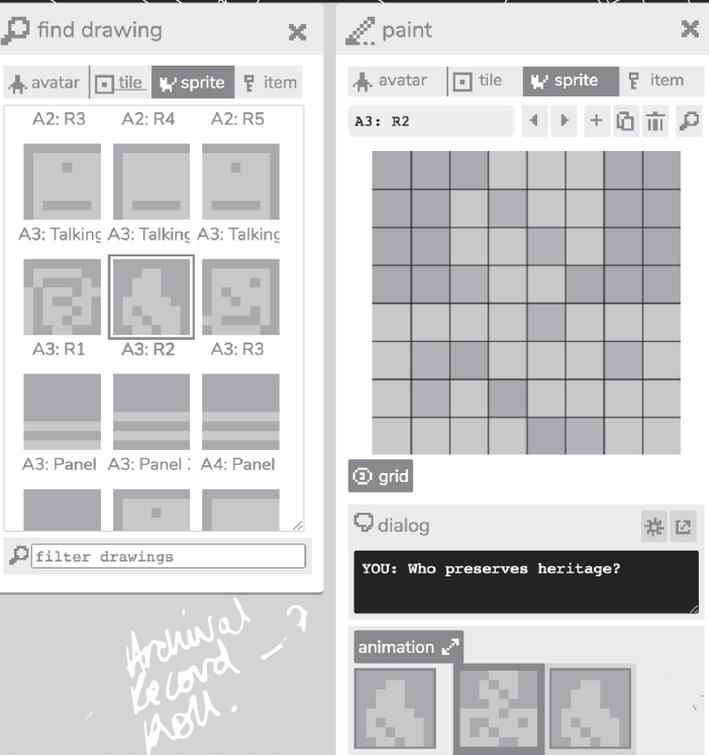
However, just as spatial terms such as 'verticality', 'form', 'fields', the 'local' and the 'translocal' are regularly used to describe institutional practices (Bourdieu, 1993; Gielen, 2013; Smith, 2008) so too might we incorporate a set of appropriate spatial tools into our disciplinary and professional vocabularies about institutional space. In doing so, we may hope to work toward a sensitive reconciliation of spatial intervention and meaningful structural change when attempting to affect not just the architectures of institutional spaces but the architectonics of 'institutional space'. As part of our research fellowship with Het Nieuwe Instituut, we at RESOLVE are exploring how we might 'topologically' re-understand institutional space; recognising institutional properties that are preserved through deformations, twistings, and stretchings (how, for example, 'institutional space' is reproduced in a variety of institutional spaces) and fundamentally



reorganising them. A topological lens encourages practitioners to develop methods of making proximate or separate distinct subsets of social relations within institutions, or 'part', without tearing them, in order to identify meaningful opportunities to intervene and disrupt. Borrowing from the mathematical study of topology we've termed this 'folding' and 'unfolding'. Folding and unfolding is concerned with the possibilities of carefully considered disruptions and interventions made co-creatively with an institution's constituent and more-than-human parts that cause leaks and loopholes, demonstrating temporary possibilities for making 'institutional space' infrastructural. It is through these methods that institutional topology's great task is in making previously conservative spaces dissipative, reimagining institutions in which communities of care and networks of maintenance can flourish (Mattern, 2018).

Fig. 10 - *The Fold's* part archeological and part apocryphal approach necessitated both the excavation of digital materials, visual, and verbal artifacts and their consequent obscuring; twisting and stretching historic instances and conversations to interrogate possibilities of 'folding' institutional space.

d) Bitsy Game Editor



(c) Level javascript hacks

```
'A4: R1',
P3: C1',
: 'P3: C1',
'P3: C1',
'P3: C1',
'A4: R1',
'A4: R1',
'A4: Public',
'A4: R1',
'A4: Public',
'A',
'7': 'A',
'A',
'2': 'A',
id-Fold': 'A4: R1',
'3': 'A4: Public',

return e && typeof e === 'object' && 'default' in e ? e : { 'default':
pDefaultLegacy(bitsy);
```

'Basic hacks are from paragraph and allow for multiple places and characters changes'

(e) 'Fold' Diagrams



As an initial exercise in institutional topology, the game-essay, “The Fold”, is not the presentation of a fix but rather an enactment of this renewed methodological approach. Stemming from our fellowship research and a series of in-depth interviews, “The Fold” takes a number of disparate actors, times, and spaces from the history and present of Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam and makes them proximate, centring them around the institute’s original ‘fold’: the contested 2012 merger of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI), the Netherlands Institute for Design and Fashion (Prensela), and Virtual Platform, a knowledge institute for e-culture. The form of the game-essay, in 8-bits and 8x8 pixels, attempts to flatten ‘institutional space’, removing the experience (but not the haunts) of geometry. By this, we mean to draw attention to the spaces of Het Nieuwe Instituut – the archive, the cafe, the office, and the pond – not as architectures that contain a changing cultural institution but as spatial arrangements that once facilitated the reproduction of a particular set of social relations, now in flux. They are complicit with the plethora of foldings and unfoldings that reader-characters find themselves immersed in and are both part of and parts *in* historical moments of institutional change.

As reader-characters then make their way through a disorientating array of spatial and temporal folds they are encouraged to act, see, and think topologically. Different levels are orientated around different temporalities of the fold, denoted as pre- and post-, located between 1998 to 2019, but all part of a continuum that affected ways of working and being within Het Nieuwe Instituut far beyond the ‘plastic moment’ of 2012. The reader-character assumes, in each level, one of four characters: a coot, an archival record, a researcher, and a member of the public. Each character is part of ostensibly disparate institutional ‘parts’, typically representative of different social relations within the institute. In this game-essay however, these relations quickly unravel, and characters are gradually divorced from their once appropriate spaces; coots wind up in the office, researchers in the pond, and archival records can be found gossiping at the cafe. Whether subtle or readily apparent, these changes alter the conversational dynamic within levels and reveal otherwise private or undisclosed moments of the fold as it happened. In light of this, “The Fold” is part archeological and part apocryphal, retrieving material, visual, and verbal artifacts and recovering meaning in their deliberate obscurity: from political commentary between ducks to the existential crises of archival records, this is an attempt to re-examine a past ‘fold’ in ‘institutional space’ and prompt the imagination of future ones.

Note

RESOLVE Collective is an interdisciplinary design collective using art, architecture, engineering, and technology to address social issues, formed by Seth Scafe-Smith, Akil Scafe-Smith, Melissa Haniff, and Sahar Ibrahim, current research fellows at the Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam.

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