

IAF SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Space for All: Decolonial Practices in Space (2)

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SPACE LESSONS FROM THE DECOLONIAL LEXICON OF THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY
(VOC)

Abstract

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) known as the world's first multinational colonial company started in 1602. Its global shipping and trade activities dealing in sourcing spices and commodities from the East and selling them for large lead to large scale colonization and exploitation networks, which left devastation to indigenous peoples and ecosystems.

This paper will share an educational art and research project conducted with students and lead by artist, tutor, Lauren Alexander from MA Non Linear Narrative at the Royal Academy of Art in the Hague. The project is developed in close collaboration with Globalise project, an initiative of technicians and historians who aim to make 5 million pages of administrative, handwritten documents of the VOC archives more researchable through methods of semantic and historical contextualization giving contextual information about persons, places, commodities and weights and measures. This unique collaboration connects artists with historians to visualize, articulate and publish new decolonial perspectives.

In February 2024 ten art students began defining and researching specific key historical commodities in the VOC archive related to the extraction, trade and commodification of natural resources (spices, cotton, tobacco, coffee) to better understand colonial logic and the origins of capitalistic thinking and practices. Natural objects became commodities and their value determined by trends and tastes of the wealthy classes. Violence and oppression of colonial slave labour, destructive production chains were invisible to the consumer who lived on the other side of the world.

Space is often perceived by companies and investors as an untapped natural resource at the disposable of humans due to shrinking resources on earth. Asteroid mining for rare metals in demand, and the transportation of seeds and experiments with cosmic crops to off-set earthly food shortages. Considering past colonial mistakes, what are the future consequences and ethical considerations that need to be accounted for? How will space eco-systems face future consequences at the hands of human greed for boundless resources.

In June 2024 students will exhibit artistic outcomes in the Hague. The aim is to articulate new critical, decolonial lexicon of commodities connecting historical practices to contemporary sources and consequences and extract lessons learnt. The public exhibition will reach students, researchers, academics and artists. Through re-investigating the archive of the historical oppressor the aim of the project is to open space for untold stories to re-enter the historical narrative, and to create awareness and prevent future damages through space activities.