

# EMBARKING FUTURE®

## - FUTURE DESIGN THROUGH THE PRISM OF ART

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By **Madeleine Schwinge**

### The Great Transformation

**W**HEN we will have reached the middle of the 21st century, the world will be a different one.

We are facing an epochal shift where we must acknowledge the planetary ecological limits and the global nature of the transformation ahead. Given the urgency and scale of this challenge, can we even hope for a good future, for us, for non-human life, and for the planet?

To face these new realities, institutes and scientists have developed approaches for transition management over the past years. For example, the Wuppertal Institute refers to the work of the economist and social scientist Karl Polanyi and outlines a realistic vision for the 21st century, where there is a good life for 9 billion people within planetary boundaries; this of course, assumes we succeed in bringing about this "Great Transformation." The Institute describes seven arenas where significant transitions need to be made: 1. wealth and consumption transition; 2. energy transition; 3. resource transition; 4. mobility transition; 5. food transition; 6. urban transition; and 7. the industrial transition. This confronts us with the challenges of a completely new dimension, scale and scope (Schneidewind, 2019).

The required system change is holistic and affects society, politics, the economy and every individual. The way we think, live, work, eat, live and move has to shift fundamentally.

The amount of what needs to be tackled, repaired and realigned seems overwhelming. How do we find our compass, creativity and courage to do less to fight these challenges and much more to shape them? (Maja Göpel, 2022).

### Shaping the future

We design our own future and that of planet Earth every day: We are influential and catalytic. In times when systems are becoming highly dynamic, volatile and interconnected, when ambiguity and complexity are increasing and morals are changing rapidly, it is above all the individual, alongside societies, politics, companies and the sciences, who is becoming the decisive enabler of change. I assert that classic methods of futurology, such as the scenario technique, roadmapping and the Delphi method, but also approaches such as design thinking and Presencing will no longer be sufficient for a pragmatic transformation design.

Time is pressing. Instead of moving linearly into the future, we need to oscillate between speculative futures and traditional knowledge in order to design future presences.

### Transformative learning

So what does it take to become a change-agent? How can current systemic dynamics be understood so that they can be transformed into constructive impulses by actors in politics, business, and civil society? In radically changing markets and personal life circumstances, a culture of change, new forms of orientation and a profound transformation in values are needed.

To make the vision of a successful Great Transformation a real option for the future, we need concepts that grasp the complexity of interlocking ecological, social, economic and technological processes for sustainable development. The Great Transformation should always be thought of from the cultural end. This is the only way to prevent humanity from being driven solely by technological and economic changes. Because at its



core, sustainable development is a 'moral revolution' (Appiah, 2011), which takes its starting point in the emergence of new values ('mindshifts' cf. Maja Göpel, 2016) and gains its civilising power through them (Schneidewind, 2019).

The Wuppertal Institute presents a model for sustainable transformation in order to react to impulses for change and to stabilise situations in which routines, comfort or fears would otherwise put the brakes on the interplay of knowledge-attitude-skills.

But is such a model sustainable enough?

### **Mindshift - a key to the NEW?**

There is a widespread belief that a profound shift in human thinking patterns (mindset/mindshift) would automatically lead to greater structural and sustainable impacts. It is based on the assumption that shifting, realigning and overcoming inner beliefs alone would be sufficient to deal with complex, uncertain, interconnected, and unstable systems.

But what makes us think that our minds are the sole source of ideas, habits, and ways of acting? Anyone who has made a resolution at the beginning of the year to exercise

more or quit smoking knows how difficult it is to change behavioural patterns in a sustainable way and that 'making it up' rarely leads to the goal. Systems psychology says that lasting change can only be achieved through the interplay of cognitive insight and emotional impulses combined with experiential practice. So we need a model that connects our mind with all our senses at a deeper level.

The stakes are high. If we stick to rational analytical approaches, we run the risk of failure. A purely cognitive model will only produce further reproductions of old paradigms and eternal waves of false innovation. It will inevitably remain in the cycle of a closed system without ever creating anything structurally new.

So what can a radically new learning look like?

### **Creativity - the potential for transfer of art**

The poet Ingeborg Bachmann describes the essence of art as a constant rupture of verticals in order to break out into new horizons.

Creativity is the most effective human force. The sociologist and originator of systems theory Niklas Luhmann describes

creativity as the 'ability to exploit opportunities' or the 'use of coincidences to build structures'. In upheavals, learned rules cease to apply, existing systems no longer function and have to sort themselves out anew. This is how creative energy is released. However, beware: systems strive for homeostasis. At the peak of any change process there is a critical instability (Peter Kruse, 2004). The danger of relapsing into old patterns is great.

This is precisely where the potential for transfer of contemporary art lies. What is meant here is an understanding of art as a medium for sensitive perception, pattern recognition and the search for new truths. Art that, through an exploratory experimental approach, is able to see alternative contexts of meaning and to wrest new possible facets from reality. Art that welcomes the unknown as a new certainty, accepts a multiplicity of truths and operates in their interstices. Art that does not anticipate but pursues the impossible possibility by oscillating between different speculative futures. Art that becomes social practice.

This art thus recommends itself as a necessary complement to the Wuppertal transformative learning model 'Knowledge, Attitude and Skills'.

### **The new emerges where it interfaces with the unknown.**

It is about 'thinking without guardrails', to use Hannah Arendt's phrase.

The increasing importance of transdisciplinary cooperation can be seen in the growing number of cross-system collaborations in economy, research and technology.

The reconfiguration of methodologies, approaches, and optics demanded by this new ontological turn situates art as the most productive multidisciplinary forum by which to address the truly universal challenges posed by the Anthropocene (Giovanni Aloï, 2022). Artists, ocean biologists, physicists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, data scientists, to name a few, are increasingly working together on futuristic topics and issues beyond the boundaries of particular disciplines.

They research and develop new materials, ideas and models. In doing so, art is increasingly leaving traditional spaces such as the studio or the classic exhibition space. Exhibiting (curating) is becoming a cultural technique that reaches the public space, the mundane objects and materials and even the individual. Similarities between archives and the human brain are discussed, as are questions about the performance and emotionalisation of knowledge.

Art as a form of knowledge, like scientific research, raises the question of how and by what means we want to make sense of the world and on what assumptions of truth we want to base our actions. When it comes to knowledge, research, perception and cognition, it is also about something fundamental: Humans' relationship with the world. Contemporary art is developmental,

experimental, questioning, communicative, co-laborative and engaged. We are indeed dealing with a cultural-historical situation that will contribute to the assertion of art as a research discipline in the course of a condensation of various political, historical, epistemological and cultural forces (Anke Haarmann, 2019).

Experimentation—in the laboratory, in the writing process, in artistic research, in life—is much more than a way of obtaining scientific knowledge. It is ultimately about a way of life that confronts the unpredictable and understands it as a permanent mission. It means a form of life that is open to the future, that constantly rejects the established, without being certain of the ending point where it will lead. This is what provides its charm (Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, 2018).

### **EMBARKING FUTURE® - a journey to 'Holitopia'**

Out of this amalgam and my longstanding transdisciplinary practice, I have developed the concept EMBARKING FUTURE®. Artistic and curatorial practice combined with futurology, speculative design and systemic consultative practice merge into a unique new method to pragmatically design the future.

The role of design is to create counter-models to the existing social order. Designing society is a call for new utopias. It uses the power of imagination and confronts the existing with ideas of the possible. It looks for testing grounds, temporary realisations of the utopian, temporary emanations that enable a sensual experience of possibility. Utopia becomes pragmatic and pragmatism turns utopian in order to make possibility a reality in the here and now (Friedrich von Borries, 2018).

As an antipole to the binary of what is actually imagined as the future, 'Retrotopia', a global epidemic of nostalgia, a longing for the good old days, and the opposite extreme of 'Technotopia', a future in which virtually all problems are solved technologically (Zygmunt Bauman, 2017) - in the EMBARKING FUTURE® concept I create a holistic vision of the future and name this space 'Holitopia'.

These possible realities can be experienced and practiced in the re:future Lab Institute for Art and Future Design. With formats ranging from art exhibitions, lectures, workshops, symposia, consulting and facilitating through to a future incubator, the visitors, participants, audiences and fellows experience how to navigate uncertain new territories, grasp the inherent opportunities, detect blind spots, and find alternative modes of action - in order to re-design their own life models, business plans, and strategies.

The mission is ambitious: Catalyse the social dream of holitopia for a good life on a healed planet.

### **THE AUTHOR**

*Madeleine Schwinge holds a degree in economics and is the founder and director of the re:future Lab Institute for Art and Future Design.*