



Pari Perspectives

"The future has an ancient heart"
CARLO LEVI

**Ideas in Science, the Arts,
Spirit and Community**

This Is Not Art

SEE INSIDE FOR DETAILS

Issue 24 / June 2026

Pari Perspectives
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This Is Not Art: See Inside for Details

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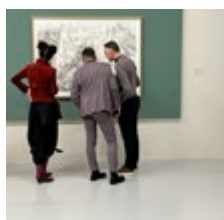
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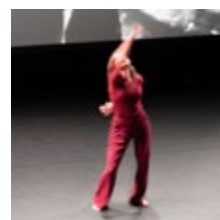
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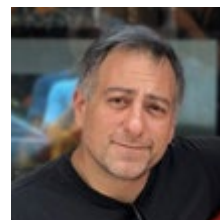
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The Pari Center

"The future has an ancient heart"

CARLO LEVI (1902-1975)

The Pari Center for New Learning, created in 2000 by the late F. David Peat and Maureen Doolan, is dedicated to education, learning and research. It fosters an interdisciplinary approach linking science, arts, ethics, community and the sacred. It favours a gentle approach to learning that emphasises human interaction in the beautiful ambience of a medieval village, without the intrusion of unnecessary technology. It also respects a 'sense of place,' for the heart of the Center is the village of Pari, a location from which to contemplate society and its future. In 2016 the Pari Center for New Learning became The Pari Center and an advisory board of thirteen members was elected.

The Philosophy and Aims of the Center are as follows:

1. **To promote** the integration of knowledge, arts, science, ethical values, community and spirituality within the ambience of a medieval village.
2. **To foster** the social, economic and cultural development of Pari, the preservation of its traditions and values, and to offer encouragement for the future to its youth.
3. **To provide** opportunities for continued learning for adults by organizing courses, workshops and conferences of the highest standards facilitated by a faculty committed to excellence and creativity.
4. **To promulgate** the approach of Gentle Action.
5. **To provide** a creative environment for artists, writers, dancers, musicians, environmentalists, scientists, philosophers, psychologists and other thinkers to work together to explore new ideas and/or to work independently on their own projects within the supportive environment of the Pari community.
6. **To foster** continuing research into art, science, psychology, education, ethics and society.

One of David Peat's initial feelings on arriving in Pari was that the village was a container, a safe haven. The same families had been living there for centuries leading a traditional life, tending their vineyards and olive groves and taking care of the land.

He wrote: 'When I first visited Pari, in 1994, I was struck by the rather bizarre reflection that I was somehow living in the future. The village itself was at least 800 years old and, in essential ways, the rhythms of life had changed very little over the centuries. When, in 1996, I returned to live permanently in Pari this intuition persisted: that there was something of great value in this community that could be carried into our common future.'

It seemed to him the perfect quiet and peaceful environment from which to pause and find time for thought and contemplation. Also, where people could have the opportunity to meet in small groups for several days to make an in-depth exploration of ideas and themes about which they felt passionate. From within this beautiful and ancient site, he could create a place where people could express themselves freely within the safe atmosphere of a vessel. The Pari Center was born.

'These meetings,' wrote Peat, 'are not designed to exhibit one's intellectual fireworks, but rather to engage in mutual exploration of particular themes, not only simply from the perspective of "new ideas" but also as they related to questions of ethics, values and society. Underlying each meeting will be the sense that this discussion is taking place within an environment that has sustained a strong social meaning for over 800 years.'

For the history and philosophy of The Pari Center, or for information on Pari Center events visit www.paricenter.com

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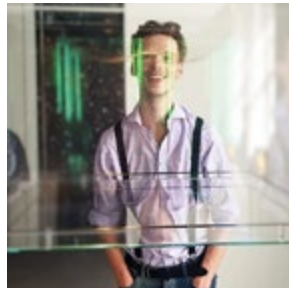
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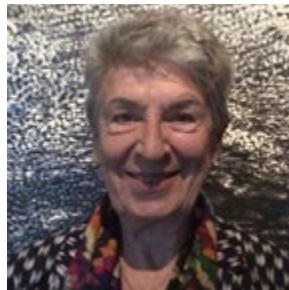
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Message from the Director

The Midnight Road

I'm writing this sitting at one of the tables in the café, under the awnings, on a warm day in Pari.

We're just at the end of the first main conference of the new season: 'Paths to Knowing Consciousness and Reality: From the Indigenous to the Academic' expertly and humanly curated by Jeff Dunne.

As always, I'm tired, over caffeinated, nursing a (slight) hangover and exploding with new ideas. I'm also hobbling around with a (slightly) injured right toe. Don't ask....

Dreaming has been a recurring theme through the conference. We've been encouraged to record and share dreams in a workshop, as well as adding the text to an on-line AI system that turns them into an image.

One of the attendees shared a fleeting insight—a message passed on in the dream time: 'The road to Pari is a midnight road.' I was struck by the phrase. It seemed deep, but mysterious (like the best dreams), but I could not get a handle on the imagery involved. So, I fed it into an AI and asked what it made of the expression.

Before we get to that though, let's be clear: striking as some of the responses you get from these systems may be, they are *not* conscious machines. They are *not* AI in the strong, weak or Sci-Fi sense. They are large language models that have been fed a diet of documents and images and coded to process commonalities and make associations. Our prompts are used as 'tokens' that trigger a response—in a sense the model looks for the 'most typical' next word and builds up a reply piece by piece. You could feed the same prompt to different models and get a variety of answers, depending on how they had been trained. And that, there, is the secret sauce. Unconscious, biases (or just plain biases) in the people selecting the data that feed the models are going to reflect in the answers obtained. In fact, I asked that very question to my pet AI and got:

Prompt: *How dependent are you on the selection of input data that is used to train you?*

Answer: *Very dependent —but not in the simple 'I just repeat the training data' sense.*

My abilities come from patterns learned across the

training mixture: language, reasoning styles, facts, examples, code, mathematics, conversation structure, and so on. Change the data substantially, and you would change what I know, what I'm good at, what biases I inherit, what gaps I have, and even how I tend to phrase things.

So, when I fed the prompt: 'What do you make of the phrase: the road to Pari is a midnight road?' it would have scanned the website and any associated things it could lay its (virtual) hands (?) on in order to recast what was already out there, albeit distributed in a way that would not be easily integrated in the way the AI can. This is (lightly edited) what I got back:

Pari is not just a venue; the Center presents itself as a place for 'pause and reflect,' linking science, arts, ethics, community and the sacred, with a strong emphasis on the 'spirit of place' in a medieval Tuscan village.

*So 'the road to Pari' can easily mean **the intellectual/spiritual journey into that kind of liminal space.***

'Midnight road' suggests several things at once:

1. **Threshold imagery**—midnight is neither one day nor the next. That fits Pari's ethos: between science and spirituality, rational inquiry and contemplative reflection, old village and future-facing thought.
2. **A road of uncertainty**—one travels with limited visibility. That could be praise: Pari asks people to move beyond familiar disciplinary headlights. Or it could be criticism: the project may seem to some to drift into obscurity, mysticism, or 'soft-focus' interdisciplinarity.
3. **Initiatory language**—midnight roads are roads of **transformation**, but also of **risk**. The phrase has a slightly esoteric flavour, which suits a Bohm/Peat-adjacent setting where wholeness, dialogue, synchronicity, and 'new learning' are central motifs. The Center was founded by F. David Peat, known for work connecting physics, Bohmian ideas, creativity, and broader philosophical themes.

It marks Pari as a place associated not with ordinary instruction, but with a kind of nocturnal crossing—inquiry at the edge of the map.

So, that's a bit stunning, at least to me. Having all these perspectives on Pari in the electronic aether is encouraging, terrifying and (slightly) bemusing.

It gets 'worse.'

Another of our number was moved to ask AI what it made of the notion of Pari as an alchemical vessel. That reply ran to several pages, so I've plucked out a couple of comments that struck me:

Around Pari the materia of the Work is not metaphor. It is geology. The three Paracelsian principles—Sulphur, Mercury, Salt—are present in the ground as literal substances, which makes this landscape less an emblem of alchemy than an actual laboratory in which the operations have been running for three thousand years without anyone needing to believe in them.

If one had to name the single governing pattern, it would be that: this is a landscape that does not need to be made alchemical, because it has never stopped transmuting itself—dissolving and coagulating, poisoning and healing, ripening metal and spirit out of its own body—and the human work here, from the Etruscan smith to the Pari Center, has always been a matter of attending to that process closely enough to take part in it. The vessel was already lit when we arrived.

Again, it's worth remembering that the AI has not made up any of this. It is pulling together threads of what is out there. Things we probably should have put together for ourselves, if we had the time to do the research it can take microseconds over. With both prompts, I'm impressed by the depth, subtly and coherence of the answers. There's something to meditate on here. I did not expect that.

Conventionally this is the point where you're supposed to draw things to an intelligent, thought-provoking and witty conclusion.

Err...

I can't let go of the phrase 'the road to Pari is a midnight road.'

I'm constantly reminding myself that it is the Pari Center for New Learning.

I'm pondering the midnight road that the whole world seems to be treading.

I'm thinking of the interactions that have taken place this week between indigenous and western thinkers and wondering if we can ever fully relate one worldview to another. It's not a simple task of translation, nor some facile 'oh by this they mean that...'.

In the end, I think the midnight road is something we walk together, figuring out a new *mutual worldview* as we go along. Perhaps AI can help with that.

I'm not telling you what came out when someone fed in 'spiritual meaning of a right-toe injury'...

That one you can do for yourselves.

Jonathan Allday



Vari(ed) Perspectives

by JEFF DUNNE

If you are a regular reader of *Pari Perspectives*, there is a good chance that you identify with traits such as a curiosity about the world, compassion for others, and a sense that a holistic perspective provides something of value that cannot be found in reductionism. You probably enjoy introspection and likely resonate with the adage that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living,’ or at least a slightly less draconian version such as ‘the examined life is richer, more fulfilling, than the unexamined one.’ Surely saying ‘the unexperienced life is not worth living’ feels pretty self-evident, for otherwise what would be the point of it all, and personally speaking I feel that ‘the *unappreciated* life is not worth living’ should be a common phrase. Understanding which version resonates best undoubtedly says something valuable about your relationship with the human experience.

But this column is, after all, Vari(ed) Perspectives, and our challenge this time is to explore our automatic assumptions regarding what represents ‘better’ in how one lives life. In circles that focus on matters of consciousness, folks generally take it as an axiom that everyone should be shifting towards states of ‘higher consciousness,’ but is that really true? And for that matter, what does ‘higher consciousness’ even mean? Is it a matter of being more cognitively complex? More self-aware? More connected? Let’s examine each of these more closely.

Complexity

We are taught to arrange living things in a hierarchy. People go above other mammals; mammals go above birds (but maybe not some kinds of parrots). Birds go above lizards, lizards over plants, and so forth. And while we may debate where to stick creatures like cephalopods, we’re pretty certain that we sit at the top with dolphins within flipper’s reach, your average koala bear is somewhere in the middle, and bacteria are way down near the bottom. But...

Suppose we look at the capacity for impact. Would we not rank the master wizard over the apprentice? I use this analogy with specific purpose, for consider the work done exploring the human capacity for our current best example of ‘magic,’ i.e. psi effects. Research shows that adults indeed have the ability to influence systems such as Random Number Generators (RNGs) solely through their intentions, but interestingly that children are more effective than adults. And lest we presume that this is a capability unique to humans, that same research discovered that

animals are even better than kids. Raccoons trying to get peanuts out of an RNG-controlled food dispenser showed tremendous deviations from randomness. And in unpublished research that the author happened to have an inside track to learn about, we saw that plants were better still (to the point of blowing out the whole system)!

Considering the nature of the phenomenon, this isn’t too surprising. The ability to influence random systems is driven far more by one’s ability to achieve resonance, to get out of the intellect rather than immerse ourselves within it. So who exactly is... higher... better... ‘more’? Going in the direction of greater intellectual capacity might not be the greatest measure, or at least not as important as...

Connectedness

Here, at least, the answer is clear. Being more aware of, more in tune with, one’s interconnectedness within the ecosystem that is life on Earth (or beyond the planet, or even beyond the materialism-based way of viewing reality), that certainly represents a higher, better state of being. Except... isn’t the very nature of being a human that one is living the human experience? And the human life experience is about having an identity, one that breathes and loves and experiences pain and joy, and does all the things that a human does. What is the ‘higher’ state of existence, the bee or the beaver? The ant or the antelope? Extreme interconnectedness comes at the cost of uniqueness, of identity. If a billion plant cells can work in harmony to influence an RNG to turn up the lights, that’s obviously powerful, but what about free will or the ability to even distinguish one cell from another? Are we really ready to sacrifice our sense of self for the sake of ‘higher consciousness’?

So maybe it’s really about...

Awareness

Surely more awareness is better. Every human should strive to be as self-aware as absolutely possible, and in doing so reach that state of ‘higher’ consciousness. The world would be perfect if everyone recognized their role as a part of reality, and everyone would be happy. After all, aren’t the mommy and daddy bird relieved to be part of the grand design when a snake sneaks into their nest and eats all the eggs?

There's no indication that other elements of nature focus on cultivating heightened self-awareness. The likelihood is that they don't really think much about their place in the universe at all, but rather focus their attention on doing the actual living—finding food, sleeping, mating, etc. Now don't get me wrong, I am not suggesting that we all cease pursuing self-awareness, because I am 1000% convinced that it has tremendous benefits. I am simply saying that we should not jump to the conclusion that it should be a requirement for everybody.

To get a little metaphysical here, consider the theory that we enter our human existence like actors on a stage. We elect to take on a specific role, to play a part in the Great Performance. And when it concludes with our death, we return to a state of non-humanness, a state that survivors of Near-Death Experiences tell us is actually far greater in terms of complexity (to the point of reaching simplicity from the other direction), interconnectedness, and awareness. But they also express that there's great value in living as a human, which is why they return to the stage to continue playing out their part.

So perhaps the goal is to play our part with the greatest possible awareness of our nature as actors. Except... who really is the better actor? The performer who stays aware of their nature as a performer while the play is going on, or the actor that is so fully immersed in their role that they are truly *living* it? For some people, maybe self-awareness takes them out of the moment. We can all find examples of certain things that are best experienced in full immersion mode, not as a bystander.

Ultimately it seems like it is all about...

Choices

What is the right way to live? Is it better to immerse yourself in the experience of life so fully as to forget what is doing the immersing, or to seek to rise above the baseline human condition, to touch the divine (or however one wants to describe it)? Why should we think there is a single right answer, or that a person must necessarily choose at all?

Speaking for myself, I prefer to have both. I want periods when I step outside and look at my life in the context of the role I play within the artwork that is reality; other times I want to be fully steeped in the joys and sorrows of the human experience. But that's me. I choose not to call one better than the other.

And maybe that's really the message here (oh, come on, *of course* it's the message here, for this whole essay was crafted to culminate in this point): *there isn't a wrong way to experience life*. Striving for enlightenment and higher perspectives is the right path for some people. Focusing on the details of the day-to-day is the right path for others.

So if obtaining 'higher consciousness' is not necessarily the endpoint for everyone, where does the betterment

of humanity happen then? Maybe it is what you get when we finally learn to respect people's right to choose the kind of person they want to be, the kind of life they want to live. One does not need to experience universe-shifting transcendence to practice mutual respect, after all. And seeing as how judging each other all the time doesn't appear to be doing the world any favours, it might be worth giving it a try.

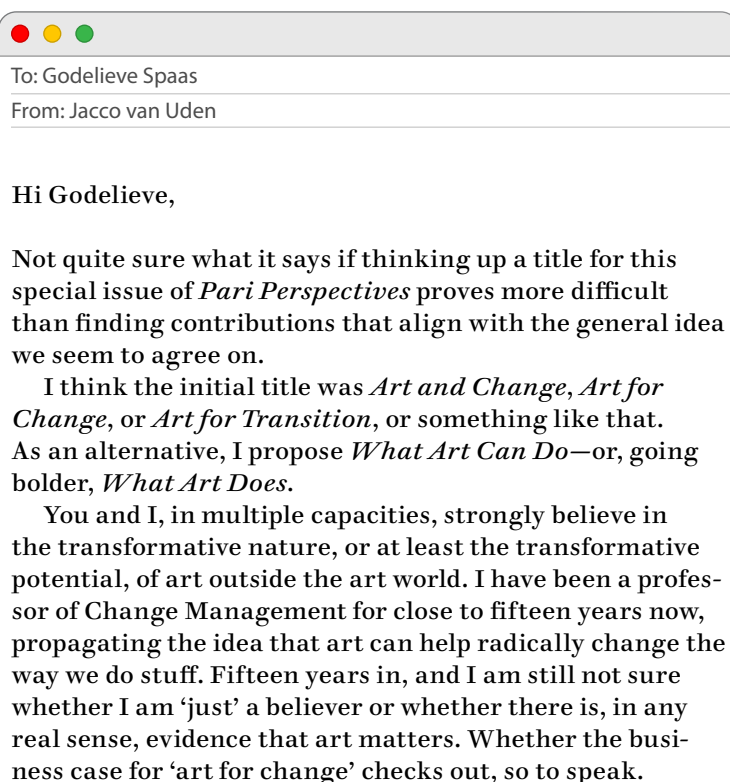
It's a perspective worth considering.





Introduction

GODELIEVE SPAAS and JACCO VAN UDEN



To: Godelieve Spaas
From: Jacco van Uden

Hi Godelieve,

Not quite sure what it says if thinking up a title for this special issue of *Pari Perspectives* proves more difficult than finding contributions that align with the general idea we seem to agree on.

I think the initial title was *Art and Change*, *Art for Change*, or *Art for Transition*, or something like that. As an alternative, I propose *What Art Can Do*—or, going bolder, *What Art Does*.

You and I, in multiple capacities, strongly believe in the transformative nature, or at least the transformative potential, of art outside the art world. I have been a professor of Change Management for close to fifteen years now, propagating the idea that art can help radically change the way we do stuff. Fifteen years in, and I am still not sure whether I am ‘just’ a believer or whether there is, in any real sense, evidence that art matters. Whether the business case for ‘art for change’ checks out, so to speak.

PREVIOUS PAGE:

Reed holds the riverbank in place, while seeds drift on the water toward unknown shores where they can take root. Art that roots beyond her own domain moves the same way. She generates knowledge that could not emerge otherwise, and lands, with direction and intention, in the middle of domains that thought they could do without her.

Marga Rotteveel

Artistic researcher, Research group Economy in Common, Centre of Expertise Wellbeing Economy and new Entrepreneurship, Avans University of Applied Sciences

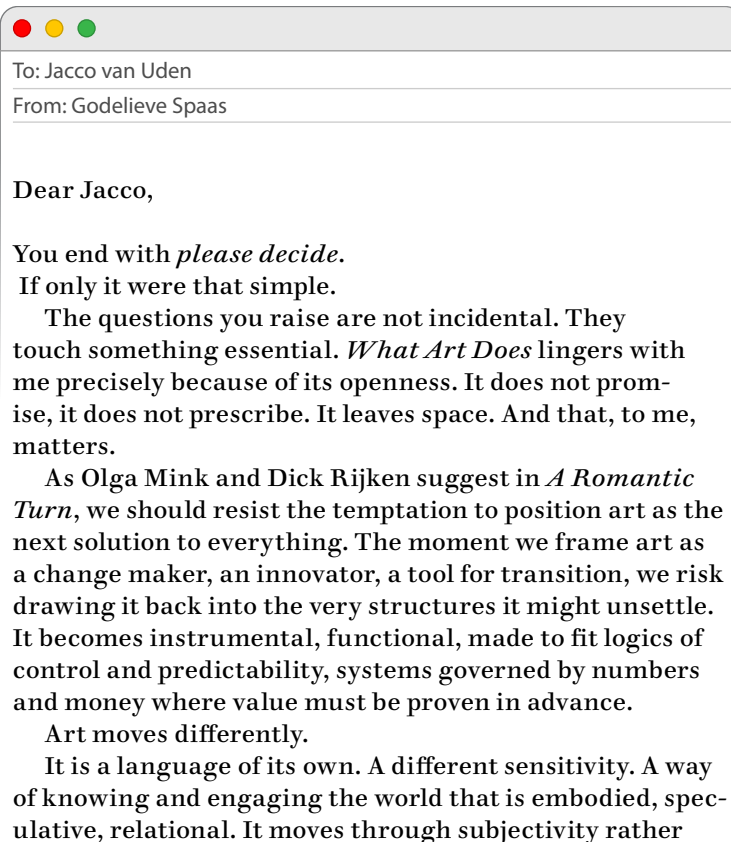
I know, I know—I can’t seem to shake off the business logic that I am trying to undermine.

So I guess that’s where *What Art Does* is coming from: fewer general claims or sweeping statements about the transformative potential of art, and more focus on the specifics of how art sets things in motion. Art in action, so to speak.

Which could also be the title for this issue.

Please decide...

Love, Jacco



To: Jacco van Uden
From: Godelieve Spaas

Dear Jacco,

You end with *please decide*.
If only it were that simple.

The questions you raise are not incidental. They touch something essential. *What Art Does* lingers with me precisely because of its openness. It does not promise, it does not prescribe. It leaves space. And that, to me, matters.

As Olga Mink and Dick Rijken suggest in *A Romantic Turn*, we should resist the temptation to position art as the next solution to everything. The moment we frame art as a change maker, an innovator, a tool for transition, we risk drawing it back into the very structures it might unsettle. It becomes instrumental, functional, made to fit logics of control and predictability, systems governed by numbers and money where value must be proven in advance.

Art moves differently.

It is a language of its own. A different sensitivity. A way of knowing and engaging the world that is embodied, speculative, relational. It moves through subjectivity rather

than objectivity, through attention rather than control. It does not stand outside the world to describe it, nor does it enter with the intention to fix it. It stays with what is not yet clear, not yet sayable. It engages, questions, unsettles, not by offering answers, but by shifting what can be perceived, felt, and thought.

In that sense, art does not simply contribute to change. It produces forms of knowing that cannot emerge otherwise. It creates spaces where different logics can coexist, where uncertainty is not a problem to solve but a condition to work with, where something can be rehearsed before it becomes legible. Where you, in your professorship, look closely at how art can play a role within processes of change, I find myself, together with the artistic researchers in my group, drawn to a slightly different movement. We look at how the stories and skills that shape our world can be critically questioned and transformed through artistic practice. Perhaps this difference also explains why we look, just slightly, in another direction. You tracing how art enters change processes, I tracing how art reshapes the very conditions through which change can be imagined at all.

And yet art does not do this alone.

It exists only in relation. In the encounter between the work and the one who meets it. The viewer, the participant, the witness. Something happens there that cannot be predetermined. A shift in perception, a hesitation, a recognition, a discomfort, a new opening. Through art we experience the freedom to see otherwise, to feel otherwise, to enter into another story and relate to it, even if only for a moment. It is in this lived exchange that art comes into being, not as an object, but as an event.

This also brings to mind the question posed by David Peat: 'How can organizations and individuals transform themselves so that they can become as subtle, sensitive, intelligent and fast responding as the world around them?' Perhaps art does not answer this question directly, but makes it inhabitable. It cultivates precisely those qualities, subtlety, sensitivity, responsiveness, that our systems, in their pursuit of control and predictability, have learned to suppress.

This is also what Verily Klaassen and I reflect on in *An Unusual Solution for Complex Issues* with Edo Dijksterhuis. Can we leave open what art does. Can it remain multiple, shifting across time and context, allowing different encounters to generate different meanings. Perhaps the beauty of art is not that it does something, but that something happens in relation to it. That it invites rather than directs. That it holds knowledge without fixing it.

What we are circling around, I think, is not art as instrument, but art as a way of knowing in action.

Which makes your unease with the business case not only understandable, but generative. It reveals the friction between regimes of value. One asks for evidence, scalability, measurable impact. The other moves through resonance, relation, emergence. Perhaps this issue does

not need to resolve that tension, but to hold it, to make it perceptible.

So rather than defining what art does, we might begin to show how it operates. Across contexts, across encounters. In science, in governance, in communities, in economies. Not as a solution, but as a force that reconfigures the conditions under which solutions are imagined.

And perhaps also how, in doing so, art itself is changed.

As for the title, a few possibilities stay with me.

What Art Questions

Art!

What Art Knows

Maybe we do not need to decide just yet. Let us read the contributions, sit with them, move through them together.

We will know then.

With love,
Godelieve

To: Godelieve Spaas
From: Jacco van Uden

Thanks Godelieve,

It has taken me a while to come to approach art not as a thing, but as a way of knowing. A particular way of knowing, for that matter: one that does not promise answers—as you might expect from ways of knowing—but one that generates knowledge as much as it questions it.

To appreciate that, you have to study art in the wild. To be less concerned with where to separate artworks, in time and space, from the rest of the world, and more with how art works in and with the world.

In that respect, I think the contributions of Betiana Pavon and Denise Harleman could work really well together. Both authors reflect on projects that are essentially, I think, about relations. Or more precisely, about just how difficult it is to understand the world first and foremost in relational terms. About how inclined we are—or have become—to see discrete entities.

In *Liefste Collectief Kapitaal*, a love letter, Denise Harleman describes, in a beautifully layered way, the complex relationship with her—and there we go already—'own' initiative Collectief Kapitaal. She writes: 'You have been brought into the world to help make a society possible in which every human being can live with dignity. You must exist—there was never any doubt about it. The necessity was and is palpable, unmistakable. But how you must exist—that is another question.'

Denise Harleman describes in detail how difficult and exhausting the realisation of an initiative such as

Collectief Kapitaal is when the different forms the initiative successively takes seem each time to do violence to the intention behind it. Denise: 'If there is anything that you have been to me in these past few years, it has been a constant shift.'

As someone who wonders what organisation studies and change management can learn from the arts, I get very excited by what Harleman calls a tenacious expectation: '... that one can become master of the change one envisions.' Change, she continues, 'then becomes something that can be predicted, controlled, regulated and managed. A professional, after all, knows where they are heading and stays the course. This logic works only as long as systems are optimised that do not question their own premises. But once change demands a reconfiguration of relationships, power dynamics and meaning, that same logic becomes a form of fixation; an attempt to freeze movement before it can reveal what is truly at stake.'

A seemingly very different kind of artwork is central to the article by the Argentinian artist Betiana Pavón: 'Compostable Altar: Offering to the Earth is a biodesign project that explores decomposition as a regenerative strategy. A biodegradable installation that is not designed to last, but to disappear—and in doing so, to nourish the soil that sustains it.'

Betiana, too, shows how things are not what they are. More strongly still, that they are not things. The ease with which we talk about soil as 'a something' in no way does justice to the relations that lie underneath it, literally: 'The soil is not merely a substrate. It is a living organism—complex, dense, teeming with invisible processes that sustain all life on the surface.' Betiana describes how modern thinking has deprived us of the sight of the unmistakable inherent connectedness of life on earth, both in time and in place. With philosophical arguments and modern technology—through what she calls 'bio-digital craftsmanship'—Betiana shows that a relational perspective offers a workable alternative to a worldview in which the earth can appear as a disposable object. As an artist, designer and transdisciplinary researcher, Pavón formulates it as follows: 'If the soil is a living body, what does it mean to design for it rather than design on it?'

And this project, too, makes me very happy as a change scholar, for instance when Betiana writes: 'Compostable Altar celebrates impermanence. It is born to disappear. As it slowly decomposes, it regenerates the soil. It is a gesture that acknowledges the vitality of matter...and which shifts the focus away from the designer as author and controller, positioning them instead as a mediator within a broader assemblage: matter, the environment, technologies, artistic practice.'

Agree that these two articles make a good couple? And yes, let's postpone our decision on the title of this edition of *Pari Perspectives*. See what emerges.

x Jacco

To: Jacco van Uden
From: Godelieve Spaas

Dear Jacco,

I agree with you that both Denise Harleman and Betiana Pavón are searching for a transformation, or perhaps even a dissolution, of the role of the maker within their work.

Someone who engages this question in a markedly different yet equally charged way is Renzo Martens. Like Denise and Betiana, he wants, and I emphasize wants, to change the world. He mobilizes art to redirect flows of money and power, to intervene in the extractive logics that continue to shape both people and land. His work enters processes of decolonization, and does so in ways that are deliberately uncomfortable, even controversial. It raises the question whether it is his position, as a white man, to occupy such a central role. Yet rather than stepping back, he steps into that tension. He does not position himself outside the conflict, but inhabits it.

At the same time, he complicates his own authorship. In the presentation of his work at the Venice Biennale, he actively relinquishes control, handing over parts of the work to others. What emerges is not a resolved position, but an ongoing inquiry. How does this process change me? What is mine to do? Not only in terms of giving space to others, but also in terms of letting go, stepping forward, withdrawing, redistributing power. It is a position that is frictional, and at times painful.

Eva Schmertz engages a similar questioning, yet through a very different energy. By participating in Tino Sehgal's work *This you you*, she explores the meaning of motherhood, both personally and through literature. Together with her baby, she enters the work over the course of five months, sitting each Friday in the space of Museum De Pont. Two interpreters respond to her and her child, and she to them, in an unfolding choreography of presence and attention. As she writes, 'My connection with the artwork showed me that motherhood is not only a social role but also a philosophical and economic practice. It interrupts the illusion of autonomy and reveals that our existence is fundamentally relational and dependent.'

An essential dimension of Sehgal's practice lies in what remains absent. There are no photographs, no recordings, no documentation. The work exists only in its enactment. This choice is not incidental, but part of a broader inquiry into sustainability and intergenerational connection. Through voice, rhythm, and body language, something takes shape, only to dissolve again. Nothing is left behind. In this, Sehgal, like Betiana, plays with the ephemerality of the work, and with the shifting role of the artist within it.

This questioning of impact itself is central to the work of Marjolijn Zwakman. She moves away from impact as a linear relation of cause and effect. Away from meas-

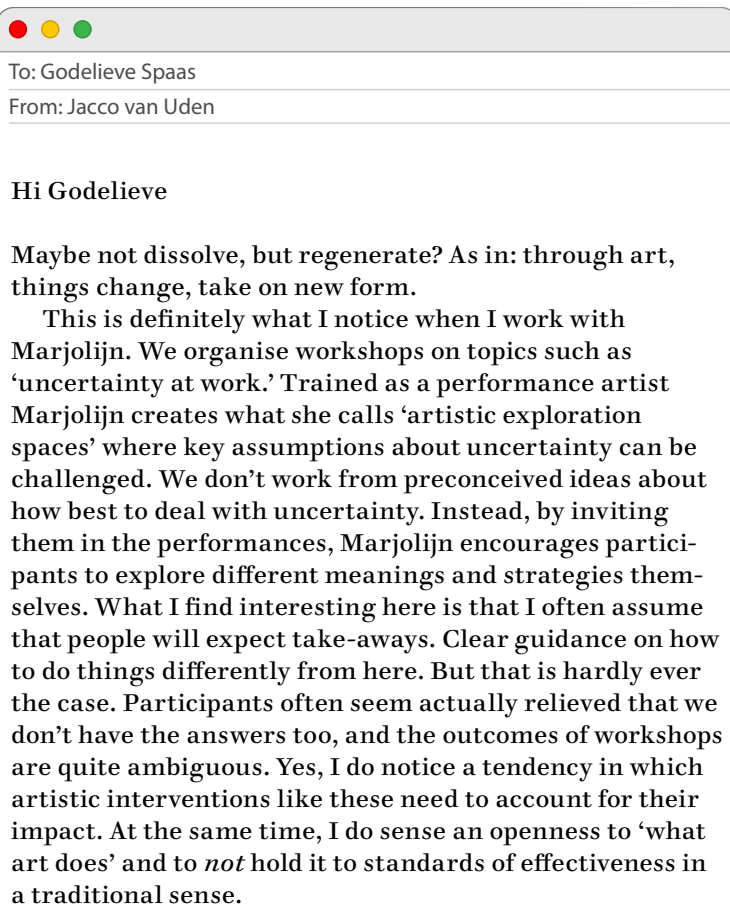
urement, from numbers, from the need to demonstrate outcomes. Instead, she turns towards resonance. Towards attuning to fields that are already in motion. Towards embodied experience as a site where change does not occur through intervention alone, but through participation, through being moved.

Jacco, perhaps you could deepen this reflection through her work. After all, she developed her research within your group, and her practice seems to articulate, in a very grounded way, what it might mean to think of art not in terms of impact, but in terms of resonance.

And perhaps, in all these practices, another line quietly emerges. Not only art as something that creates, intervenes, or transforms, but also art as something that allows things to dissolve. To disappear. To not be held, measured, or sustained. Something we are not particularly skilled at in a world so oriented towards control, preservation, and accumulation, even in our notions of sustainability.

Maybe a title could also move in that direction. *Art of Dissolving*. Or something close to it. Not as an answer, but as another opening in the conversation we are holding.

With love,
Godelieve



To: Godelieve Spaas
From: Jacco van Uden

Hi Godelieve

Maybe not dissolve, but regenerate? As in: through art, things change, take on new form.

This is definitely what I notice when I work with Marjolijn. We organise workshops on topics such as ‘uncertainty at work.’ Trained as a performance artist Marjolijn creates what she calls ‘artistic exploration spaces’ where key assumptions about uncertainty can be challenged. We don’t work from preconceived ideas about how best to deal with uncertainty. Instead, by inviting them in the performances, Marjolijn encourages participants to explore different meanings and strategies themselves. What I find interesting here is that I often assume that people will expect take-aways. Clear guidance on how to do things differently from here. But that is hardly ever the case. Participants often seem actually relieved that we don’t have the answers too, and the outcomes of workshops are quite ambiguous. Yes, I do notice a tendency in which artistic interventions like these need to account for their impact. At the same time, I do sense an openness to ‘what art does’ and to *not* hold it to standards of effectiveness in a traditional sense.

Which is why I propose juxtaposing the contributions of Marjolijn Zwakman on the one hand, and Lija and Rodolfo Groenewoud van Vliet on the other. Both pieces explicitly deal with the question of how to express the impact of art, but take quite different approaches in answering it.

In the artistic exploration spaces Marjolijn hopes to create, ‘there is room for pre-verbal knowledge, there is room for energy that can flow between people. In these spaces something can emerge that is not immediately visible or explainable. It does not follow a clear line from action to result and cannot easily be captured in words. Precisely there, in that in-between space, something shifts.’ She wants to make room for the emergent, the difficult to grasp.

Well aware of the challenges this poses with regard to trying to communicate what she hopes to achieve, Marjolijn writes: ‘Practice-oriented researchers are expected to realize demonstrable impact on societal issues with their work. Impact is often reduced to what is measurable: numbers, reach, visibility. Working in organizations I recognize the need to make impact visible. And I understand that desire. We want our work to matter. At the same time, discomfort is growing among researchers and artists about this reduction. It narrows what we can perceive. What can be counted becomes central, but how do we speak about impact that cannot be captured in numbers?’

She finds inspiration in Tatiana Fraser’s work on Deep Scaling: ‘In my work I see that this deep impact takes place in relational and emotional processes that are difficult to capture, but essential for transformation. It is about creating conditions for change. Practices of scaling deep focus on collective learning, connection and healing. They shift the focus from solving to meaning-making, from accelerating to slowing down, from control to relationship.’

Lija and Rodolfo Groenewoud van Vliet approach things differently. They are the founders of In4Art, a European-focused independent research and development organisation for artistic experimentation and responsible innovation. ‘Art-driven innovation,’ as they refer to their way of working, inherently begs the question of how art works if it is to contribute to innovation.

I interviewed Lija and Rodolfo as they worked on an impact infographic to reconstruct in detail how the E-missions project they helped initiate played out. Lija and Rodolfo discovered that impact is neither a tangible outcome nor a static product. Instead, impact represents a dynamic process that evolves and manifests in various ways across different settings. As they put it themselves: ‘The reconstruction distinctly highlights the gradual evolution and maturation of ideas before they find resonance in a particular context. At times, stakeholders require repeated exposure to a project—three, four, or even five instances—before taking action. Occasionally, it may initially be shelved, only to resurface later on.’

Best, Jacco

To: Jacco van Uden
From: Godelieve Spaas

Dear Jacco,

Reading the articles by Edo, Verily and myself, alongside the text by Olga and Dick, I find myself returning to the question we touched upon earlier in our exchange. The question of the title, yes, but more insistently the question underneath it. What do we actually invite in when we invite art?

In the previous letter I spoke about the risk of making art functional, of folding it back into the logics of change, innovation, transition. Reading these texts together, that tension does not resolve. It sharpens.

The article by Edo, and the text by Verily and myself, circle around a delicate construction. Rabo Art Lab is not simply a place where art happens, but a space that must be actively held open. Protected, even, so that art does not collapse into purpose. The condition is fragile. Art must take place in freedom, otherwise it ceases to be art. And yet it is placed at the very heart of an institution that measures, calculates, decides. A system that cannot help but ask what it yields.

So art is invited in, and at the same time kept from being absorbed.

The work of Henk Wildschut in *Territory* embodies this tension without resolving it. It does not intervene. It does not reconcile. It does not translate conflict into clarity. It remains with what is, and with what is disappearing. It holds multiple realities side by side, without forcing them into dialogue. And somehow, precisely there, something begins to move.

Not because the work sets out to create change, but because it refuses to reduce what it encounters.

In a different yet closely related way, the text by Julia Mullié opens up the work of Rodrigo Hernández. She does not simply describe his practice, but moves within it, tracing how figures, memories, humans and animals continuously emerge, dissolve, and reappear. What becomes visible through her writing is a world in which identity is never fixed, where meaning is not given but formed in relation, and where perception itself becomes unstable.

Through Hernández's work, as she unfolds it, the relation between human and animal is not symbolic or illustrative, but experiential. It is felt. A shared world in which boundaries blur, where presence is always partial, and where to see is already to be entangled. Her text does not explain this away, but stays with it. It allows the work to remain open, layered, and in motion.

Like Wildschut, Hernández does not resolve what he encounters. And like Wildschut, what his work produces is not an answer, but a condition. A way of holding multiple temporalities, perspectives, and realities together without forcing coherence. Julia's writing makes this perceptible, not by closing the work, but by carefully extending its field.

In both, art does not step in to fix or to clarify, but to hold open. To allow multiple worlds to exist at once, without forcing alignment. To remain with what is in between.

This resonates deeply with what Olga and Dick articulate. Their refusal to cast art as solution is not a withdrawal, but a repositioning. Art does not operate in the logic of problems and answers. It operates in the realm of meaning. Of ambiguity. Of felt knowledge. It resists definition, not out of vagueness, but out of precision. Because what matters cannot always be named, let alone measured. And so the question intensifies.

How do we allow art to remain fluid, indeterminate, not fully knowable, and still grant it a solid place within processes of knowledge development? Can something that escapes function still carry weight? Can something that does not aim to deliver still be taken seriously?

Perhaps this is where the real work lies. Not in demonstrating what art does, but in holding open the conditions under which it can act without being captured. Not outside the system, not fully inside it, but in a space that remains unsettled. A space that insists.

Which brings me, again, to the title. *What Art Does* still echoes, but it begins to feel almost too certain. As if we might be able to point to it, define it, contain it.

Maybe we need a title that resists us a little more.

This Is Not Art.

Not as a rejection, but as a warning. As a mirror held up to our own desire to make art useful, legible, accountable. To make it work. Because perhaps the moment art fully works, within the terms we set, it ceases to do what we need it to do.

With love,
Godelieve

To: Godelieve Spaas
From: Jacco van Uden

Hi Godelieve,

Can I propose a subtitle to go with that? Something that underscores that art doesn't like being told what it is and isn't. 'This Is Not Art: See Inside for Details'

x J



GODELIEVE SPAAS is Professor of Art | Culture | Transition at HZ University of Applied Sciences, where she works at the intersection of artistic research, societal transformation, and cultural imagination. Her work grows from an attunement to the ways contemporary systems have become too hard for life itself. Shaped by control, efficiency, and extraction, they often fail to remain sensitive to complexity, relationships, vulnerability, and care. Through performance, curating, writing, and participatory research, she explores how art can open spaces within these systems for other ways of sensing, knowing, and relating. Her practice approaches artistic research not as a tool for solutions, but as a force that can question dominant narratives, unsettle fixed structures, and create room for more relational, embodied, and life sustaining futures.



JACCO VAN UDEN is a professor of Change Management at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. He has a background in organisation studies (Erasmus University Rotterdam, NL) and holds a PhD in Humanistic Studies. The Change Management Research Group (www.lector-aatchangemanagement.nl) focuses not only on the 'management of change' but also addresses the question of how management ideas and practices themselves can be changed. To answer this question, Jacco often turns to the arts for guidance. In addition to his academic career, Jacco also works as a theatre play director. Jacco and Godelieve co-initiated the SUSTAIN project, an ongoing exploration into how artistic forms of knowledge can contribute to cultural change within fields such as governance, science, education, and business.

A Romantic Turn

Text: OLGA MINK & DICK RIJKEN

Illustrations: OLGA MINK

Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful.

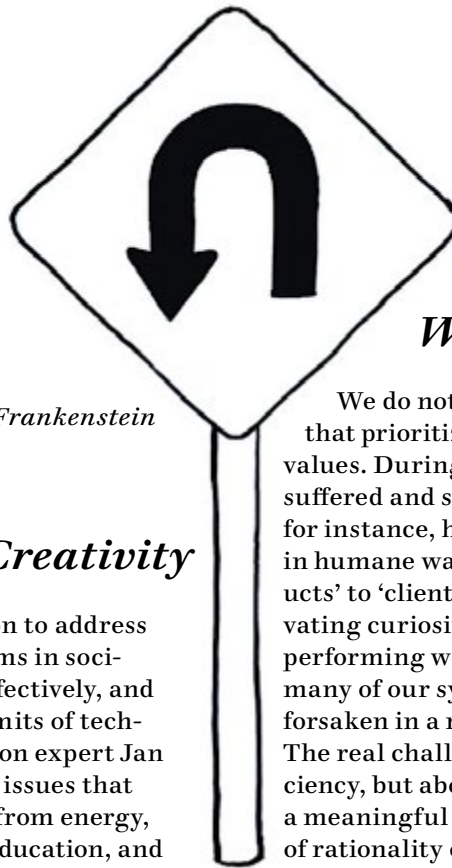
Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

What We Don't Need, is Creativity

Increasingly, art is being called on to address societal transitions. Many systems in society are no longer functioning effectively, and it feels like we are hitting the limits of technocratic neoliberalism. Transition expert Jan Rotmans identified a long list of issues that fundamentally and urgently challenge us: from energy, resources, and agriculture to healthcare, education, and personal life. Everywhere in society, we observe crises that could benefit from new ways of thinking, and the arts have always been considered the domain of creativity par excellence. Now that we find ourselves getting stuck, we assume we need more creativity, and so we turn to art.

If only it were that simple. Is it really a matter of better thinking? Is more creativity the way forward? And what is 'art,' anyway?

Looking beyond the surface, it becomes clear that art neither can nor should be expected to fulfill any promise of saving the world. The idea that 'creativity' can offer us a solution is far too simplistic. Creativity itself is not the issue, and it is not exclusively the domain of artists or designers either. New is not necessarily better, and in various domains of society, there is plenty of creativity to be found without artistic interventions or influences. A tragic example is the financial sector, which, prior to the global crisis in 2008, was extremely creative in developing new financial products. Most of which encouraged greed in unparalleled ways, with dreadful and disastrous consequences.



What Truly Matters

We do not need more ideas, but better ones; ideas that prioritize meaning and embody social and moral values. During the past decades, many values have suffered and succumbed to market forces. Healthcare, for instance, has shifted its focus from 'healing people in humane ways' to the efficient delivery of 'care products' to 'clients'; education is no longer about cultivating curiosity, but about obtaining diplomas and performing well on standardized measures. Across many of our systems, essential values have been forsaken in a relentless pursuit of efficiency and profit. The real challenge, then, is not about novelty or efficiency, but about addressing what truly matters in a meaningful way. This transcends simple notions of rationality or creativity and requires us to go on a quest for meaning and purpose where what truly matters cannot be neatly defined or measured. That does not make it impossible to address, but it does call for more than marketing and efficiency.

And that is perhaps where 'art' comes in. Artists and designers comfortably work with ill-defined concepts like 'beauty,' 'meaning,' 'artistic quality' in highly professional ways. Different artistic practices add up to a professional discipline: A field in which practitioners know what they are doing and excel at it. Artworks can make us feel deeply what we cannot name. Artists can tune into patterns that seem hidden beneath the surface of daily life. Artistic practices involve skills and methods that develop with experience; there are ways of reflecting on notions of quality, and methods for selecting and presenting artworks that stand out. What we call 'art' encompasses all of this: from artworks and practitioners to education and criticism. But most of all, we argue that art embodies a way of being. A mentality that transcends specific media or educational frameworks, and that is needed now more than ever.

But first, we need to address our current predicament.

Complexity and Technocracy

Firstly, we must address the complexity of issues in our society. Drawing from a long history of successfully applying technology and rationality, we have organized many processes in our society into increasingly complex systems. Scientific knowledge and analytical methodologies have long been the foundation of an ‘understanding is the first step towards improvement’ approach to life and societal design. However, in our networked society, where everything is interconnected, our world has become so complex that full understanding is no longer even possible anymore. And, to add insult to injury, technology can no longer provide us with solutions to dynamic and unpredictable social and moral issues that are all interconnected. As a result, the notion of ‘understanding is the first step towards improvement’ has lost its relevance. Simply thinking more or longer will not help.

Market Misery

In addition to this, there is a neoliberal belief in market forces, which has prompted us to outsource many societal values and challenges to the private sector, in order to organize everything cheaper, fairer, and more efficiently. In doing so, we overlooked the fact that many societal values are not easily translated into measurable or definable ‘targets’ and ‘deliverables.’ As the Dutch poet Lucebert also said: ‘everything of value is defenseless.’ The harsh world of market forces, shareholder value, and return on investment is no place to cultivate the things we value most in life. Love, friendship, beauty, empathic care, or curiosity cannot be defined or quantified and consequently suffer consistently in this system. In the market, profits trump all other values.

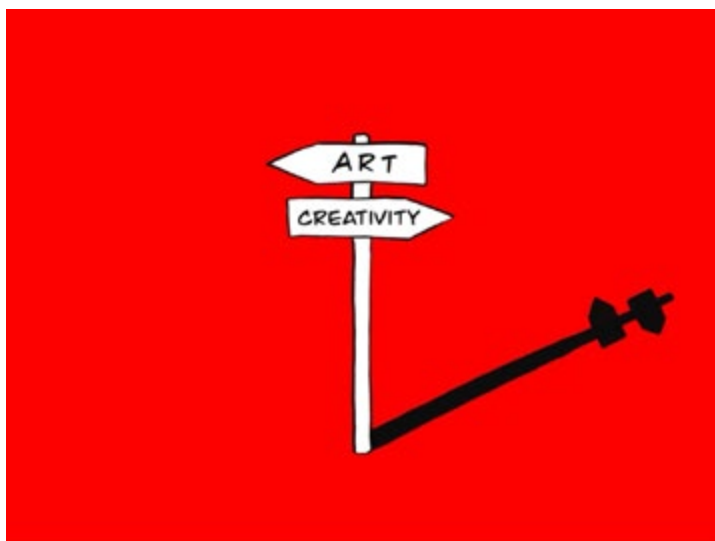
Connected and Conflicted

Finally, we find ourselves on the internet, which connects us all while simultaneously pitting us against each other. We see and reflect on more than ever before, forming opinions on virtually everything, and freely sharing our thoughts with everyone. It is an effective infrastructure for transparency, expression and reflection. However, this turns out to be a double-edged sword. Social media platforms have become battlegrounds where we hurl insults at each other from the safety of our own filter bubbles. Within these echo chambers, our current beliefs are continually reinforced, trapping us in an endless feedback loop..... BEEEEEEP!!

We Need Real Change

In short: complexity cannot be calmly analyzed. Definitions and measurable goals are not suitable for what is truly important in life, and life turns out to be saturated with messy trade-offs between various societal and personal values, in which emotions play a dominant and vital role. We engage in culture wars like puritan warriors and crusaders ready to fight anyone who does not agree with us, anyone who is not ‘us.’

Science and technology will not get us out of this mess. Science helps us understand the world as it is but tells us little about the future or about what else there could or should be. Institutions seem lost within systems that fail to adapt to a changing world. Politics appears entangled in a web of radicalization, desperately searching for simple explanations (it’s all the fault of foreigners, capitalism, the patriarchy, the EU, and so on). Companies and corporations, meanwhile, are more concerned with serving shareholders than their customers. What we currently have is no longer effective. We need real change, deep change.



Not faster, cheaper, or more efficient, but fundamentally different. More meaningful and rooted in values that truly matter to us in life, rather than being solely focused on profit and efficiency.

New Meaning

The realization that we need to innovate along the axis of values and meaning is becoming stronger. We can empirically observe this phenomenon when we witness the impact of the internet on our perceptions of the world and our daily lives, and we also sense it intuitively. Values matter. Culture wars are essentially about values and demonstrate how clumsy and immature we are in dealing with them. We need to get better at this. We need to get really good at this since there is so much at stake.

But all this is easier said than done. In the maze of problems and dysfunctional systems, there's no simple solution or single discipline that will save the day. So don't expect 'the arts' to accomplish this. Chances are that the arts aren't even remotely interested in such a messianic role.

Approaching the issue from an arts perspective—from within, we might say—may offer valuable clues for how to address it.

Not Truth, but Meaning in the Arts

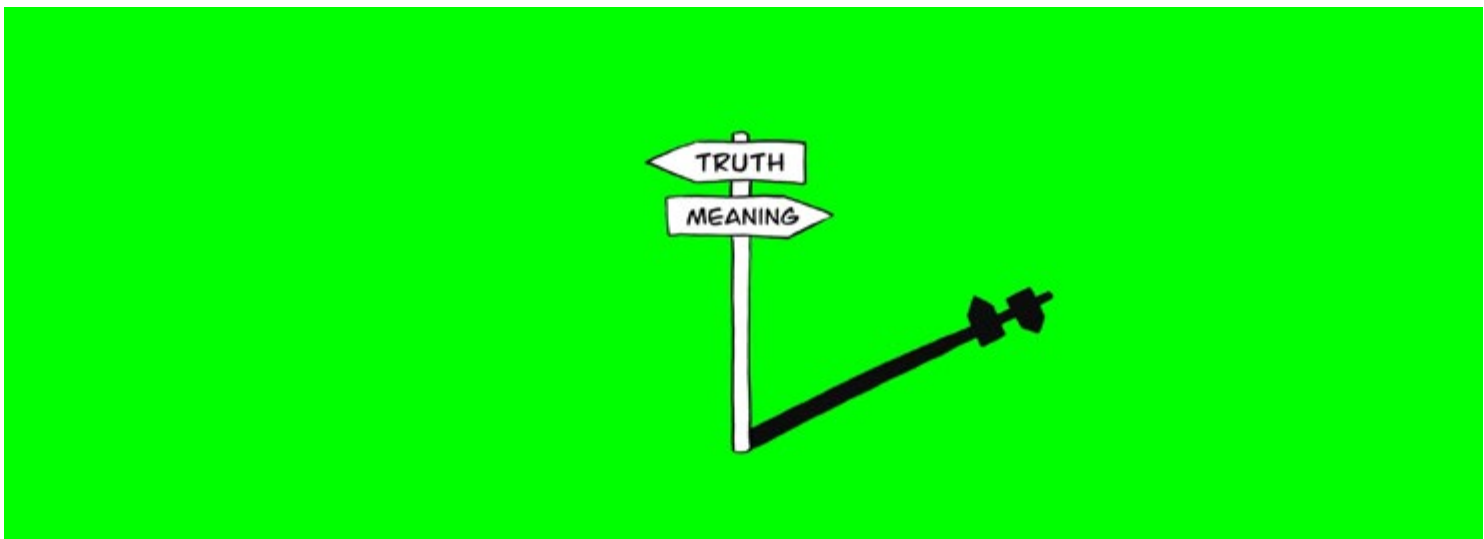
Art is not about truth; rather it often concerns itself with representing reality (note the word: Re-presenting, presenting again), or expressing realities that only exist in our imagination. Art interprets the world and re-presents it in meaningful ways. They are meaningful, because they make and help us feel. And there lies the source of

meaning and value. Sometimes, art is 'about' something (like social commentary), and sometimes it isn't (like the notes of a melody). But in both cases, the goal is to make us feel something: about the world, about our lives, about ourselves. And all these feelings are meaningful. Brian Eno and Bette Adriaanse formulate this beautifully in their little book called 'what art does—an unfinished theory': 'ART IS A WAY OF MAKING FEELINGS HAPPEN'

Just as the healthcare sector is about health, the educational sector is about curiosity (or at least, it should be), the arts are about meaning. From a simple melody that evokes a sense of comfort to a painting of a pipe that also states that it is not a pipe, but a representation of one, it's all about playing with meaning. Which is a far cry from 'solving problems.' But more on that later.

Interpretation is Subjective

Essential to this process is interpretation—discursive or evocative, intuitive or reasoned, or all at the same time. Working with meaning is a process of interpreting the world—it is playing with intentions and perspectives. This makes it a personal matter—everything depends on the perspective of the interpreter. Art education generally focuses strongly on developing the artist as a person with their own 'voice.' Knowledge and skills are also involved, but the core of artistic practice is a mentality, a way of being in the world where the development and communication of personal vision play a central role. Art not only shows or helps us understand the world rationally, but above all, it formulates its perspectives in an evocative manner. It makes us feel. This is categorically different from the 'explanation' based approach of science.



Ambiguity is the Norm

Meaning is often inherently ambiguous; there are multiple possible meanings, simultaneously and non-exclusively. Meaning can be messy, sometimes even self-contradictory. Good art doesn't narrow down ideas, feelings, or emotions; instead, it is open to many of them. It's an interpretation that can be rich in meanings and can vary from person to person: ambiguous and subjective. Art can not only show us 'what is' or 'what could be,' it can also emotionally engage us with complex interpretations. It is this evocative ambiguity of different realities, which exist simultaneously alongside each other, acknowledging and denying each other, that makes art powerful and, at the same time, elusive.

The Probable and the Possible

In this sense, art operates within the realm of the unknown. When it comes to predicting the future, it does not ask 'What will happen?' but 'What else could be?' If probability governs what is expected, art insists on the legitimacy of the unexpected. Art does not aim to predict the future, but to make space for different futures to emerge. It shifts attention from calculation to imagination, from evidence to experience, from the probable to the possible.

Art can create an entirely new (symbolic) language, context, experience or narrative with multiples meanings and perspectives. It can help us to leave conventional thought patterns and expectations behind us and to connect thinking and feeling in complex new ways. Some will argue that the promise of art lies in the unpredictable, the unknown, the elusive, and the uncertain—which is a far cry from asking the arts to solve societal problems. As argued by Nick Cave in the *Red Hand Files*: 'Art doesn't like being told what to do.' Which is both a strength and a vulnerability.

This is precisely what our dysfunctional technocracy requires. It is time to move beyond the notions of 'solving problems' or 'implementing policies' and to adopt an approach to complexity that harnesses both rational thinking and intuitive sensitivity. It is time to acknowledge that complex problems are not easily 'solvable' because life itself is inherently ambiguous. We need to incorporate that understanding into the design and management of our systems. Working with meaning and essential values (that defy definition and quantification) is impossible without subjective interpretations. Not as new truths in an autocratic way, but as possibilities, worth experimenting with and reflecting on. Perhaps systems could better serve us if they accommodate or even cultivate ambiguity and subjectivity. Playfulness instead of policy. Experiments instead of procedures.

This poses an interesting dilemma. Seeking solutions from art may not be applicable, but perhaps it's precisely the artistic way of thinking and doing, as an approach to life in general, that is urgently needed now. Moreover, art itself has not been idle in recent years and appears to be increasingly inclined towards forging new connections.

How has the role of art shifted in recent years?

Autonomous vs Applied Art

In the arts, there is a long tradition of distinguishing between 'autonomous' and 'applied' art. The autonomous artist is typically a free spirit who produces works without anyone else directing them. Even if there is a commission from a museum or festival, it is still the artist who makes all the choices during the production of a work. The creative space is large and shaped by the artist's vision. In contrast to this, design as a discipline has often been regarded as 'applied art': artistic skills or methods are employed for a specific purpose. The client presents a question or a prob-



lem, and the designer produces a work that addresses that need. The creative space is much smaller because it is largely determined by what the client is willing to pay for. This dynamic remains prevalent in the design world. In short, ‘who pays, decides’ is still the norm for many design firms. Museums and concert halls were traditionally reserved for artworks and artists, while the outside world was the domain of designers and products or services. This is changing and this marks an interesting shift.

Relational Art and Social Design

In recent years, we have increasingly seen artists working outside of this traditional distinction, particularly in new fields such as social design or relational art, where ‘makers’ (a term sometimes used to suggest a new kind of role) play more of a catalyst role in (social) processes rather than exhibiting their work in museums. They engage with (societal) issues without a client, creating work within the context itself: they venture into places where they cultivate relationships with stakeholders and participants. Not because they have become designers who have been asked to solve problems, but because their inner artistic drive makes them want to work in the outside world—the world outside museums and venues. Their art takes shape through relationships in the outside world. Relationships become their medium.

This also represents a different approach to understanding and utilizing knowledge—one that extends beyond abstract discourse or cold scientific data to encompass embodied knowledge, which is intertwined with our senses, emotions, and deeply rooted in history and social structures. This type of knowledge resides in the ways people and communities thrive and interact. Experiencing the world and exerting agency within it are integral components of understanding. Systems thinker Nora

Bateson discusses ‘warm data,’ and eco-feminist Donna Haraway emphasizes ‘situated knowledge.’ All this is significantly different from the abstract and disembodied technocratic way of thinking that has shaped many systems in our society.

Students at the *Prins Claus Conservatory* in Groningen and *The Academy of Interdisciplinary Arts* in Maastricht, but also in many other art schools, seek connections with the outside world from deep, authentic, personal, and artistic motivations. Not because they must, but because they want to. They want to connect and make a difference in the ‘real world.’ They work in a practice-oriented manner within the various contexts they seek to engage with. The traditional context of the museum, theater, or concert hall is no longer their primary focus; in fact, they often see these as meaningless because they are disconnected from real life.

The choice to work within an applied context is a sincere and autonomous choice for them. But wait... what exactly is going on here?

Autonomous vs ‘Commissioned’

The distinction between the autonomous artist creating works for exhibitions, concert halls, or festivals, and the designer working on commissioned projects addressing societal issues seems to become less clear when ‘autonomous’ and ‘applied’ can simply coexist. Autonomy is not absolute but rather a spectrum. At the other end of that spectrum is not ‘applied’ but rather ‘commissioned.’ Those who wish to genuinely engage with a group of people cannot avoid relinquishing some autonomy within that collaboration. Giving up autonomy can be an autonomous choice. Also, working on societal issues while limiting yourself to answering a client’s question means missing out on many opportunities. Indeed, asking (meaning-



ful) questions becomes more important than formulating answers. Giving a client what they ask for is often not what serves that client best.

Breaking away from the initial question and seeking new ways of relating to the issues at stake, is often the path to meaningful representations or interventions. We also observe that clients, especially governments aiming to address complex social issues, are increasingly willing to collaborate with artists. However, they are fully aware that creative freedom (or autonomy) is a prerequisite for generating interesting ideas: 'We would like you to address this issue without us posing a specific question.' That is no longer a 'list of requirements,' but a genuine interest in the unpredictable or even the elusive. Hello again, ambiguity.

Reflective vs Transformative

A distinction that may be even more interesting is the position of a project or work in relation to society. Museums and concert halls are deliberately isolated from society (they are sometimes even referred to as white and black boxes). The works that they present primarily provide commentary on that society from an external perspective. Venues literally shut out the world—lights either go out in concert halls, and museum walls are equipped at most with high windows against daylight. This enables reflection from a distance, with no other purpose than to make us think or feel ABOUT the outside world, and not IN that outside world. While science seeks to understand the world through analysis and theory formation, the arts prioritize subjective and intuitive interpretations of the world. However, within the walls of museums and concert halls, they remain commentaries. They represent various forms of reflection, yet each remains inherently non-transformative.

In a networked society where everything is interconnected, a relationship-based approach to work is signif-

icantly more meaningful. Through active engagement with the world outside and direct involvement in a specific context, a connection is established that holds the potential for transformation, surpassing mere reflection.

This is both autonomous AND applied, but also situated AND transformative at the same time. Makers and collectives are increasingly collaborating with organizations and informal networks. Not to solve problems, but to search together for and experiment with new meanings. New ways of thinking, where emotions and intuitions are valued as much as facts and rational thought. Serious and playful. Engaged and with a fresh perspective. With a deep sense of complex emotions and the rawness of existence, coupled with a drive to experiment with novel methodologies. Learning by doing. Change is fostered through active participation, with empathy serving as an antenna, and lived experience serving both as a source of inspiration and a destination.

The organization of art into white and black boxes, isolated from society, sharply contrasts with traditional and small-scale societies where artistic practices took precedence, even amidst limited resources. In such contexts, art wasn't relegated to the fringe; it formed an integral part of a vibrant culture rooted in relationships and exchanges, without an immediate expectation of receiving something in return. The encounter with beauty extends beyond the confines of art institutions; it's an intrinsic aspect of our humanity. Aligned with this, Ellen Dissanayake argues that the essence of art doesn't solely reside in the physical object, but in the interactions, the stories, and the memories that emerge during the creative process. Anything has the potential to be 'beautiful' in many different ways. What is precious to us, we feel compelled to share. Through these processes of exchange, new connections are formed that shape our identity in relation to others. Hence, the essence lies in the act of 'sharing,' forming a foundation for humans as social and aesthetic beings. Once more, it underscores a mentality grounded in everyday life.



The Romantic Turn

Consider it a *romantic* turn. Romanticism arose as a critical response to the intellectual and rational tendencies of the Enlightenment period. Rather than prioritizing rationality and logical thinking, emotion and intuition were the key drivers of meaning in life, particularly in the arts. Emotion, individuality, nature, and history were seen as counterparts to the rational and fact-based scientific approach of the Enlightenment. Our technocracy has strong roots in Enlightenment thinking. Decisions must be scientifically supported; emotions are dangerous and suspicious. However, more thinking will not help us if our socio-political challenges are moral and emotional in nature. We must learn to deal with emotions and subjective meaning more deeply—and professionally.

The good news is that the arts have been dealing professionally with personal emotions for centuries. Art takes intuition seriously as a source of knowledge, fearlessly comforting the paradoxes and ambiguities of life, while also welcoming facts and sharp thinking without hesitation. Art can navigate concepts, meanings, values, and emotions, with both rationality and empathy at the same time. There are patterns in the failing structures around us that defy modeling or definition, but also in our desires and values to find new ways of going forward. We need to be sensitive to these patterns and express our intuitions about them.

Unfortunately, romantic thinking has often been perverted over the years. Reactionary conservatism is unequivocally indebted to romantic thinking. But the perversion of feeling by extremist populists should not deter us from seeking professionalism in dealing with the emotional complexities and ambiguities of life. Values such as beauty, tolerance, solidarity, safety, and caring are strongly connected to emotions and warrant serious attention. Reducing them into measurable targets or simplistic slogans demonizing wrongdoers is an insult to our humanity. Appealing to emotions differs from profes-

sionally working with them. It's time to act and reclaim the importance of feelings, values and meaning. Many of our contemporary problems are deeply emotional in nature (loneliness, poverty, housing issues, sense of justice, immigration, racism, fear of the unknown, etc.) and deserve genuine and empathic sensitivity as the basis for interventions.

And this is where the domain of art can excel. If we allow ourselves the space to practice and embrace it, we can engage professionally with emotions, meaning, and immeasurable values in the world.

Love Hurts!

Methodologies from the arts, such as design thinking, are increasingly being utilized to address societal challenges more broadly. Workshops where employees learn within a day how to generate new innovative ideas through a new creative mindset have become more of a rule than an exception. And while this can lead to interesting new insights, it also raises the question of whether this is not more of the same, just packaged in a new (sustainable, technological, or creative) guise. Greenwashing, anyone?

Such generic approaches typically do not lead to a fundamentally radical different way of thinking, seeing, or working regarding the underlying causes of problems, because they are often approached from an isolated perspective, that of the context of a problem which may well be the core of the problem. And for that very reason, they will not work.

Art can forge connections and unveil fresh meanings, encompassing the raw emotions and paradoxical, sometimes hypocritical choices inherent in our lives. Let's confront our messy realities, let's acknowledge our dark sides, and let's try to grow anyhow. Not just reflectively, but in full contact, as actors willing to get their hands dirty. When the stakes are as high as they are now, artistic approaches may serve us well.

This goes beyond methods or techniques. And it goes beyond artists and artworks, and even beyond the art world, with its schools, museums, venues, critics, celebrities, audiences, and consumers. We see a true potential in that elusive concept that we can call an 'artistic mentality,' a way of being in the world, a way of interpreting the world that connects thinking with feeling, facts with experiences, values with emotions, and where ambiguity, paradoxes and subjective interpretations are as much part of the discourse as facts and rational thought.

Thus, art's potential comes into focus, showing how dysfunctional systems can be different, more meaningful, with more respect for deep human values. Art has long observed, interpreted, and evaluated, but now is the time to actively engage through participation, collaboration, and radical experimentation. Leading by doing, so to speak. If human life revolves around emotions, values,



and meaning, if it is full of contradictions, then let us face those challenges boldly and professionally. If love hurts, we'll find ways to deal with the pain. If life is messy, then so be it. This is not the time for puritanism or dogmatism. Let's be vulnerable and energized, sensitive and courageous, speculative and situated, with humility and passion. Forget simple solutions, stop tedious arguments about trivial details, and let us delicately and subtly play with what truly matters. And let us accept that outcomes will probably diverge wildly from our expectations.

Beauty and solace should not exist only in museums, but everywhere in our lives, and in our societies. That is where art's true potential lies—in shaping the world through multiple layers of empathy, love, friendship, engagement, curiosity, and care.

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OLGA MINK develops collaborative projects through co-creation, participatory action research, and contextual learning, aiming to challenge assumptions and societal blind spots. With experience in curation, interdisciplinary art, cultural leadership, and practice-based research, she directs the *Future of Work Foundation*, has led the *Art and Culture as Transformative Practice* research group at Zadkine, headed the Academy of Interdisciplinary Arts Maas-tricht, and worked as a researcher at Fontys and Avans Universities of Applied Sciences. Olga is currently active in community development, developing creative inquiry through participatory action research. Together with Reon Brand, she co-edited the book *Co-emerging Economies: Exploring Radical Perspectives on Post-Anthropocentric Economies*. With Godelieve Spaas, she developed the program *Who Owns Our Economy?* which culminated in an interdisciplinary festival program at the cutting edge of art, design, economy, and society.



DICK RIJKEN has a background in artificial intelligence, cognitive psychology and electronic music. He was a co-founder of the department of Interaction Design at the Utrecht School of the Arts in the early nineties, and also of the Design department at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He was professor of Information Technology and Society where he led a research group of researchers from different disciplines (care, safety management, design, computer science). Their practice-based research focused on dealing with complex challenges in society through methods and techniques from art and design. He was also director of STEIM, a lab for electronic live performance and sound art, that functioned as a studio for artists and musicians who wanted to expand their practice through experiments with new technologies and contexts for music and sound. Currently, he is director of The Beach, a social design lab in the 'Nieuw West' neighbourhood in Amsterdam.

An Unusual Solution for Complex Issues

EDO DIJKSTERHUIS

Six years ago, Rabobank's art department reinvented itself. Artists were invited to help the bank tackle major transition issues in the areas of climate, agriculture, inequality, and the economy. Rabo Art Lab was born.

Why We Need Artists

Within the bank, Rabo Art Lab functions as a free space where art is approached as a form of knowledge. Through artist residencies, the lab creates a context in which artists, employees and external partners engage with societal transitions.

It operates in response to complex challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty and exclusion. These issues require fundamental shifts in thinking and practice. Existing frameworks are no longer sufficient, while new ones are still emerging. Within this context, Rabo Art Lab positions art as an active voice and brings together people from inside and outside the bank to explore alternative approaches.

The lab facilitates an exchange between artistic and institutional ways of working. It explores what can be learned from artistic practices and how these can inform both the bank and broader society. In this process, forms of knowledge that often remain implicit become visible, and patterns, emotions and imaginaries are made tangible.

Rabo Art Lab also creates space for processes that are not primarily driven by efficiency or immediate outcomes. Experimentation, failure and open-ended exploration are part of the working method, both for artists and for the organization. This requires a high degree of mutual openness and trust. The Rabo Art Department safeguards the autonomy of the artist and protects the conditions for independent artistic practice.

As such, Rabo Art Lab is not only a space for imagination and creation, but also a space where discomfort can be experienced and examined. It acknowledges that remain-

ing present within complexity and uncertainty may be one of the essential roles of art in times of transition.

What Does this Look Like in Practice?

'You don't know either. You may appear more than others to know, but you don't know either,' theatre maker Lucas de Man told Wiebe Draijer, chairman of the board at that time, at their first meeting. Why did we ever let this oddball in, he must have wondered.

But de Man's honest enthusiasm was infectious and quickly won over any initial sceptics. He talked to bank employees at all levels of the organisation, attended meetings and never minced his words. He used his findings to create a theatre monologue in which an imaginary bank employee dissects her professional life, including her doubts and frustrations. During the performance for Rabobank employees, few of them were able to keep their tears in check. After the performance, one of them said: 'For the first time in my professional life, I feel that Wiebe understands how difficult it sometimes is for me at the bank.'

Running Start

With De Man as the first artist in residence, Rabo Art Lab got off to a running start in 2017. Only three years earlier, the existence of the art department had been in grave danger. The Art Zone, the exhibition space in the lobby of the Utrecht headquarters, was shut down for good. In light of the wave of layoffs that swept through the company, it could not be justified that Rabobank was spending money on something many employees considered, at best, a frill.

Tackling climate change, global inequality, the transition to sustainable agriculture and building a circular economy are the issues on which the bank focuses its

efforts. But what if artists could help address these transition challenges in innovative ways? This idea was put forward by Verily Klaassen, head of the art department, and Godelieve Spaas, professor of art | culture | transition at HZ University of Applied Sciences.

They saw a role for art as an alternative R&D department, a knowledge channel, an ethical sounding board and a transducer of concepts such as ‘trust’ and ‘humanity.’ Above all, they saw art as a disruptive force that could create space within the bank to explore unusual solutions for unprecedented and complex issues.

Desperate times call for creative measures.

No Quick Fixes

One major drawback of this kind of undertaking is that art risks being subsumed into the organisation’s corporate philosophy and reduced to a means to an end. But as Draijer pointed out when the idea for Rabo Art Lab was presented: ‘It has to take place in total freedom, otherwise it isn’t art.’

Free space for art implies a philosophy that may feel counter-intuitive within a banking environment. Art does not offer ready-made solutions and often raises more questions than it answers. It does not begin with predefined goals; its outcomes are rarely measured in hard figures; and failure is considered an integral part of the process.

Bridging the gap between corporate culture and artistic thinking was, and continues to be, a complex challenge for Klaassen and Spaas. De Man, as the first artist in residence, proved instrumental in this. While still explor-



TOP AND ABOVE: *Verily Klaassen and Godelieve Spaas.*

ing his subject, he presented a clear plan that included podcasts, a theatre performance and an exhibition. The Flemish artist also showed himself to be a natural connector, with a genuine interest in bank employees. He demonstrated that collaboration itself can become a work of art. And although he could be disarmingly direct, his work primarily evoked deep emotional responses.

Confusing Arrows

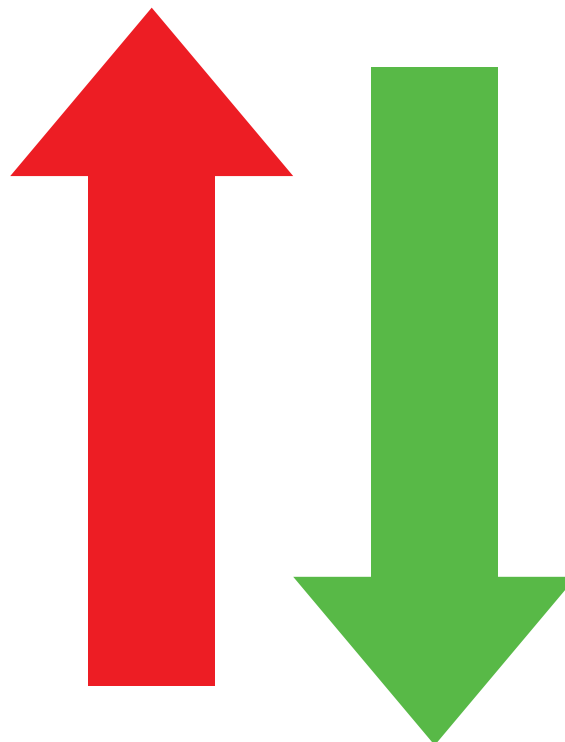
It was entirely different for the second artist in residence, Arne Hendriks. His art leans more towards the reflexive-investigative kind. Under the moniker of The Incredible Shrinking Man, he has for many years been exploring the benefits of shrinkage versus growth, across a spectrum that ranges from the destructive growth of cancer cells to the rising consumption of jet fuel as the average airline passenger grows ever larger and heavier.

Hendriks' critical view of growth clashes with the mindset of many bankers, who see growth as a condition of profitability and wonder why they should invest time and effort in an artist who challenges the very foundations of their business model. On more than one occasion, the chart that Hendriks had placed in the lobby of the bank with an upward-pointing arrow in red and a downward-pointing arrow in green was turned around: surely growth could not be negative?

The fact that Hendriks produced mainly stories and hardly any tangible work made it all the harder to see and interpret his work. To prevent him from sinking into seclusion, Klaassen and Spaas set up a group of 'ambassadors' in the bank who took the artist under their wing. They also asked Hendriks to make an exhibition and invited him to produce a newspaper, printed on the same pink paper as *Het Financieele Dagblad*, the Dutch financial newspaper. It was a tangible conversation starter that allowed him to engage in uncomfortable exchanges. This culminated in three dinners at Mediamatic, all courses of which were made from white cabbage that would otherwise have been tossed out.

Most Interesting 90 Minutes

Months after Hendriks' time at the bank, a manager sighed wistfully: 'Arne's work was premature. Had he come now, his message would have fallen on fertile ground.' Perhaps he was right and the artist was too far ahead in the debate on food transition. But perhaps it was Hendriks' work that provided a pivotal boost to the maturing of minds and normalised 'not-knowing as an active position.' It illustrates the effect of art, which is rarely one-dimensional, sometimes remains ambiguous and is often elusive.



TOP: Arrows, extracted from the incredible shrinking man posters, Arne Hendriks (https://www.the-incredible-shrinking-man.net/?page_id=286). **ABOVE:** Arne Hendriks in his studio.

What is beyond doubt is the activating role art plays in Rabo Art Lab. Employees who had previously looked at the art collection as observers have now been promoted to participants. It is not always an easy role, remarked one employee who had taken part in a workshop by painter Koen Delaere. Although he objected that he had a pile of work on his desk, no time and certainly no inclination, he stayed nonetheless because this would later prove to be the most interesting 90 minutes of the entire year.

Delaere was invited to explain what he understood by 'creativity.' It was a concept that kept cropping up in communications from the Rabobank management, but in the minds of many employees it seemed difficult to reconcile with the protocols and structures inherent to a bank. Delaere explained how he always uses canvases of the same size and completes his paintings within a set time-frame. He finds freedom within these self-imposed restrictions. What was a nondescript concept for many became meaningful and comprehensible through his story.

Sometimes there were also tangible spinoffs, such as the artwork of mycelium that Lucas de Man wanted to make. And while this did not work out during his artist-in-residency, the artist continued his research on fungi and their potential as building materials. The Art department continued to provide financial support until the Innovation department took up the project. At the most recent edition of the Provada real estate trade fair, de Man was at the Rabobank stand promoting biobased construction.

Alternative Tender

Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, Daan Roosegaarde was engaged as the third artist in residence. It soon became clear that this connector of technology and artistic aesthetics was a different kind of artist than his predecessors. He is an art master with an international reputation, and that appealed to many bank employees. His work of art Grow—a neat counterpoint to Hendriks' focus on shrinkage—was much appreciated. But although Roosegaarde opened a potentially fertile space for ideas, there was less emphasis on the interaction the Art department always seeks.

The two most recent artists in residence play their role of artistic *agent provocateur* with great enthusiasm. Visionary designer Koert van Mensvoort initially planned on doing something with food but decided he would rather focus on money and value. He developed an eco-coin with the idea of using it to incentivise sustainable behaviour.

Van Mensvoort's choice of subject was well suited to the work and experiences of bank employees and was enthusiastically received. With its proposal for a new currency, Rabo Art Lab has truly captured the aspired to position at the heart of the organisation. Here, discussions are held at the cutting edge of all things financial and economical.

This also applies to the conversations of Carlijn Kingma. They form the basis for her large, detailed drawing of a structure representing the financial system. Kingma is sometimes underestimated by her interloc-

Carlijn Kingma



utors, but they gradually come to see that the artist has access to a much larger part of the bank as an institution than their own, defined specialism. Through her work, she opens up insights they themselves do not have.

Kingma's drawing has been added to Rabobank's art collection, which continues to grow—albeit at a slightly slower pace than before because part of the acquisition budget is now earmarked for the artist in residence. As before, artworks are loaned out to museums and festivals and exhibited both inside and outside the bank.

Thorny and Troublesome

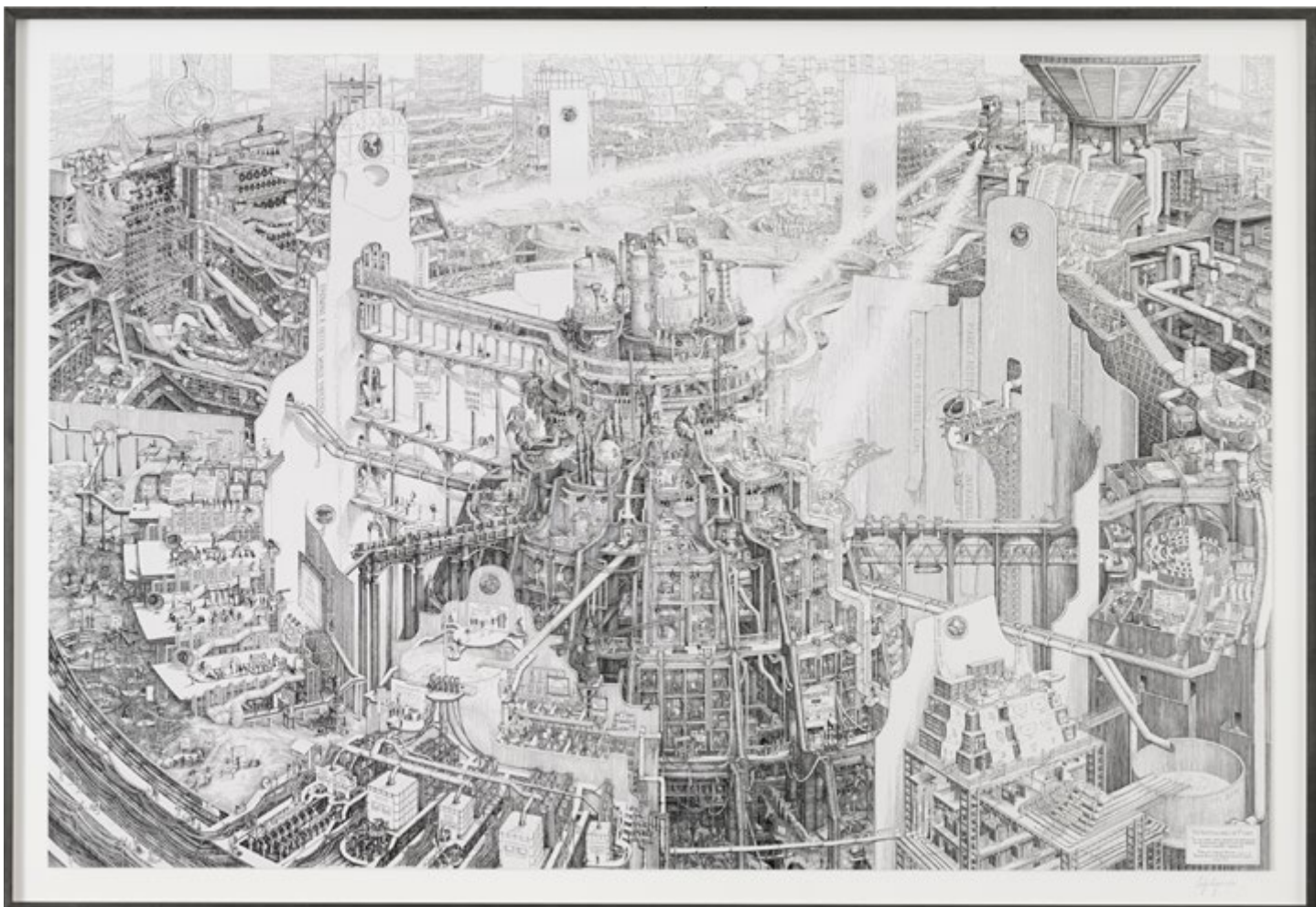
In a manner of speaking, the artists of Rabo Art Lab get up 'close and personal' to the bank. It is the main reason why all the invited artists initially hesitated to participate. Surely you run the risk, as a committed artist, of being crushed within such a large organisation? Especially when you deliver a thorny message in the lion's den.

Just as bank employees sometimes felt uncomfortable around the artists, the artists could have felt intimidated by the suits and ties that proclaimed the opposite of their message. In such a situation, an artist may consciously or unconsciously compromise themselves, whereas they should remain thorny, troublesome, confrontational and elusive.

To 'protect' the artist from encapsulation by the company and self-censorship, the Art department is constantly on top of things. At the same time, bank employees must feel free to engage with the art and the artist in their own way and ask questions about them. Perhaps that is the greatest challenge of Rabo Art Lab: to safeguard the artist's status as a 'desirable outsider' while keeping the space open for everyone.

Bank employees are more than welcome to visit the exhibition at Het Depot or to talk to the artists there. Just as Rabo Art Lab first introduced artists to the bank, the next step is to entice bankers to the world of art. Here, they are addressed not in terms of their position but as a person—one who can admit to not knowing either. And that this can actually be a versatile position to be in.

Waterworks of money, by Carlijn Kingma <https://www.waterworksofmoney.com/>





*Carlijn Kingma exhibition at Depot Boijmans
Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.*

The next article explores this approach through the work of one of Rabo Art Lab's artists in residence, Henk Wildschut, and his project *Territory*.



EDO DIJKSTERHUIS is a culture journalist and art critic. He writes for *Het Parool*, *Museumtijdschrift*, *De Filmkrant*, *Zout*, *De Lage Landen* and *Dude*, among others. From 2004 to 2009, he headed the art desk of *FD*, and from 2009 to 2012, he was director of Art Amsterdam.

Territory, Inevitable Change

VERILY KLAASSEN and GODELIEVE SPAAS

In his work as a photographer, Henk Wildschut (born 1967) follows the delusion of the day as little as possible. He deliberately creates distance from his subjects, allowing patterns to emerge. He photographs with a clear, almost clinical and unromantic gaze. His imagery is informative, grounded, down to earth. And yet his choice of subjects is deeply personal. Repeatedly, he finds himself in places where people have fallen between the cracks, focusing on what may clash with what we would rather believe to be true.

In *Territory*, this approach leads him back to where he grew up.

In the spring of 2022, the nitrogen crisis flared up, turning the Dutch landscape into a political arena. What might once have appeared as stable ground became a site of conflict, a space where agricultural entrepreneurship, nature conservation and climate legislation collided. As artist in residence at Rabobank, Wildschut followed a route back to his native soil: the village of Speuld on the Veluwe.

It is a small farming community, mostly calf farmers, surrounded by a nature reserve. A place now confronted with the larger questions of our time. The forests are suffering from nitrogen emissions, while the farmers are increasingly affected by public opinion and the growing sense that nature may outweigh their economic interests.

Wildschut's images move carefully through this tension. Calves. Cows. Empty stables. The pain of the farmer present but never overstated. He does not dramatize what he encounters. Instead, he observes, allowing the weight of the situation to unfold in its own time.

While he was working on the project, something irreversible took place. Many calf farmers accepted buyouts from the Dutch government. Farms closed. Stables emptied. What had shaped this landscape for decades began to disappear within the span of a few years. This disappearance is not announced in the work, but it is everywhere. In the stillness of buildings, in the absence of animals, in the quiet persistence of those who remain.

Curious about how people deal with change, Wildschut photographed his native land over a period of two years, recording stories along the way. Farmers being bought

out. Scientists researching the effects of nitrogen on ecosystems. Sheep farmers afraid of the return of the wolf. Hikers, pastors, nature lovers. Each of them connected to the same landscape, each of them carrying a different understanding of what is at stake.

All shared their concerns with him. About the future. About the fear of losing identity. Yet what emerges most strongly is not dialogue, but distance. People speak, but rarely to one another. Positions have hardened.

What *Territory* reveals is not conflict as an event, but as a condition. A situation in which multiple realities coexist without a shared language. Each perspective makes sense from within its own frame, yet collectively they seem to resist alignment.

And still, within his work, something shifts.

Through the sequencing of images and the careful montage of film, Wildschut brings these separate worlds into a different kind of proximity. It begins to seem as if they are speaking a similar language. Not because this language exists in reality, but because the work holds these perspectives together long enough for connections to appear.

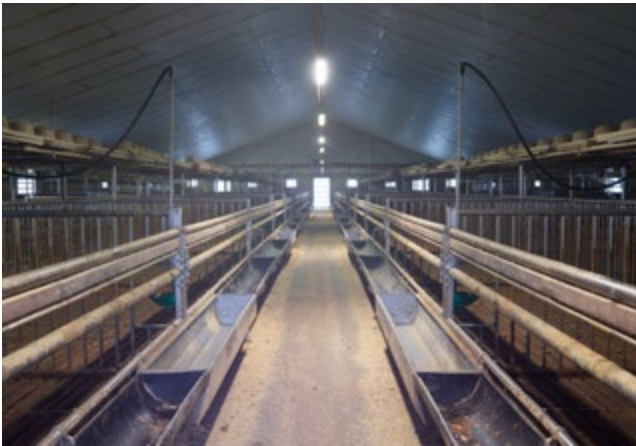
A single oak tree returns throughout the series, photographed again and again, across seasons and moments of the day. It becomes a silent witness, a point of continuity in a landscape that is otherwise changing. Around it, time accumulates. Not as progress, but as layering.

In this way, *Territory* becomes more than a documentation of a landscape. It becomes a reflection on the passage of time, on the fear of letting go, and on the inevitability of change.

This is where the work touches the question of art in transition. Not by offering solutions, and not by resolving the tensions it reveals, but by staying with what is disappearing while the new has not yet taken shape. By making visible the condition of being in between.

Wildschut's practice here is not about intervention, but about attention. About remaining present within a situation that resists simplification. About allowing complexity to exist without forcing it into resolution.

In *Territory*, a way of life is both present and already gone. The landscape holds traces of what was, while something else, still undefined, begins to emerge.





PREVIOUS PAGE: *Barns of calf-rearing farms in Hierden, the Netherlands, some still in use, others abandoned or demolished. ABOVE: Impressions of everyday rural life in Hierden.*



ABOVE: *The same oak tree photographed from exactly the same viewpoint at different moments and in different seasons.*



VERILY KLAASSEN is head of Art Department Rabobank, with a corporate collection of 2500 works of art www.art.rabobank.nl/nl. And manages the Rabo Art Lab, a creative free space in a usually efficient corporate environment where Artist in Residences are invited to work, address and reflect on business, bank and societal issues. Collections and projects with artists in residence are exhibited in their own Art Space in Depot Boijmans van Beuningen. Verily is involved with a number of cultural and societal initiatives in Netherland (Brabant) and will be curator of the H3H Biennial in Oosterhout in 2028.

GODELIEVE SPAAS is a maker and researcher working at the intersection of art and transition. As Professor of Art, Culture and Transitions at HZ University of Applied Sciences and the Delta Climate Center, she questions what is taken for granted, reworking the stories and skills that underpin our systems. Her work explores how artistic knowledge, alongside other ways of knowing, can open space for more just transitions. She is co-initiator of the Rabo Art Lab and chair of the board of Casco Art Institute, working for the commons.

Compostable Altar: Offering to the Earth

Designing to Disappear as an Act of Regeneration

BETIANA PAVÓN

I grew up in a rural area of Córdoba province, Argentina, surrounded by people who knew the land and worked it with their hands. My family has been involved in farming for several generations: They know how to read the land, respect its rhythms, and wait. That bodily memory—the smell of damp earth, the cycle of sowing and harvesting as a structure of time—is something that took me years to recognise as part of my artistic practice. Today, after a long journey through architecture, design and bio-manufacturing, that origin has returned to the centre of my work—not as nostalgia, but as a method.

Compostable Altar: Offering to the Earth is a biodesign project that explores decomposition as a regenerative strategy. A biodegradable installation that is not designed to last, but to disappear—and in doing so, to nourish the soil that sustains it. But before I talk about the project, I need to talk about the soil.

Looking Down

The soil is not merely a substrate. It is a living organism—complex, dense, teeming with invisible processes that sustain all life on the surface. A single gram of healthy soil can contain billions of microorganisms: bacteria, fungi, nematodes, actinomycetes. It is the most biodiverse system on the planet and, at the same time, one of the most threatened by contemporary agro-industrial models.

The central idea behind the *Compostable Altar* stems from recognition of this: to honour the sacredness of the earth, not as a romantic metaphor, but as an ethical and design stance. If the soil is a living body, what does it mean to design *for* it rather than design *on* it?

This question led me to rethink the very purpose of the design object. In a world saturated with things made to last beyond their usefulness, proposing an object designed to disappear is a radical gesture. But it is also an ancient gesture.

Ritual: The Necessary Discontinuity

Ritual introduces discontinuities into the structure of time. Through its sensory elements—touch, smell, the repetition of gestures—and its symbolic representations, ritual expresses something that lies at the heart of human creative activity: the need to mark the threshold between taking and giving back, between consuming and giving thanks.

Cultures across the globe have practised rituals of making offerings to the earth before sowing and after the harvest. In Andean worldviews, *Pachamama*—Mother Earth—is neither a metaphor nor a distant deity: She is a living, present and reciprocal entity. The communities that uphold this tradition practise the *offering* or *ch'alla* as a daily act of gratitude before taking from the earth: before sowing, before eating, before building. It is not an exceptional ceremony reserved for special occasions, but an attitude woven into the rhythm of life. The earth gives; we give back. That cycle is the foundation of the relationship. The *Compostable Altar* stems from that very understanding, translated into the language of biodesign. Not as appropriation, but as resonance: the offering as a form of attention, the gesture of placing something on the earth as an act of acknowledging our interdependence with living cycles.



In other words, ritual is not necessarily exceptional. The anthropologist **Arnold van Gennep**, in his study of rites of passage, showed that ritual functions as a mechanism for marking thresholds: transitions between states, between times, between ways of being. When that function is integrated into everyday gestures, the boundary between the ordinary and the sacred becomes porous. The everyday takes on ritual significance.

Totem: Symbol, Cohesion, Nature

The totems that make up the installation have a dual nature that I wish to maintain in tension. They are sculptural objects reminiscent of ancestral symbols, but they are also data instruments, scientific artefacts, and material prototypes.

Totemism is a practice with tens of thousands of years of history: It is a system of symbolisation that links social groups with species or natural phenomena, constructing relationships of identity, origin and collective power. The term ‘totem’ derives from ‘dotem,’ used by the Ojibwe people to refer to clan membership. What fascinates me about this tradition—and which the researcher **Hans Kalliwoda** has explored in the context of contemporary art as part of his studies at PhDarts—a PhD programme in the arts run by the Universities of Leiden and The Hague—is its capacity to generate social cohesion through shared symbols, and its roots in a worldview where human beings are not above nature but intertwined with it.

Modern organised religions have tended to propagate the idea that humans are separate from—and even above—the natural world. Totemism, by contrast, belongs to a pre-religious era in which spirituality was deeply influenced by natural phenomena. To reinterpret the totem today, through the lens of biodesign, is to recover that lost relationality; to recognise that our identity as a species is inscribed within the cycles of the earth, not separate from them.

In *Compostable Altar*, each totem is a device that encodes ecological processes and environmental data within biodegradable geometries. They are, at once, form and function, symbol and experiment, cultural object and ecological agent. As they decompose, they do not simply disappear: they return to the system that generated them, fulfilling the cycle that their form already promised.

A Living Theoretical Framework

The project draws inspiration from a group of thinkers whose work has reshaped my understanding of matter, design, and the relationship between humans and non-human environments.

Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*¹, argues that materials are neither passive nor inert, but possess their own agency—a capacity to act, affect and surprise that transcends human control. In the *Compostable Altar*, this becomes literal: seeds sprout in unexpected places, cracks follow cycles of moisture, microorganisms reconfigure the texture of the material beyond any intended design. Matter participates in the narrative as much as any design decision.

Donna Haraway, with her notion of *making kin* in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*², proposes an ethic of radical relationality: taking responsibility for our connections with other species, other systems, other times. The *Altar*, as a gesture of offering, is exactly that: an act of recognition that we are part of a broader assemblage that precedes and outlives us. Her closing quote in the project video expresses it precisely: ‘We need one another in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in piles of hot compost. We become one another, or we do not become at all.’

Bruno Latour, in *Reassembling the Social*³ reminds us that scientific data is not neutral information: it consists of material testimonies embedded within contexts, narratives and subjectivities. All data is produced by someone, somewhere, using certain instruments and under certain conditions—and that chain of decisions forms part of its meaning. To ignore it is to confuse measurement with truth. In this project, data from soil sensors is not confined to scientific analysis—it becomes aesthetic language, form and narrative. Ecological monitoring is also a poetic practice.

Finally, **Carole Collet**, whose research into design and biological systems is carried out at Central Saint Martins, London, and particularly through her *Biotics* project (2013) with her concept of living *data-driven design*, posits design as an interpretative system of natural intelligence. She proposes that design should be understood not as the imposition of form upon matter, but as a system for interpreting the processes and intelligences that already operate within living systems. Rather than starting with a preconceived idea that is then executed, the designer becomes a translator: they listen to the rhythms of the ecosystem—its nutrient cycles, its climatic patterns, its microbial activity—and translate them into form, structure and object. The *Altar*’s totems are precisely that: morphological translations of ecological data, forms that make visible what the soil knows and the human eye cannot perceive directly.

These frameworks are not merely decorative academic references. They are tools of thought that guide the very foundations of the project.

A Place, a Material

Following a long journey of personal research, various residencies, geographical locations, collaborators and institutions, the project reached its peak in terms of development and scale in southern Italy, at the agroecological farm *Le Terre di Zoé* in Calabria, as part of the *S+T+ARTS Hungry EcoCities* programme. The connection with the place was no accident: It was a context where the link between food production, organic waste and soil health was tangible.

In the process of transforming fruit into food, the farm generates large quantities of organic waste: citrus peel, pulp, plant fibres and pruning ‘waste.’ But far from being waste, these materials hold enormous potential. The question was: *How could this production waste be transformed into circular practices, into materials that return to the soil as an offering?*

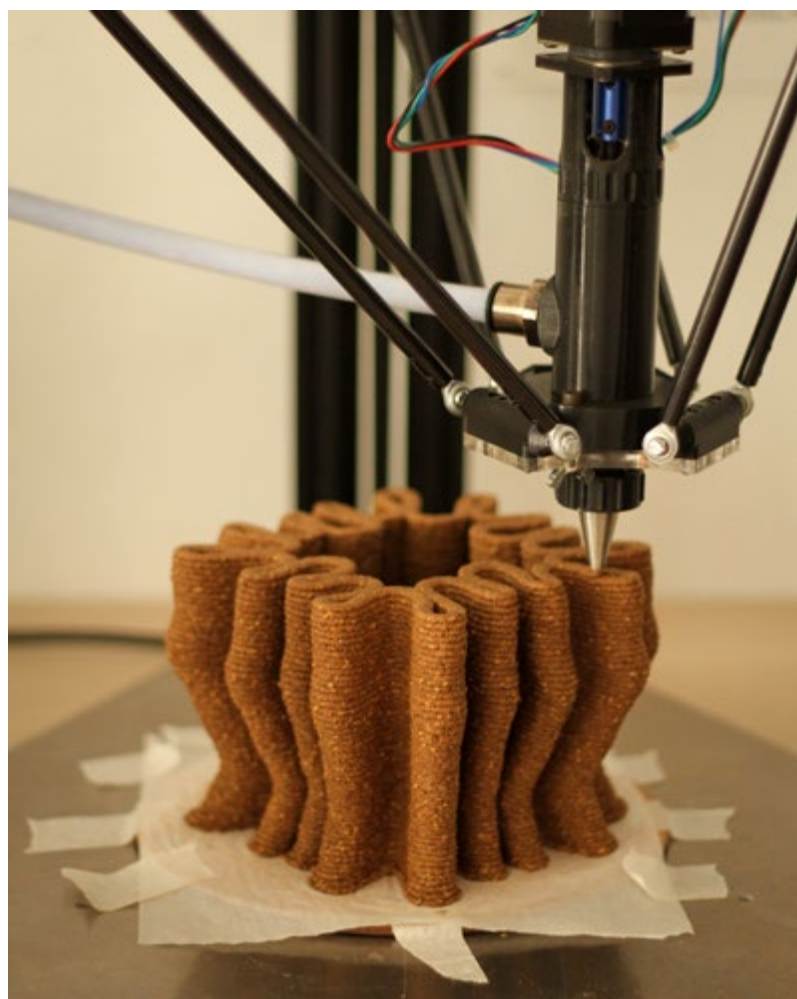
I developed a catalogue of biomaterials from this seasonal waste. The biocomposites combine crushed lemon peel, wood dust, starches, natural gums and micronutrients in varying proportions, creating mixtures with different densities, textures and rates of biodegradation. Each

recipe is, in itself, a statement about the place: There is no universal formula because there is no universal soil.

These biomaterials possess a property that goes beyond their structure: they can harbour and promote the growth of seeds within their printed architecture. I selected species with nitrogen-fixing properties and the ability to attract pollinating insects. The *Altar* does not merely decompose—it germinates.

Digital Fabrication as Eco-friendly Craftsmanship

To shape these materials, I used additive manufacturing: 3D printing with biomaterial pastes. But the technical process was inseparable from the conceptual process. We built a large-format printer based on open-source principles, in collaboration with the maker community. This gesture has an ethical dimension that matters to me just as much as the material dimension: technology as a



common good, knowledge as something that is shared, returned, and passed on.

3D printing with pastes allows for a formal freedom impossible with other methods: organic geometries, layered strata with different rates of biodegradation, surfaces that evoke natural textures. The *Altar* is not static: It changes, softens, cracks, sprouts. The viewer does not see a finished object but an ongoing process.

In this sense, my practice lies within what I call bio-digital craftsmanship: technological processes rooted in a sensitivity towards materials and ecological awareness. Technology not as domination over matter, but as listening.

Data as Poetry

For three months, a system of soil sensors monitored temperature, moisture, pH, electrical conductivity, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium in a pilot experiment—carried out in Barcelona—designed to simulate farm conditions. Three control groups—soil alone, soil

with lemon-based biomaterial, and soil with biomaterial enriched with wood, micronutrients and seeds—allowed for a comparison of the effect of decomposition on soil health.

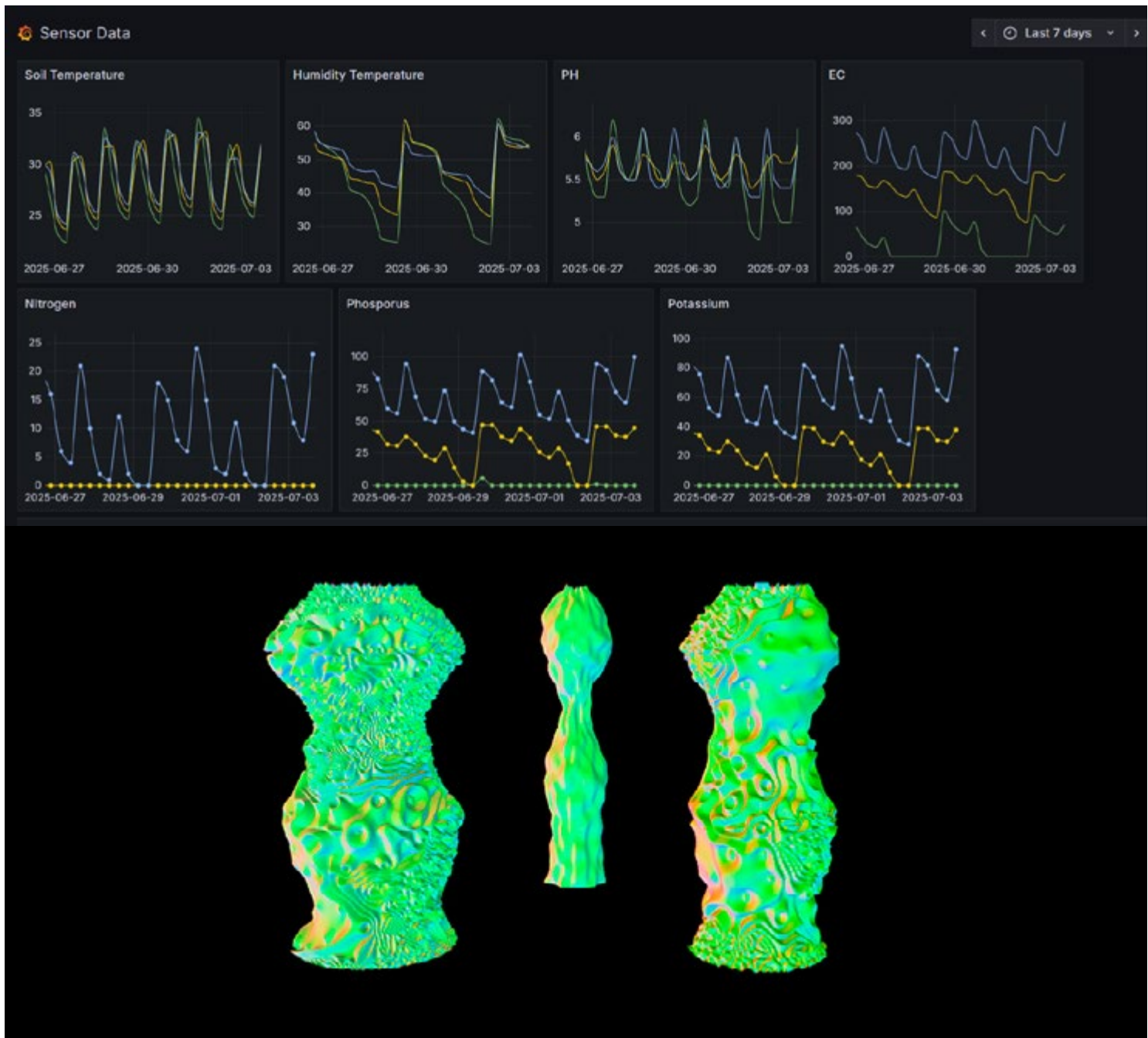
The initial analyses are promising: the decomposition of the enriched biomaterial shows an improvement in nutrient availability and in the microbial activity of the surrounding soil. The figures bear witness to the fact that the offering is not merely symbolic, but regenerative.

But what interests me most is not just the data, but what we do with it. The outputs from the sensors—graphs, time series—are not confined to scientific analysis; they become part of the project's aesthetic language. Using this data, parametric models were developed in *Grasshopper*, a design and visual programming software that works as a plug-in within *Rhinoceros 3D*, that translates climate curves and nutrient cycles into three-dimensional forms.

This is How the Three Totems of the Initial Installation came into Being:

- Totem 01—Biomaterial-soil interaction—incorporates seven layers of data from the Barcelona experiment. Its surface texture was generated using Worley (Voronoi) noise, a procedural algorithm that translates electrical





conductivity, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium into irregular organic patterns. The resulting roughness materialises the invisible microbial activity.

- Totem 02—Rainfall calendar—maps the monthly rainfall data for Rosarno, the municipality closest to the farm. Months with the highest rainfall are expressed as volumetric expansions and open perforations; dry months generate narrower, denser forms. Weather becomes form.

- Totem 03—Thermal calendar—uses the same basic geometry as the second totem but modifies it according to average monthly temperatures. Heat and cold are inscribed in the structure's diameter and density. The *Altar* bears the climate engraved upon its body.

This approach resonates with what **Carole Collet** calls 'living data-driven design': design as an interpretative system of natural intelligence. The totems do not represent the ecosystem—they translate it, make it legible, and render it in a tactile form.

An Open System, not a Closed Object

One of the aspects of the project that matters most to me—and is sometimes overshadowed by its material or technological dimensions—is its educational and community-based nature.

The Compostable Altar is not a signature piece designed to be viewed in a gallery. It is, fundamentally, a system: a replicable methodology that invites other communities to map their own waste, formulate their own biomaterial recipes and create their own site-specific offerings.

The recipes, manufacturing protocols and digital processes are open source. This is not a technical detail—it is a political stance. The knowledge generated by this project does not belong to me alone: It arises from collaboration with farmers, engineers, researchers and local communities. Returning that knowledge as a common good is part of the project's circular logic.

The *Altar* is an educational gesture: It teaches that the production of waste is also the production of potential; that decomposition is a form of generosity; that design can be a practice of reciprocity.

The Project and its Evolving Formats

The *Compostable Altar* has no fixed form. Since its first installation on the island of Öro, Finland, in 2024 as part of the *Koyne* residency programme, the project has been evolving and adapting to very different contexts, and this capacity for transformation is central to its concept. That same year, the project continued at *CYENS' Thinker Maker Space* in Nicosia, Cyprus, where it was presented as a solo exhibition to mark the end of the residency period, exploring how the materials and methodology engaged with a Mediterranean context and the local community.





At *Barcelona Design Week 2025*, the *Altar* was presented at the international symposium *Bio-Design for Living Futures*, organised by CoCoon and the Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia (IAAC), as part of the programme of selected talks and papers. In December of the same year, it was presented as an installation within the group exhibition ‘La materia construida’ at the Disseny Hub Barcelona. For the first time, the installation was moved to an indoor urban setting: The natural environment was recreated using an automatic irrigation system that maintained the necessary humidity conditions for the decomposition process to continue in real time before the public. The *Altar* was not a static exhibit: It remained a living laboratory.

At the next edition of Milan Design Week 2026, the project will form part of the Dropcity Material Library with a full-scale piece, forming part of a space dedicated to exploring the materials of the future. This presence in Milan is significant: It places the *Compostable Altar* within a global conversation about materials as agents of change, extending beyond the art world.

Each exhibition context forces the project to ask itself new questions: *What happens when the Altar leaves the agricultural land and enters a cultural institution? How is the ritual dimension sustained outside the territory that generated it?* I don’t have all the answers, but it is precisely that tension that keeps the project alive.

Disappearing as an Act of Design

Compostable Altar celebrates impermanence. It is born to disappear. As it slowly decomposes, it regenerates the soil. It is a gesture that acknowledges the vitality of matter—following **Jane Bennett’s** notion of *vibrant matter*—and which shifts the focus away from the designer as author and controller, positioning them instead as a mediator within a broader assemblage: matter, the environment, technologies, artistic practice.

Designing something destined to vanish is a radical reversal of the dominant logic of design, which has historically valued permanence, durability and accumulation. But it is also an ancient, almost instinctive gesture: We know that what is returned to the earth returns transformed. Farmers know this. Ecosystems know this.

Perhaps what biodesign can offer at this moment of climate emergency is precisely this: to remind us of what we already know. That matter is not lost, that the cycle is endless, that disappearing may be the most generous way of being.

Each *Altar* is a distinct chapter of the same investigation. A methodology that allows itself to be rewritten by the place, by the materials, by the community that inhabits it. An offering that, as it dissolves, leaves behind nutrients, seeds and traces that continue beyond its own form.

A ceremony of returning to the earth.

Endnotes

¹ 2010, Duke University Press

² 2016, *ibid.*

³ 2005, Oxford University Press



BETIANA PAVÓN is an artist, designer and trans-disciplinary researcher born in Argentina and based in Spain. Her practice lies at the intersection of bio-art, digital fabrication and living materials, working with organic waste as a vehicle for morphological construction and meaning. She explores matter as an agent of transformation: objects born from waste, which carry biological memory, and which propose ritual as a form of ecological knowledge. Her work does not separate the technical from the poetic, nor science from the sacred—instead, it seeks new ways of listening to the cycles and intelligence of the living.

Collectief Kapitaal

DENISE HARLEMAN

Collectief Kapitaal (Collective Capital) is building a world in which every human being can live with dignity.

To bring that world into being, it is necessary to break through structures of inequality. These structures are deeply rooted in our legislation, economy and culture. They determine who is protected and who is structurally disadvantaged.

Radical imagination is the driving force of our work. We do not analyse inequality from a distance as a theoretical question, but look upon it as a design that can be redrawn. We actively construct different social orders and explore what happens when people and institutions relate to one another on the basis of dignity, justice and trust.

In practice, we let money flow differently, through redistribution. So far we have redistributed more than one million euros through unconditional gifts of €1,000 per month for twelve months.

But our work goes beyond financial redistribution. We also question and rearrange decision-making power, the power to define, and ownership. Who decides what is valuable? Who is heard? Who carries responsibility and who does not? We explore these questions not only at the institutional level, but also in our relationships with one another.

We do this in so-called *reisgezelschappen*: groups of people who travel together for shorter or longer periods of time while living very different lives. Some receive gifts and others do not. Through art, conversation and shared experience they explore themselves, their relationship to others and their position in society. In these encounters, existing structures become visible and can be dismantled. From this shared reflection, we develop alternatives. These alternatives are not abstract ideals but are rooted in lived practice.

By living a different reality, our imagination does not remain stuck in a dream. We show that another world is not only possible but has already begun.

In the following love letter, I look back on six years of the initiative, from its origins to the present moment, dwelling on its moments of elevation and uncertainty, its beauty, and its vulnerability.

A Love Letter

DENISE HARLEMAN

artist and founder of *Collective Capital*

Dearest *Collectief Kapitaal*,

You have been around for five years now, nearly six.

Your 'coming into being' didn't happen without struggles.

I love you. That has to be said. But also: I find you exhausting.

You have been brought into the world to help make possible a society in which every human being can live with dignity. You had to come into being—there was never any doubt about that. The necessity was and is palpable, unmistakable. But how you are to be—that is another question.

Over the past six years I have had to explain you over and over again. In fifty words, in one slide, in thirty seconds. What exactly is *Collectief Kapitaal*? I hesitate. Are you a civic movement? A design practice for a dignified life? An instrument in the fight against poverty? A universal basic income experiment? What are you, really?

If there is anything that you have been to me in these past few years, it has been a constant shifting. A shift in relationships between people, ideas, systems and contexts. From insight to meaning. From Denise then, to Denise now. At times it has felt unsteady: the speed with which mission and vision statements about you proved outdated as we arrived at new insights. And the fact that in six years we must have gone through at least ten websites. As though we did not really know what we were doing. Directionless. Inconsistent. Although one may wonder if all those versions were necessary, I also see that this sense of unsteadiness stems from a tenacious expectation: one can become master of the change one envisions. Change then becomes something that can be predicted, controlled, regulated and managed. A professional, after all, knows where they are heading and stays the course.



This logic works only as long as systems that do not question their own premises are optimised. But once change demands a reconfiguration of relationships, power dynamics and meaning, that same logic becomes a form of fixation; an attempt to freeze movement before it can reveal what is truly at stake. You are about making a dignified life possible for every human being. And this is exactly what demands such a reconfiguration of where the power lies to define problems: who is considered hard-working and who lazy; and which lives are protected by default while other lives are controlled or made invisible.

This revision leaves no one untouched. I do not stand outside it either. We cannot question the order of our society without asking ourselves from what position we look and act, what that position makes possible for us and where we do and do not benefit. Our choices are not neutral, and therefore neither is the effect we have. In working on you, this awareness does not take shape as a thought exercise or an apology, but as a continual test in practice: what do our choices set in motion as we build? For whom do they open space, and who is held in place once again?

It is precisely when the effects of our choices on others do not match what we intend that the meaning of our place becomes truly clear. While we were working on you, there was always room for that confrontation. And over again, peoples' experiences showed that our definition of the problem was too small, too narrow or too innocent; that holding onto the existing form would mean that we would repeat exactly that which we were trying to break through.

Remaining accountable for what our choices mean for others, remaining vulnerable to what we have to learn, remaining responsible for the consequences—that is the only way to change, through essential connection to peoples' lives and circumstances. Our shifts, therefore, are not a lack of direction, but the trace of a learning process.

With this letter I do not want to free myself from the doubt about you. Nor do I want to romanticise things that simply have not worked. I want to highlight what has always remained intact: the choice not to fix positions, language and stories. A necessary refusal in a world that runs on fixation; on separate lives instead of what unfolds between people; on erasing context; on dividing people into one-dimensional categories and risk groups. A world in which problems can be 'solved' with new calculations—for example, the number of people living 'in poverty'—so that action can be taken without actually touching the order that produces inequality again and again.

Let us revisit some of the shifts that we have experienced together. To keep learning about where change really begins and what it takes not to defuse her right away.

What is the Value of Solidarity?

You came into being during the first weeks of COVID-19. Society came to a standstill for the first time, and I had lost all my paid assignments in the three hours before I conceived you. I can still feel the panic—how every muscle tightened while at the same time a tornado raged inside me.

I know this feeling from earlier in my life. A period in which I had no words for dignity yet, but I could tell exactly what it feels like when it is missing.

And while public life was being shut down, people struggled with its consequences; social distancing, wearing face masks, a lockdown, a QR code... Of course, people had to take each other into account in those days (and in general) and some measures only worked if most people complied with them. But the impact of the measures taken during this period deserved a better public debate.

What was 'right' was hard to put into words in those days. I did not want people with health conditions that made them vulnerable to be in danger, or to die. But there was also no room at all to talk about the cost of the measures for other lives, or about the interventions of our government. Meanwhile there was a constant appeal to our solidarity. 'We're in this together, it was said. 'We have to look after one another.' The emphasis on an abstract 'together' masked all inequalities present in our society at that moment, magnified by COVID-19. Without a public conversation or the possibility for an alternative, this call for solidarity was above all a call for obedience.

And I sat on my bed and thought: What is solidarity, really?

So you begin with an invitation to explore solidarity. And because money leads a life of its own and for many people is worth more than the lives of others, I decide to use you as an inquiry into solidarity through money, so that moral convictions are tested at the same time. The invitation sounds as follows:

Hi, this is Denise. I'm looking for one hundred people who want to donate fifty euros each month for a period of eight months. Together we will raise €40,000. That money will go to five people who will receive €1,000 each month for eight months. We don't yet know who we will give the money to, how, or why. That is exactly what we are going to explore. Are you in?

The idea is that by searching for answers together and immediately putting into practice what we design along the way, it becomes clear what these one hundred people mean by solidarity. I want you to become not just a thought exercise, but a practice in which thought and action come together.

After three weeks you have already had your first 'rebranding.' 'Exploring solidarity' is too vague for people. 'What will we actually do, and for what purpose?' 'How can this ever become anything if it remains this open?'



Someone says: 'Oh, you give away a thousand euros a month. Then this is just a basic income experiment.' And someone else says: 'I explain it to my friends as a giving experiment.'

From an invitation you suddenly turn into an 'experiment' and an 'approach.' Your new descriptions suggest a certain clarity that does not match the phone calls I have been having for weeks by then with people I know and with total strangers. Phone calls in which the desire to share immediately clashes with deeply rooted ideas about rights, value and possession. Some people join you because the proposal forces them not only to give money, but also to take a position on moral questions that are usually outsourced to politics and government. Others do not participate for exactly that reason: the question feels too big; it is not up to them to have an opinion. And for yet others, solidarity should remain anonymous and without involvement.

I also notice that people immediately create a hierarchy between lives that are seen as 'promising' or 'hopeful,' and lives for which they fear that money would not be well spent, because it will not solve anything and might even be damaging. Solidarity is weighed against productivity, resilience, potential, even when people explicitly say

that everyone deserves peace and space. For a number of people, this consideration is especially important because we can 'only' share the money with five people. Had there been room for everyone, they say they would see it differently. Money appears as something that can create space, but at the same time brings about a sense of obligation, gratitude and dependence.

After four months of phone calls—by that time there are around sixty people working on building you—we take our next step. You give all participants an assignment. You send them eighteen fictional descriptions of people: of their dreams, their family situation, the things that hold them back in life, and their income. All written in verse and based on interviews with people and reports from, among others, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research. You ask everyone to make a top five of these descriptions and to give an explanation why they would prefer to share the money with exactly those five. In addition, you ask questions about their own lives, dreams and needs.

The assignment leads to ten evenings of conversation with one another. During each evening there are six to ten people present from the group of one hundred. Some



people refused to do the assignment: they did not want to choose. There are people who, in hindsight, regret that they did not make that choice as well. And there are people who are very glad that they dug into it; it makes everything pleasantly straightforward. Others say it has given them a lot of insight into the tensions at play between different values and considerations. ‘What are we supposed to do with that?’ More conversations follow. And more. Meanwhile, you have also been given a name: *Collectief Kapitaal*.

Over time, the conversation about you is less about who deserves solidarity, but more about how we can carry responsibility together for a reality in which each person can have a secure existence. Trust and dignity emerge as core values. What we want to express, while building on you, is that a secure existence is not something that should be earned. It is an inalienable right. We decide to let the money go to people by lottery. No one has to deliver ‘proof’ of their economic insecurity. We do not want to play government 2.0. We want to imagine an alternative.

Through all our conversations we have also become wary about our own compulsion to control. Of our tendency to think that we ourselves would be better at ‘being poor’ than someone who actually is, and of our presumption in sharing well-meant advice. We decide that a small part of our group becomes part of a so-called ‘research working group.’ This research aims to create an exchange with the people who will receive the money about how trust, dignity and livelihood security are experienced in such an alternative set-up.

It is July 11, 2021.

This evening we will meet for the first time: the six members of the research working group and the five people who were selected by lottery to receive one thousand euros a month for eight months. We had to move heaven and earth to get to this point, to be able to share money with people at all. Compromises had to be made, such as excluding people receiving social assistance, who would run into problems if they received the money because of the Dutch Participation Act. Our attempts to create an exception were unsuccessful.

It is an extraordinary evening. Each of us has brought an object that represents something about who we are, what is important to us, what we have experienced in life. The six members who have been involved longer take the five new participants through the journey they have been on so far: How slowly ways of thinking changed; the values we came to embrace: trust, dignity and autonomy. The new members recognise the feeling of being distrusted. They still find it hard to believe that this is really happening: a thousand euros a month, from complete strangers. Just like that. Why on earth would people do such a thing?

We also explain how these values will take shape in practice in the coming year.

That the people who receive the money do not have to share what they spend it on. We trust them and, after all, the money no longer belongs to us. That they can

decide not to share any experiences. Sharing is not a required condition.

We also explain that we understand they may not necessarily be interested in meetings with the collective, in well-meant advice, or in the implicit expectation of gratitude. And that, for those reasons, everyone will remain largely anonymous to one another.

And then Esra looks at me and says: ‘Oh... and it didn’t cross your minds that you might also have something to learn from us?’

By redistributing money without meeting each other, we thought we had broken the uneven playing field. Or at least mitigated its damage. What we did not see was how much that choice actually kept existing roles intact: us as the designers; them as the objects of our design.

And so we wrote on our flyer that people apply for a gift of one thousand euros a month. That it was an unconditional gift. That someone’s application was enough for us to assume that they ‘needed’ the money. That we would not check what the money was spent on. In everything we conveyed the message: ‘We Trust You.’ Not for a single moment did we ask ourselves whether the people that got hold of our flyer had any reason to trust us. Because from our position—the ones with the money—it seemed inconceivable that people might not want to make use of it.

This deliberation illustrates how power works as the self-evident space to determine what the problem is, what solution belongs to it, and how the other fits into that.

Back to that evening. I look at Esra and say: Point taken.’ We split into pairs and decide that each pair meets once a month. And so you stumble on.

Revolution Through the In-Between

Between October 2022 and March 2023 you come to a halt. There is a disagreement with the Dutch tax authorities about whether the money you share legally qualifies as a gift, or whether it should be regarded as ‘income from other activities.’ After all, people share their experiences of what it means to receive a gift, and this is interpreted as a form of compensation, as work. It takes time to make clear that they misunderstand you. Sharing experiences is not a condition, not an obligation, and not a form of exchange, but something that may exist within the relationship without having to exist, precisely because the money is unconditional. It is this suspension of the logic of quid pro quo, you argue, that makes room for livelihood security. Eventually, that distinction is recognised.

With all fiscal boxes checked, you can continue on your way. The journey with the first five people has meanwhile



come to an end. They tell us that the past eight months have brought about a shift in their lives. There is more peace and space. They relate differently to themselves and to the world around them. They speak of an experience of mutual involvement, shared vulnerability, and that through this, 'something' has been healed. Karelyn says: 'I finally feel that I have the right to exist.'

Wait. The right to exist? Our mission is livelihood security for everyone. Are we actually talking about the same thing?

Livelihood (in)security is about the conditions under which someone can live: about income, housing, and access to affordable care and good education. But what Karelyn voices here is not about conditions but about position, about rights, and about recognition. About no longer having to exist invisibly or conditionally.

Livelihood insecurity as a definition of the problem allows us to frame the problem as something locked in within individual lives. As something that belongs to the other; you either have it or you do not. What remains out of view is the interconnectedness of structures, norms and systems that repeatedly produce the same outcome: some lives are protected, while others are exposed to risk, danger and exclusion.

We then call upon ourselves to listen to 'their' problems. To immerse ourselves in 'their' reality. While placing ourselves and the world we share outside the picture, we maintain a narrative in which our system is just at its core and the problem lies with the few 'exceptions.' In this way, livelihood insecurity not only individualises the problem; it simultaneously produces the (self-)absolution and supposed powerlessness of the system.

Now that you see what previously went unseen, you begin to search for a different language. Language that makes room for the necessity of material conditions for existence, as well as for what cannot be captured in arrangements: recognition, respect and people's shared desire to belong. Language that does not suggest that one person can give this to another, but makes visible that—and how—we make each other's lives possible.

That is why your mission changes into 'a dignified life for every human.' And from that moment on, the form can no longer remain the same. Where you once began with a research working group, which gradually evolved into a 'circle for collective knowledge development,' you now choose *Reisgezelschap*; a group of companions on a shared journey.

For you, the *Reisgezelschap* is an in-between space: a carefully organised interruption in which taken-for-granted problem definitions, roles and logics are temporarily suspended. It is not a place where others are analysed, or where better policies are designed, but a space in which people with very different life paths meet. Some receive a gift for a year, others do not. In that encounter, thinking, learning and change are always relational, and between us the world we dream of begins to take shape.

But the difficulty is: the in-between space is no magic wand that simply waves away the information that has

taken root in us. Stories about 'the other.' Stories about ourselves. We fumble our way through rearranging things.

First meeting: *everyone seems so kind.*

Third meeting: *what am I doing here, really? I don't understand the purpose.*

Fourth meeting: *this assignment is so incredibly stupid—why on earth should I sculpt myself in clay?*

Fifth meeting: *you all speak like aliens. I don't understand you, and I come here with a bad feeling because of it.*

Eighth meeting: *I want other people to feel what I have felt here: Love.*

People who share time or money often join you with the idea that their role should mainly be restrained: to listen, make space, support. 'I have nothing to say about this.' 'My role is a supporting one.' These thoughts are understandable, and often well-intentioned. They arise from the realisation that some voices have been structurally silenced, and from discomfort about one's own good fortune, security or privilege.

But in practice, fellow travellers learn something else from one another. That not bringing yourself into the conversation can also be experienced as another form of disengagement. Resolving to 'see the other' is also one-sided—who grants whom what status? While the people who receive the gifts work hard to tell their story, to make their lives understandable, other voices say: 'How brave of you to share this.' As if vulnerability were a choice here, and not a lifelong condition in which credibility has to be fought for again and again. Making space can easily tilt into absence and before you know it, the labour shifts once again to the person who is already used to explaining and justifying themselves. A phrase like 'the human being this concerns,' meant as a loving and elegant alternative to 'the target group,' keeps this division of roles intact. Recognition becomes something you can give without being affected yourself, without your position, your advantage or your part in it having to be questioned. And it always keeps the other in a predetermined place: that of 'the vulnerable one.'

'Those who are major can afford to be genteel, liberal, apolitical,' writes Viet Thanh Nguyen in *To Save and to Destroy: Writing as an Other*. This language is a good illustration of that.

That same phrase does something else as well. 'The human being this concerns' is not only seen as someone with experience, it also creates the expectation that this experience should provide direction; that this person knows what another person needs. In this way, experience quietly shifts from knowledge to norm. But even someone with experience carries prejudices, assumptions and blind spots, just like anyone else. Precisely because language protects this position so carefully, asking questions or exploring differences can quickly feel as if someone's experience is being called into question. The conversation can unintentionally become rigid, even though there is a real desire for equal contact in which everyone remains open to challenge.



Artwork by Sanne Doornenbal.

In your Reisgezelschap, equality does not appear as a moral starting point but as a conflictual practice. Not as a given, but as an ongoing process in which no one withdraws from its risks. That is why a remark from one of the fellow travellers touches the political core of what is being attempted here: 'For a loving way of living with one another everyone must show up fully and equally committed—me too, in my not-knowing, my fumbling, or my privilege.'

That is the revolution of your in-between spaces: not a grand gesture, but a daily disruption of how we speak and how we relate to one another.

Collectivity and Community

It is 2026. Your awareness has grown, and so has your scale. Since I first conceived you, more than four thousand people have been involved with you, one million euros have been redistributed, and eight Reisgezelschappen have taken place. For the first time, you are collaborating with a government organisation. You want to weave your way of working into existing structures in order to expand your influence.

For some time now, we have described you as a citizens' movement. People involved with you have planted your seeds in new cities, from which local initiatives have grown. We began to call these 'collectives,' of which there are now seven. Or rather, I should say, there were seven. Because with this growth something was also lost along the way, and change became inevitable.

Growth was never the goal. You began without a strategy, without the ambition to become big. But over time the context changes. You strike a chord with people. And you also see for yourself that what you are doing matters. You want to keep going, to draw more people into this movement. But soon that exploratory, meaningful process is no longer the leading focus in how you are seen from the outside. Results are being demanded. Not of what happens between people, but of what can be measured within the 'target group': how many people you help and whether their lives have significantly improved because of you.

You weigh your response to that question again and again. You know you mean 'something' in people's lives. People tell you about confidence that has grown. About houses that are not being sold to the highest bidder, but to a single mom from the neighbourhood. Yet you do not lead anyone into work or teach anyone to manage money 'better.' At least, that is not what is promised or pursued. You do not measure it. Yet, it does happen.

What happens when you prioritise 'results for the target group?' When you focus specifically on that, what reality and what definition of the problem do you thereby confirm? 'You have to learn to speak the language of the system,' you are told, 'so that afterwards you can do what you actually want to do.' You have never believed in that, precisely because you have always been wary of being drawn into the system. Of the risk of becoming an extension of the very

thing you are trying to challenge. You have always sought a delicate balance: just enough accommodation to exist, but never so much that it undermines your capacity to resist. At the same time you wonder: Am I not just being elitist? Do I really know what people actually need? Isn't helping simply good and necessary? Phrases like 'talk doesn't put bread on the table' and 'you can't live in bullshit' are regularly thrown at you. Some days you cannot remember why you exist—whether it has any meaning at all, or whether you slowly drown in your own philosophy.

In this layered field of questions, criticism and deliberation, growth becomes an anchor. An encouragement to carry on and a confirmation of your necessity. At first, this works well. As long as there are enough experienced people to carry the 'in-between space' in the local collectives, you continue to exist as a reciprocal inquiry into position, language and power. These experienced people are essential. You are not a model that can simply be transferred through a blueprint or a step-by-step plan. Understanding what is written in a vision document is something different from being able to carry what emerges in practice. Working on you requires craftsmanship: the ability to guide conflict without shutting it down; to allow tension to remain; to invite imagination into the conversation; to sometimes give direction but much more often to create the conditions in which others can do the work. It requires the capacity to guide groups to where things become tense—without determining the outcome.

After a while, things begin to falter. I see you struggle to be present in as many places as possible. How you make quick calls to people before an evening gathering, just to give them a few extra tips. Or a bit more information about 'how we do things.'

And although everyone is doing their best, I also see how, on some evenings, the layering slips away from you. How people try to get a grip on you by fitting you into categories they recognise. Your practice space becomes an intervention again. Relationship turns into service. You become something meant for others, something they contribute to.

A paradox emerges. In order to keep your exploratory process of reordering power, position and capital alive, you have to guard it more closely, correct it more often, and explain it more and more. What was meant to be an open space becomes a centrally managed structure. And with that, exactly what you wanted to prevent begins to happen: by trying to guarantee the in-between space, you make it impossible.

You feel it in the summer of 2025. You cannot go on like this any longer. And in the autumn of 2025, a series of conversations take place with representatives of the different local collectives. A decision follows.

From 2026 onwards, local collectives continue on their own—if they choose to. In connection with you and the horizon you showed us, but under their own name, in new constellations and with their own rhythm and form. It is a reordering of role, position and power. For the local collec-

tives, this opens space for new shapes. For you as well. To no longer carry, but to create again. It brings you back to the question that had always been at the core of this whole endeavour.

A dignified life for every human being. What would a world look like that makes this longing real? How do people think, act, share and care in that world so that they make each other's lives possible?

With each new project, with each new act of imagination that lies ahead, you gather the building blocks to bring that world into being. In two months' time you will travel with a group of fifteen women—many of them single mothers—to dreamland. Or at least, that is your (final) destination. But many of them have been denied access to that place. Dreamland is not free ground. It is occupied territory. By norms meant to teach people 'a sense of reality.' And we are going to liberate it. By letting bumps, obstacles, insults, underestimation and norms dissolve into the clouds.

With this decision, what once began as a source can continue to renew itself, and a dignified life becomes not a promise that must be guarded, but something that is lived and embodied.

Finally—Worldling

To exist is a form of expression. In the way we exist, we practice a different society. The form we take does not emerge as a means to a predetermined end, but in the gathering of people who make each other's lives possible while working to dismantle existing structures.

Donna Haraway calls this *worlding*: the realisation that we create worlds while living in them, and that every act, every story and every relationship is world-making. This is where your resistance lies. Not as a promise for a world to come, but as the concrete practice of other ways of owning, sharing, governing, caring and connecting. Here and now.

There are forms of struggle that draw their strength from sharpness and clear boundaries. They focus on a single rule, a single symbol or a single practice, and are indispensable in that struggle. But working towards dignity cannot be exhausted in a single demand. Your practice touches something that often remains unseen, something Slavoj Žižek points out: Ideology does not only reside in what people explicitly believe, but above all in what we take for granted. In the rules that are already in place before we even begin to think.

This calls for a different kind of politics: one that intervenes not only in what is visible and measurable, but in the relations, positions and choices in which dignity is made or denied on a daily basis.

What I know now is that your fluidity is not directionlessness. Not a style. Not a compromise. It is an ethic. Both a necessary strategy and a daily struggle. In the way

you exist, you reveal a vulnerability that is actually very healthy in a disrupted world. And the rest, I leave open.

It wears me out—and how I love it.



DENISE HARLEMAN studied Theatre Studies at Utrecht University and worked as a business manager at various theatre companies in The Netherlands. In 2020 she laid the foundation for *Collectief Kapitaal*. She writes and speaks about livelihood security, human dignity and inequality, and about the role of art, language and imagination in societal change.

Denise shows that a different society is not only conceivable but can already be seen in how we interact with each other today. She regards relationships as a political space where power, guilt and shame and inequality can shift. And she organises practices where people can see each other anew—beyond the existing order.

Connected Experience

Motherhood, Art, and Feminist Economics

EVA SCHMETZ

For the past five months, every Friday afternoon, I walked with my baby daughter to De Pont Museum in Tilburg, The Netherlands, to participate in Tino Sehgal's artwork *This youiiyou*. What began as a personal routine unfolded into a profound experience of connectedness, reciprocity, and reflection.

In an otherwise empty exhibition space, I sat with my daughter while two interpreters attentively observed her. They translated her movements and sounds into voice and gesture. She responded; they responded back. A continuous exchange unfolded, in which looking and being looked at became inseparable. Each day, over the course of five months, different parents and babies took part in this situation. Nothing was recorded. No photographs, no video. Only the moment itself remained, carried in the experience of those present.

De Pont invited me, in my role as a researcher at the Transforming the Economy research group of Fontys University of Applied Sciences, to reflect on my personal participation in the work. I explored how this experience relates to broader ideas from art, anthropology, philosophy, and feminist economics.

This youiiyou turned out to be a living illustration of a broader shift: away from a conception of the human being centered on autonomy, rationality, and measurable productivity, toward a perspective in which relationality, care, and immaterial value take center stage. The work shows that we do not exist apart from one another, but that we are always, fundamentally, shaped through dependence and exchange.

With these insights, and with the scattered notes I had written over the previous months, I began preparing my lecture for De Pont. I imagined myself on a stage with a clear, linearly structured argument, carefully weaving theory and lived experience together. But in the two weeks I had set aside to connect my writings and form clear

conclusions, both my children became intensely ill. The headspace I depended on—silence, time, clarity—vanished completely. Something else emerged in its place.

The lecture ultimately became, at the last moment, a performance lecture. Cancelling was not an option; my words and experiences needed to be voiced. The audience sat in a semicircle around me, and between us lay the texts I had brought. Theoretical passages marked in blue, written-out experiences in pink, and three green notes for the sound fragments that a singer would perform live. Thanks to this color code, I could decide in the moment which thread was calling. It became not a linear argument, but an improvisational narration that, like the artwork itself, took shape through doing.

This essay is a condensed and more concentrated reflection of that form. It moves between thinking and experiencing, between body and concept, between art and economy. Not linear, but composed of fragments that call one another forth.

Motherhood and Productivity

In many ways, this is an absurd undertaking for me. With two children under the age of three (a two-and-a-half-year-old son and a ten-month-old daughter), chronically sleep-deprived, with a household to run and an almost full-time job to hold down, I try to carve out the mental space needed to prepare a lecture.

My life no longer has the productive and predictable rhythm it once had before my children arrived. I am in the process of rediscovering my voice and my language. Over the past two and a half years, I have repeatedly fallen silent, gathered words in fragments, felt overwhelmed by... by what exactly? By the sleep deprivation; the train that has kept running without stopping since their birth; the endless stream of care; the immense love for two small beings; the

schedules that seem to promise structure but almost always unfold differently. By the loss of the space and freedom I once had, and at the same time the support offered through parental-leave policies; the awareness that so many people go through this, and how little we truly pause to acknowledge it. Overwhelmed by the love our community shows our children—by my body, which has twice carried a massive belly and then returned to itself. I could go on and on. It's a relief to put these things into words, and sometimes to just be quiet and simply be overwhelmed.

Motherhood, giving birth, postpartum care, care work: these are no longer purely private matters but public, philosophical themes that visibly touch both art and the economy. The very fact that I openly share that my motherhood shaped the form of this lecture shows how norms have shifted. In the past five years, many books and novels have appeared that focus on childbirth, becoming a

mother, and the philosophical and scientific significance of motherhood.

Through *Matrescence* (2024), I learned from British science journalist Lucy Jones about the concept of matrescence: the transformation inherent to pregnancy, childbirth, and early motherhood. The brain and body of the birthing person change as profoundly as they do during adolescence. I remember joining my first meeting after months of being cocooned following the birth of our son Ollie. At the end I exclaimed, relieved: I can still think! My body had softened to make room for a child, and my brain felt just as softened. Thankfully, the ability to organize thoughts, listen, and respond was still there. Jones shows that changes in the brains and bodies of mothers are much deeper and longer-lasting than we used to think, and that there is a structural lack of interest in this process, rooted in long-standing economic and social constructions.



The main hall of museum De Pont.

The arts reflect this shift too. In *Het moedermodel* (2025), Dutch art critic and writer Joke de Wolf demonstrates how motherhood—pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for children—were not so much absent from art history, as rarely recognized; barely visible as legitimate subjects, and seldom given a serious platform. These themes—despite their universality—were not considered artistically relevant. Only in the last decade has there been growing space for artists who integrate these experiences practically and visibly into their work.

This shift became tangible for me at the exhibition *Good Mom/Bad Mom* at the Centraal Museum Utrecht, the first large-scale overview of motherhood in the arts in the Netherlands. It was my first time going out alone after the birth of our daughter Sari, in April 2025. I felt embraced, comforted, held, acknowledged. The exhibition carried me from my small, local Tilburg experience of pregnancy and care into an echo of past and present, filled with images and stories. I felt something similar to those first weeks after my first birth, when I stepped outside again. With every person who passed, I thought: ‘You were also born; someone gave birth to you.’ I was in awe of the familiar and simultaneously the phenomenal. My thoughts moved with a sharp clarity reminiscent of what drugs can induce.

This youiiyou is not directly about motherhood or parenthood, but the work does have its origins in motherhood. Several dancers in Sehgal’s practice were pregnant at the same time. Rather than excusing them from work, Sehgal said: ‘Let’s make babies part of the piece.’ And even later: ‘Let’s make them the focus of the piece.’ Sehgal creates only intangible artworks—constructed situations—made of encounters between people. There are no objects, no props; the experience arises only in the moment itself. His works may not be photographed or filmed. They exist only in the present, in relation to whoever is there and whatever unfolds. It is precisely this refusal of documentation that makes the experience of *This youiiyou* so fundamental: it cannot be captured, only lived.

In late modernity, Western structures often reduce motherhood to role, planning, identity, and productivity. In *This youiiyou*, motherhood—and parenthood—appears for me in its most elemental form: rhythmic, embodied, relational; prior to language, identity, and control.

Before I continue, I want to clarify one term. When I use the word ‘mother,’ I do not necessarily mean a biological or gender-bound category. Not every pregnant person is a woman, not every woman becomes a mother, and not every mother gives birth, as De Wolf writes in the introduction to her book. I, too, use the term as a broad, inclusive indication of people engaged in caring, supporting, or nurturing work.

In the ongoing attention to care, I also notice how fragmented my thinking has become. What helped me was the essay ‘Tussen kunst en kind’ (2022) by Dutch journalist and writer Bregje Hofstede. She shows how novelist Jenny Offill does not place art and motherhood in opposition; instead, fragmentation and practical pressure shape

the form of her work. The small and the large slide over one another; dirty diapers and ecological crises coexist. The fragmentary nature that makes her work innovative was born partly out of necessity: ‘I only had scraps of time,’ Offill says. Hofstede writes: ‘Motherhood brings a constant splintering of thought. A brain preoccupied with the well-being of a small stranger cannot sustain a long line of reasoning, and you are forced to become creative if you want to produce anything at all.’

So I let go of the linear. What follows is a story that meanders and is composed of fragments.

Situation I—The Walk

It is Friday afternoon on the twelfth of September, the nineteenth of September, and the twenty-sixth of September 2025. Friday the third of October, the tenth of October, the seventeenth of October, the twenty-fourth of October, and the thirty-first of October 2025. Friday the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth of November. Friday the fifth, twelfth, nineteenth, and twenty-sixth of December. Friday the ninth, sixteenth, twenty-third, and thirtieth of January 2026. And Friday the sixth, thirteenth, twentieth and twenty-seventh of February 2026.

On these Fridays it is around half past one in the afternoon. I close the door behind me and push the stroller with my daughter Sari inside it forward. Just five months old, six months old, seven, eight, nine months old, and now, at the time of writing, ten months old. The basket underneath the stroller is filled with clean clothes, her bottle, milk powder, clean diapers, wipes, and in the last weeks also small pieces of bread and soft fruit. I leave my laptop, planner, the book I am reading, the laundry, the dishes, and the not-yet-cooked dinner at home. It is just the two of us, and the things needed to care for her.

We walk our familiar route down the Bredaseweg, crossing at De Wilgenstraat, then straight ahead along Sint Ceciliastraat, Jan Heijnsstraat, and Vredeman de Vriesstraat. Sari sleeps, or looks upward at the sky, or smiles at me. I look at her, smile back, or look inside the houses we pass. A small turn to the right and then to the left, and we walk along the path leading to De Pont Museum. I cast a glance at *Sky Mirror*, the six-meter-high polished steel sculpture by Anish Kapoor, and see what Sari has seen throughout the entire walk—the sky. The revolving door comes into view. We arrive.

For five months, every Friday afternoon, I walked to the museum, with my baby daughter. Not to look at art, but to become art. We were part of *This youiiyou*, a work that was presented in a continuous loop for more than five months—from Tuesday to Sunday between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m.—in which the end always returns to the beginning. The starting and ending points of the piece are without a baby, but in between, parents take turns sitting or lying



De Pont and Sky Mirror.

with their child amid the sounds of Sehgal's interpreters. Why did I choose to maintain this ritual with such consistency every Friday afternoon for the past months? And why did I guard that moment so carefully?

I had just finished a four-day workweek in education—dynamic, hectic, never done. Together with my partner I care not only for Sari but also for our two-and-a-half-year-old son, Ollie. We do groceries, cook, tidy up, wash dishes. We sleep, on average, four to five hours a night, between feedings and soothing and comforting. We are fully in the most demanding phase of parenthood. And yet—or perhaps precisely because of that—I chose to go to the museum every Friday, and sometimes an extra day as well. Because with this walk, we were moving toward slowness, quietness, and open space. Literally, because we would enter the large empty hall of De Pont several times. And figuratively, because for a moment there was nothing but this—she and I. More than a thousand square meters of white emptiness. Sound. Louise, Nestor, and Vera, the core interpreters of the work. The visitor. And the momentum—unfolding slightly differently each time.

In a time so dominated by autonomy, control, and productivity, I chose a moment of openness, slowness, and reciprocity.

My connection with the artwork showed me that motherhood is not only a social role but also a philosophical and economic practice. It interrupts the illusion of autonomy

and reveals that our existence is fundamentally relational and dependent. An artwork like *This youiiyou* makes this dimension visible and tangible. It creates a space of encounter in which relational value can surface, offering room for a different conception of the human being, and perhaps also for an economy in which relationality, and thus care, do not stand at the margins but at the center.

Care as Foundation

Feminist economics emerged in the 1990s as a critique of traditional economics and focuses on what has long remained out of view: that care work, raising children, attention and emotional labor, forms the indispensable underlayer of every society. When care is not seen or valued, precisely that which sustains societies disappears—time, attention, presence.

In 1994, American economist Diana Strassmann founded the journal *Feminist Economics*, because research on gender, care, and inequality had no place in mainstream economics. Feminist economists show that traditional economics is built on a conception of the human being—the autonomous, rational, market-oriented actor—that is too narrow. But who is left out of view in that frame? Which forms of work are not counted? And which possibilities for recognition and humanity disappear as a result?

Feminist economics does not critique the existence of the current economic logic itself, but rather it recognizes only one form of productivity—measurable, goal-oriented, market-driven output. Everything that does not fit into numbers—care, attention, relational work—falls outside the frame; not because it lacks value, but because it does not fit the existing value system. Feminist economists are not saying that the economy as we know it is wrong, but that it is incomplete.

Centering care work, inequality, and lived experience creates a more complete picture of how societies actually function.

From that perspective, *This youiiyou* reveals something essential. The work shows that being engaged in a relationship is also productive. Not in terms of output, but in generating meaning, connection, and humanity. Perhaps that is even the foundation of real productivity—the ability to hold relationships, to give care, to allow something to arise that no individual could create alone.

Lived experience is increasingly finding a central place in research, not merely as illustration, but as a source of knowledge. I, too, moved from experiencing, to understanding, to interpreting. This aligns with a broader movement in practice-based, embodied, and artistic research: knowledge that emerges from the body, from relation, from the moment.

Where feminist economics shows that care and relationality are structural forces, the work of Marcel Mauss offered me a second lens through which to understand my participation in *This youiiyou*. At the Transforming the Economy research group, where I work as a researcher, we read Mauss's work *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925) shortly before my involvement in the artwork. His ideas continued to resonate throughout those months at De Pont.

Mauss examines how the gift economies he studied, from Māori communities to Northwest Coast peoples, are held together through systems of reciprocity—giving, receiving, and giving back. These systems have economic dimensions but cannot be reduced to market exchange and instead operate as a form of social fabric.

I noticed how naturally this insight aligned with my experience within *This youiiyou*. Sehgal creates a situation in which people do not meet through language or function, but through sound, rhythm, touch, and closeness. What I gave—attention, sound, time—returned to me in other forms: a smile, calm, resonance, an unexpected movement from Sari. And what I received called again for a response. A small but powerful flow of reciprocity emerged between me, Sari, the interpreters, and the visitors. Care is not something one person gives, but something carried between people, as the Swedish architect, writer, and strategic designer Jenny Grettve also shows in *Mothering Economy* (2024).

My weekly participation became a kind of gift circulation. Not a sacrifice, not a performance, but a ritual of relational value that renewed itself each time. In that ritual, value does not arise through production, but through openness.

The shift I describe—from doing to being, from productivity to relationality—is therefore not only personal or artistic. It is also a response to a broader societal dynamic of acceleration and alienation. Feminist economics and Mauss's gift theory help to understand this shift as part of a long tradition in which care, dependence, and reciprocity are the foundations of human life together.

Situation II—My Back Supported

Sari has fallen asleep in my arms in the 'backstage baby room,' after drinking a warm bottle of milk. Her head resting on my chest. The delicate lines of her closed eyes. Her calm breathing.

The other babies are not able to enter the artwork. I heard from Louise that once before, a sleeping baby had been part of the piece. Perhaps I can enter the work with Sari while she sleeps in my arms? I decide to try. Slowly, I walk through the hallway toward the open space. Sari does not stir. She is completely relaxed and continues to sleep peacefully. I step into the empty hall and find a place near the interpreters. I sit down with Sari in my arms.

Immediately, in smooth and gentle movements, Vera approaches me and nestles her back against mine, supporting me. Tears spring to my eyes. The support. The warmth. The softness. We cannot see each other. We only feel each other's back. And each other's breathing. She hums. Louise hums. I begin to hum. I seem to enter another dimension. The sounds, the breathing, the softness, and the quietness that a sleeping baby evokes. I occasionally close my eyes and sway Sari back and forth. It feels like a dream and seems to last endlessly.

Jiki

Tino Sehgal deliberately does not call his work, including *This youiiyou*, a constructed situation. That distinction is essential; it is not 'us' versus 'an audience.' The visitor shapes the moment and the experience just as much as the interpreters do, as do Sari and I. In this work, Sari and the other babies play a key role. They are beings who do not yet know an 'I' in the way we do, an 'I' that positions us in the world.

Pregnancy, although a deeply profound and existential human experience, has been nearly invisible as a subject in philosophy for centuries. As a result, a fundamental human experience—the carrying of another body within one's own—remained outside the general philosophical consciousness.

Jonna Bornemark, a Swedish professor of philosophy, examines the philosophical implications of pregnancy. The pregnant person both governs their body and does not. Is passive and active at the same time. Is one, and simultaneously two. If we take this paradoxical experience seriously, she asks, what might it allow us to see? We often think that life begins at birth, that our bodies exist separately,



Walking towards the piece to enter and join.

and that we are fundamentally alone. But is that true? Where are the boundaries of the self? Pregnancy invites us to ask those questions anew and offers another way of understanding what life is, and what kind of relationship we truly have with other living beings.

In *Ik ben zee en hemel* (2023), Bornemark describes how the ‘I’ does not begin as a self-contained individual, but as something learned. Slowly, through rhythm, repetition, touch, sound, the gaze of the other. The self is a process of becoming, a continuous movement between two poles—the ‘sea’ of pre-reflective experience, embodiment, and openness, and the ‘sky’ of structure, language, and self-recognition.

Babies, in their first months, exist almost entirely in that sea. In a world in which boundaries have not yet solidified; in which the body is not yet separate from the other; in which sound and touch need not carry meaning to be meaningful. Pre-reflective refers to a mode of experience before conscious awareness, language, or deliberation appear. It is the layer of existence in which we do not yet reflect on ourselves, but simply are, feel, respond, attune.

Bornemark helps me understand why babies play such an extraordinary role in this work. In *This youiiyou*, that sea becomes almost tangible—sound, movement, attention, improvisation. The babies draw us back into that pre-reflective space where everything is still relational, not yet filtered through a formed self. They invite us into a form of resonance that precedes identity.

And then there is the first reciprocal smile—Bornemark’s example of early mutuality—the moment when a newborn meets the mother’s gaze for the first time. That exact phenomenon occurs within the artwork—a smile, a tone, a glance that carries no function, yet opens a world. A tiny movement revealing that meaning does not begin with language, but with attunement.

Bornemark’s concept of *jijki*—a term she created to name the fluid relational space between I and You—resonates directly with what *This youiiyou* embodies. Both seek language for that realm in which individuality does not disappear but becomes permeable; where I and You shape, carry, listen to, and move with one another. In *This youiiyou*, this becomes not a concept but an experience; a moving-with presence that renders exactly that *jijki*-space palpable.

Situation III—The Young Man Who Walked Away

I was in the large, empty white space with Sari, and with Louise and Nestor, the interpreters that afternoon. Only the four pillars broke the vastness of the room. A museum guard stood in the corner. And leaning against the wall

with the closed wool cabinets in which artworks are normally displayed, were a couple with presumably their son, somewhere in his mid-to-late twenties.

The couple took their time to look but the young man scanned the situation briefly and walked away. His body communicated that he had no desire to engage with what was unfolding before him, nor to examine himself in relation to it. Yet he still had to cross that entire expansive space with his body in order to leave. We were all witnesses to his departure. Including Sari.

She was lying on her stomach.
And watched him go.
Head lifted.

He felt her gaze on his back.
He stopped and turned around.

Sari kept watching him.
He hesitated.
Turned away again and continued walking.

Sari continued to look at him.
He felt it again, in his back.

He stopped once more, turned toward us, and saw her eyes holding him.
He absorbed it. I thought I saw discomfort and doubt. Something stirred in him. What exactly, I do not know. Something touched him.

What will he do now?

He turned away again, continuing his path toward the exit. Sari kept watching him, and his back kept feeling it, until he disappeared. I found this moment to be of such extraordinary beauty. Relatively little happened, and yet so much.

Sari cannot be directed, and she has no sense yet of timing or dramaturgy. And he was simply doing whatever he was doing. But the choreography and the pacing were perfect. The moment could not be controlled; it emerged. Through Sari's persistent gaze, an encounter took place. Whether the young man wanted it or not. And we were the humming, present witnesses.

Resonance

The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa shows that our culture is obsessed with availability: Everything must be plannable, measurable, predictable. Babies are the exact opposite: They cannot be planned, they cannot be optimized, they bring the unexpected into the room. In *This youiiyou*, this becomes visible: The baby determines the rhythm, the sound, the intensity of the moment. The baby withdraws from late-modern logic and thereby opens a space of resonance.

A world that is fully known, planned, and controlled is a dead world, Rosa writes in his essay *Onbeschikbaarheid* (2022). He argues that modernity is driven by the desire to make the world knowable, calculable, manageable, and controllable. He calls this availability: designing the world in such a way that nothing can surprise or resist us any longer. Everything must be measurable, plannable, optimizable. But it is precisely this striving that leads to alienation, because it pushes the unexpected and the relational out of life.

Rosa emphasizes that much of what gives life meaning—the first snowfall, an unexpected conversation, art that touches you—appears in ways that are fundamentally uncontrollable. They are experiences you cannot plan or force. They happen, or they do not. Uncontrollability is not a deficit, but a precondition for a living relationship with the world.

That is why Rosa introduces the concept of resonance as an alternative to the modern fixation on control. Resonance is a way of being-in-the-world in which you do not try to possess the world, but to meet it instead. It means opening yourself, being moved by something outside yourself, and entering a reciprocal relationship with people, nature, art, or ideas. Resonance is always relational, always reciprocal—something outside me touches me, and I respond in feeling, in meaning, in my relationship to the world—and it is always unpredictable. You cannot possess it, plan it, or guarantee it. It is, by definition, uncontrollable.

In *This youiiyou*, this becomes visible. The babies bring a form of uncontrollability that is not disruptive but generative. They do not disturb the work; they make the work. Their presence—a smile, a tone, an unexpected movement, a moment of attunement that cannot be staged—opens a space in which resonance can arise. These are minute events that reveal that meaning does not arise through control, but through receptivity.

Rosa's analysis makes clear why these moments are so powerful; they break through late-modern patterns of control and invite us to relearn how to listen, feel, and respond. They remind us that life does not consist solely of what we can plan, measure, or optimize, but also of what eludes our control, and moves us precisely because of that.

Situation IV—The Emergence of Sound

Louise, one of the core interpreters of Tino Sehgal, asked me during our first meeting in early September, when we were exploring whether I might participate in the artwork, whether I could sing. 'Yes,' I said. 'But I'm not a professional.'

She invited me to sing along with the interpreters whenever Sari and I were present on the floor. In the first weeks I didn't dare. My voice stayed deep in my throat. I didn't know yet what sound I was meant to make in this setting. And it had been a very long time since I had sung publicly.



Main hall De Pont with closed wool cabinets.

Each time Louise, Vera, and Nestor sang for Sari, I listened attentively—to their tones, their timbres, their rhythms. Inside me, a sound began to resonate, one that only after a few weeks cautiously dared to become audible. I had been invited to sing but hadn't been coached or directed. It couldn't be forced; it had to unfold in its own way. As if the sound, just like Sari ten months earlier, was allowed to be born.

And now that it is here, and dares to sound, I enjoy it deeply, the improvisations in which each person's voice tries to find the others, responding to Sari's movements and emotions. Sometimes certain tones align so beautifully, and the genuine attention, from us, and also from the visitor—for everything present in that moment—becomes so palpable that my body seems to dissolve, losing its boundaries, and my soul moves through the space.

From Doing Nothing to Expressing

The Friday afternoons at De Pont were a pause in time for me. A stepping away from rhythm, expectations, and productivity. A ritual that gave me the space to be with Sari. To fully see her, feel her, experience her. Of course, we were there to 'make' art, but what I felt most strongly in the beginning was doing nothing. Just being present.

The artwork consists of people and no objects. Apart from a few simple agreements, all Sari and I had to do was be there. During the five months in which the piece ran in a continuous loop, the presence of the babies formed the heart of the work. They are nothing but presence; small bodies that perceive and respond. And we, parents, interpreters, and visitors, respond to them. In that simplicity, a layered-ness emerges that is often lost in the pace of everyday life.

A few years ago, I read *How to Do Nothing* (2019) by the American artist and writer Jenny Odell, in which she describes how doing nothing becomes an act of resistance in an attention economy that seeks to claim everything. She writes about how, after destabilizing events, she began sitting daily in a rose garden in her neighborhood, a place where she simply sat, looked, and breathed. That garden became a space of receptivity for her, outside the logic of efficiency.

The German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han also emphasizes in *Vita contemplativa* (2023) that inactivity is not emptiness, but its own form of intensity and attention; a mode of being present that our culture can barely recognize anymore.

In *This youiiyou*, I recognized that sense of stillness but soon noticed that something else was happening. Where Odell's rose garden remains quiet, a place where the world does not directly respond, De Pont became a space of reciprocity. The baby responds, I respond, the interpreters respond, the visitor responds. In that emptiness, response appears. In that quiet, sound arises.

What I first experienced as doing nothing, sitting, looking, breathing beside Sari, turned out not to be emptiness

at all, but a form of attention that makes room for expression. A receptivity that becomes relational. In the slowness of those Friday afternoons, something shifts—what seems still is full of life; what seems like nothing reveals itself as relation; what seems empty becomes expressive.

This youiiyou thus became not a pause, but an event; a place where presence turns into reciprocity, and where expression is not produced, but emerges.

Epilogue

On Sari's birth announcement card, above the message of her arrival, we wrote: 'Sing sing sing sing sing sing melodies'—a line from Alela Diane's 'Oh! My Mama,' a song that accompanied me throughout my pregnancy. We added a small slip of paper with a longer fragment from the song, a promise to give her melodies.

Through our participation in the artwork, she has been literally immersed in live melodies during the first months of her life. But in those months at De Pont, I also saw that melodies are not only given. They arise between us—in breathing, in attention, in an unexpected sound that presents itself; in a small movement in which relationality takes shape. Expression is not an individual creation, but something that forms within the space we hold together.

Perhaps this is what this period has shown me most as a researcher: that knowledge does not emerge from analy-



Sari's birth announcement card.

sis alone, but from presence; that theory only takes shape when it becomes embodied; when resonance, reciprocity, and jijki are not just concepts, but events.

Constructed situations such as *This youiiyou* make a space in which meaning is not produced but emerges tangible and palpable.

And that may be why some melodies have no ending—because they do not belong to either of us, but continue moving, somewhere in between.

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EVA SCHMETZ (b. 1985) graduated in 2007 from the Academie voor Theater at Fontys Academy of the Arts as a theatre maker and drama teacher and continued her training in 2008 at the Maggie Flanigan Acting Conservatory in New York. In 2022, she completed a Master's degree in Philosophy of Humanity and Culture at Tilburg University.

For a decade she worked as a freelance actor and discussion facilitator in youth theatre and in participatory settings where theatre is used to spark dialogue and explore how the world appears through different perspectives.

Since 2018, Eva has been a lecturer and researcher at Fontys Economie Tilburg, within the Trend Research & Concept Creation programme. Here, students learn to explore cultural and societal developments, practice creative and conceptual thinking, and develop future-oriented concepts grounded in human insights. Eva teaches creative thinking, concept development, and communication skills, and co-creates talk shows with students around their graduation research.

As a researcher, Eva is part of the Transforming the Economy research group, which explores new economic perspectives based on multiple value creation and is grounded in philosophy and action research. She is also a member of the Designing the Future research group, where they investigate the emotion of awe—examining how moments of expanded awareness can shift perspectives, support systems thinking, and inspire new forms of collective action within societal transitions. Her current research increasingly centers on feminist economics.

Seven Easy Steps for Museums to Liberate the Plantations that Funded Them

RENZO MARTENS

For over a decade, between the years 2000 and 2012, the Unilever Series in Tate Modern's chasmal Turbine Hall reigned as one of the most renowned and impactful contemporary art commission series. Its installation commissions were behind the success of some of the most significant artists of the period and positioned Unilever, an Anglo-Dutch conglomerate, as a darling of corporate sponsorship. At the very same time, Unilever's plantations, including those in the Democratic Republic of Congo, continued to produce raw materials for Unilever consumer goods while offering full-time wages of no more than \$30 per month. Those living on these plantations had no running water, no electricity, minimal healthcare, and child malnutrition was widespread. This sponsorship by a company that pays for progressive and inclusive contemporary art in the North, yet underpays laborers on plantations in the global South, was just one more recent example of a wider and lasting phenomenon: Many key European art museums have been, brick by brick, funded by profits extracted from plantations.

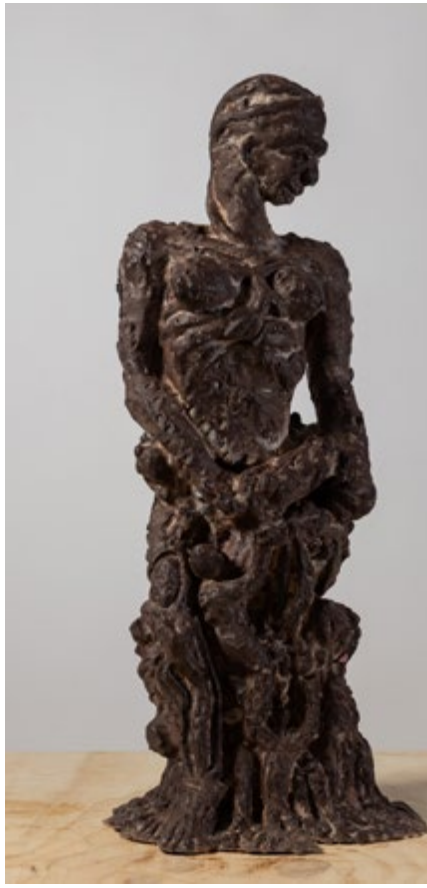
The toolkit, *'Seven Easy Steps for Museums to Help Liberate the Plantation that Funded Them,'* is an attempt to formalize and share possible tools created over many years of work and collaboration with the intention of not only shedding light on this unequal arrangement, but also of actively reversing it. In the decades in which Institutional Critique, social practice and so-called decolonization have increasingly been the subject of museum discourse, can the very museums that were funded by plantation labor also meaningfully engage with the communities that are still stuck in bonded labour on these plantations? Can museums take the calls for inclusivity

and diversity seriously enough to practice them on the very people that funded their creation? Can the communities that live and work on these plantations become equal partners and even steer the so-called decolonization efforts of museums?

The attempt to find out began in 2012, when I, founded Human Activities to take on the mantel and the authority and responsibility of a Western art institution. We set out to establish a 'reverse gentrification program' on a palm oil plantation in Boteka, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The gesture was both deliberate and precarious: to bring the symbolic and economic power of contemporary art into a place historically defined by extraction and reverse the dynamic. In other words, to devise a system through which art was not to extract visibility, capital and legitimacy from working class communities and concentrate them in urban centers for urban elites, but to devise a system through which these communities would regain visibility, capital and legitimacy. Yet the conditions that made such a project necessary also rendered it fragile. Within a year, the project was destroyed and expelled by force from the plantation by the London-based plantation company that had acquired the land from Unilever.

What followed was not an end, but a displacement. Together with friends and collaborators from Boteka, the project moved to Lusanga, another former Unilever plantation. Lusanga carries a longer and heavier history. It was here, in 1911, that Unilever established its very first plantation, after being granted vast tracts of land by the Belgian colonial administration. Lusanga was at the center of Unilever's vast plantation empire, and it was to Lusanga that forced laborers were sent through a system of subjugation that led to the last armed popular revolt against



PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

How My Grandfather Survived, *Ced'art Tamasala (CATPC)*, 2015-2022;

Seedbed, *Muyaka Kapasa and Ced'art Tamasala (CATPC)*, 2023;

Pende Vengeance, *Richard Leta (CATPC)*, 2021;

Mvuyu Libérateur, *Blaise Mandefu (CATPC)*, 2023;

Roots, *Irene Kanga (CATPC)*, 2023.

the Belgian colonial government before independence, the 'revolt of the Pende' in 1931. The structures of the plantation system continue to dominate daily life.

It was in Lusanga that a different form began to take shape. Human Activities worked alongside people from Boteka, Lusanga, and other regions in the DRC to support the founding of CATPC (Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise) a collective that would begin to reimagine the plantation not only as a site of extraction, but as a site of artistic and economic transformation.

Guided by the leadership of René Ngongo, CATPC's president, CATPC has been engaged in a sustained effort to reconnect with ancestral art practices while gradually reclaiming lands that were confiscated in 1911 by the British-Dutch multinational Unilever and its subsidiaries.

This process unfolds through a collective practice of art making and world building. Sculptures are shaped from the very soil of the plantation, carrying within them histories of dispossession, present conditions, and possible futures. These works circulate beyond Lusanga, exhibited and sold in international art contexts, allowing value to move in a direction that counters the extractive flows that once defined the plantation.

Through this practice, the members of CATPC have begun, parcel by parcel, to buy back the land that was once confiscated and on which they and their families nevertheless laboured. What was taken through colonial concession is slowly and collectively being returned through artistic production. In this way, the plantation is reconfigured, no longer solely as a site of extraction, but as a place of negotiation, memory, and reclaiming.

Ten years later, CATPC was invited to occupy the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. For the first time in the history of the Biennale, a community living and working on a former plantation, one that for over a century had helped fund European art institutions, represented itself and spoke in its own voice on an international stage.

At the opening, member Céd'art Tamasala emphasized that this participation had to begin with an act of respect toward the communities of plantation workers, past and present, whose labour had contributed to the wealth of Dutch art institutions, most notably in Suriname and Indonesia.

CATPC has worked hard to ensure that this work would not end with symbolic recognition that would be beneficial mostly to some selected invited artists and the visitors to the museum. When the collective was invited to exhibit at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, an institution which

is likewise funded by plantation economies, in this case in Sumatra, they set a condition. Before any exhibition could take place, they would need to seek permission from the communities still living and working on the plantations from which its wealth had been derived.

Members Mbuku Kimpala, Céd'art Tamasala, and Matthieu Kasiama, as well as I travelled to Indonesia to meet these communities still living and working on the plantations. CATPC asked for consent, not as a formality, but as a necessary reorientation of the relationship between institution and source community. I myself apologized for the fact that I had accepted many invitations to show my work at museums that have been funded by plantation labour, including the Van Abbemuseum, the Stedelijk Museum and Tate Modern, whereas the communities still living and working on the plantations had never been invited. In these encounters, a new set of questions began to emerge. What responsibilities do museums carry toward the histories that sustain them? What steps might they take, not only to acknowledge, but to actively contribute to the liberation of all plantations?

From these encounters, the outlines of a different institutional practice began to take shape. The conversations in Indonesia, as well as earlier engagements in Lusanga and elsewhere, gradually formed a set of insights, questions, and proposals.

In the process, CATPC and Human Activities together developed a toolkit, a set of principles and practices for reconfiguring the relationship between art institutions and the communities whose histories and labour underpin them. It is the result of years of direct engagement with museums built on plantation wealth, alongside ongoing dialogue with the communities still living and working within those same systems.

The toolkit is grounded in two forms of situated knowledge: On the one hand, the knowledge embedded within Western art institutions. On the other, the knowledge that emerges from the lived realities of survival and resistance in plantation contexts. We believe that a more equitable relationship is not only necessary for the communities from which value was historically extracted, but also for the institutions themselves. Museums, too, stand to gain from rethinking their position in relation to the worlds that enabled their existence.

The toolkit was first presented on 10 November 2025 at the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam by Matthieu Kasiama, Mbuku Kimpala, and Céd'art Tamasala of CATPC, in a closing keynote during HERE: Heritage Reflections. In early 2026, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, itself historically linked to plantation-derived wealth, informed CATPC that it would begin implementing the toolkit. Several other institutions have since indicated, albeit informally, that they may follow.



ABOVE: Images from the Venice Biennale exhibition.

The Toolkit

The profits extracted from plantation labour have long flowed into the foundations of major Western art institutions, including the Ludwig Museum, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Tate Britain, and the Van Abbemuseum, among many others. Yet initiatives aimed at ‘decolonizing’ museums, or even returning looted objects, have had relatively limited impact on the communities whose involuntary labour financed, and in some cases continues to sustain, these institutions.

In many instances, current approaches to decolonization, restitution, and repair remain centred on the institution itself. They reshape narratives, collections, and governance structures, but rarely address the material conditions of the communities from which value was extracted. As a result, museums continue to benefit from historical and ongoing systems of extraction, while plantation communities remain largely excluded from the institutions their labour helped bring into being.

It is within this context that CATPC and Human Activities developed what they refer to as a toolkit. Drawing on the perspectives of plantation worker communities as well as those of Western art institutions, the toolkit offers a framework through which museums can begin to rethink their origins, their responsibilities, and their possible futures.

Step 1: Identify the Debt

Research how plantation profits—past and present—funded your museum.

Map past and present funding streams, donations, endowments, and sponsorships tied to plantation profits. Quantify plantation worker communities’ investments in the museum.

Pitfalls: Treating the contributions of plantation worker communities as if they were confined to the past, rather than as part of an ongoing relationship that continues to inform the communities and the museum today.

Step 2: Publicize the Debt

Acknowledge publicly the contributions of plantation worker communities.

Educate audiences about the museum’s funding, as well as about present-day conditions on plantations.

Pitfalls: Hiding behind a lack of resources. Transparency and accountability do not require large budgets. A simple plaque acknowledging the contributions and present-day conditions of plantations costs little. Be aware that a plaque alone does not change the lives of the communities involved.

Step 3: Establish Contact

Reach out to plantation communities.

Reach out directly to communities that live and work on the plantations in question. Visit in person, if invited. Recognize and navigate imbalances of power, agency, and wealth, possibly with the help of trusted intermediaries.

Pitfall: Outsourcing ‘decolonization’ and repair to convenient partners who have already succeeded in navigating the art world and are amenable to the museum. This may create symbolic or reputational value for the museum but can undermine genuine engagement with the communities that live and work on the plantations that funded the museum.

Step 4: Enable Informed Agency

Inform the community of what your museum is: historically, artistically, financially.

For communities to engage meaningfully, they must understand both the museum’s origins and its current conditions, finances, and mission. Provide translation, legal advice, time, and resources. Only then, can the community make informed decisions about collaboration.

Pitfalls: When museums are seen through the eyes of those whose labor financed them, their meaning changes. This can be a disconcerting experience for museum personnel. Yet, ‘performing humility’ can also obscure present-day imbalances of access, power, and agency. Make sure that both sides understand the framework in which decisions are made.



CATPC during their visit to the Kopiisme community.
TOP LEFT: still from CATPC on one of the plantations that funded the Stedelijk Museum, 2024.
BOTTOM LEFT: White Cube in Lusanga under construction; **BOTTOM RIGHT:** depleted land in Lusanga after 100 years of Unilver mono culture plantations.

Step 5: Learn from Plantation Workers

Listen to the communities' priorities, demands, and visions.

Each community has its own forms of expression, spirituality, and knowledge that cannot be anticipated. Plantation worker communities have survived expropriation, ecological disaster, and authoritarian regimes. For many communities, simply staying alive and transmitting ancestral knowledge to future generations has been a profound creative act. Listening to these key investors in the museum may offer lessons in endurance, ecology, and care that can also help museums reconnect with their own local working-class communities.

Pitfalls: Curators may lack the knowledge to recognize the art and visions of plantation worker communities. Their aesthetic and curatorial frameworks can blind them to other systems of value and meaning.

Step 6: Co-design a Program

Co-design programs that enable the community to begin reaping the benefits of their investment.

Harness the museum's visibility, resources, and legitimacy to advance the community's agenda.

Pitfalls: Plantation worker communities may find limited value in the museum itself and instead prioritize the reclamation and restoration of their land. Make sure that the museum's structure serves the community's liberation.

Step 7: Formalize Collaboration if Desired and Exit When Asked

Institute joint decision-making and shared ownership of outcomes.

Collaboration can end, and the museum must step back, when the community declares they have achieved a meaningful and sufficient return on their investment.

Pitfalls: Treating this as a one-off project. Avoid exiting prematurely once the museum has gained symbolic or reputational capital. The liberation of the plantation and learning about the nature and future of the museum, will require sustained effort.

These seven steps foster concrete material, cultural, and ecological repair. By reconnecting with the communities who funded them, museums can help liberate the plantation and, in so doing, rediscover their own purpose. If museums once grew from plantation extraction, now they can learn from their liberation.

Postscript

The toolkit should be understood as part of a broader and ongoing effort. For Human Activities and CATPC, the aim is not only to establish pathways through which museums can reconnect with plantation communities, but also to reconsider their relationship to working-class communities more generally.

In the Netherlands, as in many other contexts, it is not only communities shaped by plantation economies that remain distant from the museum. Many communities do not visit museums, do not feel addressed by them, and do not experience these institutions as spaces in which their own forms of knowledge and cultural expression are welcome. The question of access is therefore not only geographic or historical, but also social and structural.

Within this context, the museum itself risks functioning as an extractive institution. It may draw resources, narratives, and cultural forms from working-class communities, both locally and internationally, and transform them into objects of display. In doing so, it can separate these forms from their original contexts and reframe them within a cultural language that primarily serves bourgeois audiences.

This dynamic does not only shape the material structures of museums, but also their modes of representation, their vocabularies, and the conditions under which cultural value is produced and recognized. The work of Human Activities and CATPC therefore seeks to move beyond inclusion as a matter of representation alone. It aims instead at a more fundamental reorientation, one in which the museum is brought back into relation with the communities from which it draws its meaning.

In this sense, the ambition is not only to produce different kinds of art, but to contribute to a different economy of art: an art practice that is redistributive rather than extractive, grounded not in exclusivity but in shared conditions, and oriented toward the possibility of shaping forms of life on the very ground from which they emerge.

Part of this wider endeavour takes a more concrete form in the development of a new 'white cube' in the countryside of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. Conceived as a space by and for communities, it seeks to connect the cultural articulation of rural contexts, both regionally and globally. Rather than reproducing the autonomy of the traditional exhibition space, this project explores how such a space might become embedded in the social and material realities from which it arises.



ABOVE: Images of the CATPC exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.



Dutch artist **RENZO MARTENS** (b. 1973) studied political science and art. His early films *Episode I* (2003) and *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008) probed the asymmetries of power between spectators and subjects of war and poverty in contemporary art and media. Of the many European art museums funded by profits extracted from plantations, he observed, none had ever reached out to the communities living and working on them today. In 2012, he founded the Institute for Human Activities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, on the first plantation erected by the behemoth Unilever corporation. There, Martens assumed the mantle of a European museum in order to realize a new world: not symbolically, but also in material terms. On this site, a 'white cube' was built, a quintessential modernist museum space, which was subsequently sentenced by a local Indigenous court and returned to the land.

Since its founding, the Congolese plantation worker art collective Cercle d'art des travailleurs de plantation congolaise (CATPC), has mounted the 'best show of the year' (New York Times, 2017) and represented the Netherlands at the 60th Venice Biennale (2024). CATPC uses its legitimacy and capital to purchase the territory once seized by Unilever and its subsidiaries to restore their sacred forest and to create a sustainable livelihood for the communities inhabiting the lands today. To date, CATPC has reclaimed and reforested 400 hectares of exhausted plantation land. CATPC is the first community of plantation workers ever to be listed in *ArtReview's* Power 100.

Mapping Impact, In4Art on E-missions

LIJA and RODOLFO GROENEWOUD VAN VLIET

The article ‘Mapping Impact’ was originally published in the spring of 2024 as part of the SUSTAIN research project. At the time, we explored the role of what we came to call ‘Spacemakers’: actors who create room for the transformative potential of art in contexts where the contribution of art is not self-evident. In4Art is one such Spacemaker. Jacco van Uden spoke with founders Lija and Rodolfo Groenewoud van Vliet about how we might make visible the ways in which art can act as a driver of change. Using a concrete In4Art project as a point of departure, the conversation explores whether it is possible to map the impact of art.

Our interview centres on *E-missions*, a project that provides insight into the sustainability of ‘digital life-styles’: what is the hidden ecological impact of our digital behaviour? *E-missions* reflects on the CO₂ emissions from activities such as emailing, online gaming, using blockchain, or streaming videos. The project was developed by In4Art, in collaboration with artist Leanne Wijnsma, creative developer Yoeran Luteijn, and scientist Jens Gröger.

Our discussion focuses on *E-missions*, a project shedding light on the environmental footprint of ‘digital life-

styles’: What is the hidden ecological impact of our digital behaviour? *E-missions* delves into the carbon footprint associated with activities like emailing, online gaming, engaging with blockchain, or streaming videos. This initiative is a collaborative effort by In4Art, artist Leanne Wijnsma, creative developer Yoeran Luteijn, and scientist Jens Gröger.

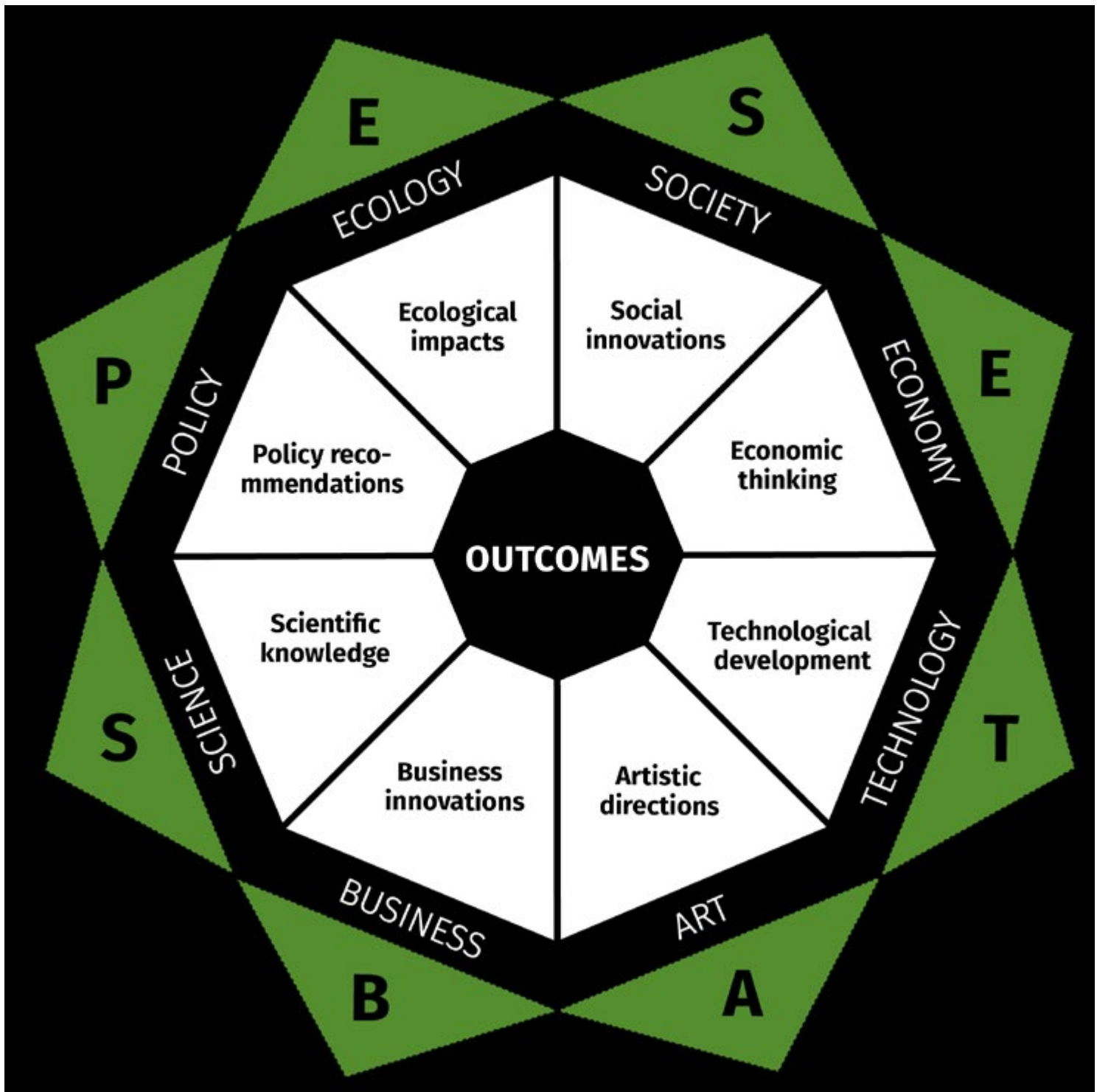
In In4Art’s initiatives, art serves as the catalyst. To more deeply understand the inherently open nature of artistic projects, Lija and Rodolfo developed the PESETABS model. This diffusion model is designed to evaluate the results of art-centric experiments within multidisciplinary collaborations and to spread awareness of their innovative contributions. PESETABS investigates the (potential) impact of projects by analysing their spill-over effects across eight distinct ‘overflow areas’: Policy, Ecology, Society, Economy, Technology, Art, Business, and Science¹.

Lija and Rodolfo employed the PESETABS model to create a comprehensive *E-missions* infographic. This endeavour aimed not only to delve into the particularities of this project but also to contemplate more broadly the concept of impact within In4Art. What qualifies as impact? How is impact manifested in tangible forms? Whom and what do you explicitly incorporate into this visualisation? As Spacemakers, where and in what ways do we contribute to achieving impact?

E-missions encompasses a variety of subprojects, each with a distinct aim. For example, the *Sensing CO₂ tasting experience* transforms carbon dioxide—an odourless, invisible gas—into a tangible taste sensation. It employs the fizziness of carbonated beverages, in which the CO₂ bubbles activate the tongue’s taste receptors, and the level of carbonation determines the strength of the sensation. A slight increase can shift the sensation from enjoyable to uncomfortable. Sensing CO₂ seeks to bridge the gap between abstract numerical data and personal

experience, merging scientific findings with the human senses to foster awareness. Additionally, the *Emissions.nl platform* empowers users to assess their digital footprint and provides advice on reducing it. Finally, the *Digital Etiquette tool* offers a framework for organisations, teams, or employee groups to discuss, establish, and implement a digital conduct code, enhancing their digital practices towards greater sustainability.

For further details, please visit: www.e-missions.nl/



The infographic documents the search for answers to a series of interconnected questions: Who engaged with the project, and in what roles? At what point did these stakeholders join, and in what specific ways did they contribute? Moreover, what tangible outcomes resulted from their involvement? Lija and Rodolfo chose to meticulously reconstruct the *E-missions* journey. They explored the project's archives in depth, engaged in thorough discus-

sions with each other, and consulted with stakeholders, including 'end users,' to gather insights into their experiences with the project.

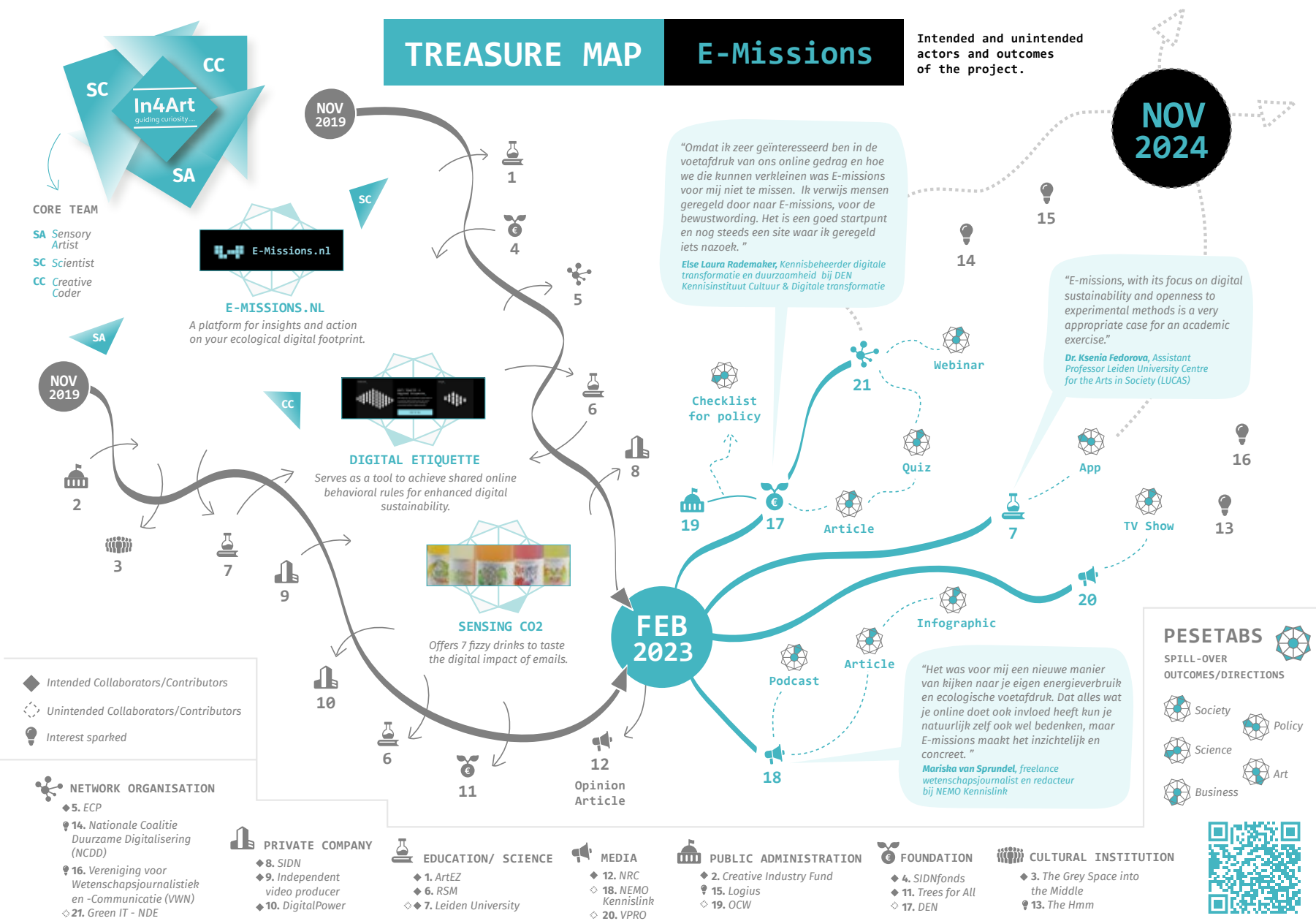
The reconstruction underscores that detail and the broader picture are often at odds when it comes to impact—dedicating time to honour a project's complexity inevitably requires including more elements in the overarching narrative, complicating the task of defining

the project's impact in clear-cut terms. Lija and Rodolfo discovered that impact is neither a tangible outcome nor a static product. Instead, impact represents a dynamic process that evolves and manifests in various ways across different settings. This insight leads to many questions: Which manifestations of impact are you aware of? How do you identify them? Furthermore, how much time should we 'allow' for a project to generate impact, and for how long can its effects be felt? These are all critical considerations that converge on a central question: What impact can we justifiably associate with *E-missions*?

Deciphering the exact sequence of events in *E-missions* posed challenges, yet engaging in discussions proved immensely valuable for Lija and Rodolfo. Did we possess

a unified understanding of the underlying reasons for the project's progression? Were we consistently pivotal actors throughout *E-missions'* evolution? Through the construction of the infographic and collaborative reflection on the interconnectedness of events, occurrences, and individuals, Lija and Rodolfo gradually attained deeper comprehension of the project's trajectory, the ramifications of *E-missions*, and the role In4Art played.

The infographic illustrates *E-missions'* journey to Dutch television (featured on an episode of VPRO's *De Dikke Data Show*²⁾, government platforms (as a policy checklist), and academic settings in universities and colleges. Rodolfo reflects, 'The reconstruction distinctly highlights the gradual evolution and maturation of



ideas before they find resonance in a particular context. At times, stakeholders require repeated exposure to a project—three, four, or even five instances—before taking action. Occasionally, it may initially be shelved, only to resurface later on.’

As you delve deeper into constructing the infographic, you begin to grasp, as Rodolfo puts it, ‘the serendipitous, winding path of ideas’ that often elude orchestration. Crafting an infographic prompts contemplation in terms of dotted lines—representing processes within the impact narrative that are documented with a hint of uncertainty: ‘a dotted line from a ministry to God knows who, who will then do God knows what with it.’

As we reconstruct the intricacies of *E-missions*, with a focus on how stakeholders from various PESETABS domains have engaged with the project, we uncover numerous insights that only become apparent in hindsight. Lija reflects, ‘The diverse effects of E-missions that we retrieved in 2023—those were completely unforeseeable at the project’s inception in 2019. Looking back reveals the nature of impact. Our aim has always been to generate spillover effects across different domains. The reconstruction visually illustrates how this unfolds. We carry this knowledge and experience forward into future projects. It helps us remain focused on our objectives and prompts us to consider who else could contribute to the process at different stages.’

During the reconstruction of the *E-missions* project, a specific moment emerged as pivotal. Lija explains, ‘Although we had a website online, its effectiveness depended on people being able to find it. That’s when we strategically decided to write an opinion piece about E-missions for the Dutch national newspaper *NRC*⁵, aiming to gain traction. This step was crucial, particularly for awareness projects like E-missions, where visibility is paramount.’

The publication of the opinion piece in February 2023 marked the beginning of a new phase in the project for In4Art, particularly in terms of impact. Rodolfo explains: ‘It was a deliberate choice. You could say that everything before the piece was planned and organised by us. We wrote the opinion piece hoping to steer the project in a new direction. We weren’t sure exactly what it would trigger, but we hoped it would spark change. We didn’t have any follow-up actions planned. I can’t say for certain if the subsequent developments in the project were directly caused by the opinion piece, but they certainly wouldn’t have happened without it.’

And looking to the future? Rodolfo reflects, ‘We know that with *E-missions*, many seeds have been planted. What we don’t know is what will happen next. There are many parties saying, “I want to do something with this project, but I don’t know exactly what yet.”’ This burgeoning interest in the project raises the question of what In4Art envisions for the future. Rodolfo elaborates, ‘We’re currently discussing this. What’s the trajectory for *E-missions*? Is it fizzling out, or are we on the verge of a new wave? Do

we have a role to play in a potential new chapter of the *E-missions* story?’

By literally mapping out various stakeholders in different roles within the infographic (termed as ‘contributors’ or ‘collaborators’ in In4Art’s lexicon), a scenario unfolds wherein stakeholders continue to advance the project independently, with or without In4Art’s involvement.

Lija: We remain receptive to parties interested in bolstering the mission underlying *E-missions* or even incorporating it into their own initiatives. That’s why everything was developed as open source, enabling others to take it up.

Rodolfo: We are no longer at the forefront. There are now various ideas circulating in the world that are starting to gain traction. At times, In4Art still provides guidance in an advisory capacity, while at other times we are merely acknowledged and cited. Occasionally, we discover that we were the primary source without even realising it. In practice, *E-missions* is no longer exclusively ours.

Lija: The fact that multiple parties are now engaging with the project in their own ways indicates that we have made progress on the impact ladder. *E-missions* was initiated because there was insufficient discussion about the sustainability of digital lifestyles. We succeeded in raising awareness. Artist Leanne Wijnsma is now receiving invitations to speak about Sensing CO₂, even from businesses. That’s really gratifying. If our work resonates with other organisations, then the project has achieved its goal, making *E-missions* a success for us.

Rodolfo: In the end, it’s about nurturing a variety of ideas and releasing them into the world. We lost control and that’s a good thing.

POSTSCRIPTUM

by Lija and Rodolfo, April 2026

Constructing the infographic for this article proved to be a methodological discovery in its own right. What began as a retrospective exercise, the act of retracing the steps of *E-missions*, gradually revealed itself to be something closer to outcome harvesting: an attempt to identify not what was planned, but what had actually grown. Worthwhile as a process in itself, we have come to call this kind of reconstruction a ‘Treasure Map’: a living chart of the collaborators, contributors, and pathways through which an art-driven innovation project continues to travel and cause impact long after its formal completion. In contrast to the conventional post-mortem, which presupposes a fixed endpoint, this process had no natural closure. Projects oriented towards systemic change rarely do. The

core idea of *E-missions* is very much alive; new stakeholders are still collecting the threads we have laid down years ago. The map itself is a snapshot, making the ongoing life of impact projects like *E-missions* visible.

That visibility, in turn, revealed an outcome we had not foreseen. During the development of *E-missions*, a shift was already shimmering on the horizon. The growing role of artificial intelligence in the digital landscape was already visible, though still accessible to relatively few. When large language models became widely available to the general public, the terrain shifted considerably. Where *E-missions* asked what lies hidden beneath our digital behaviour, the same question now demanded to be asked of AI. Wanting to understand it before commenting on it, we found ourselves asking what AI actually is. That discovery led us to identify six distinct species of artificial intelligence, each with their own logic, implications, and impact. The resulting book, *Samenleven met AI* (co-living with AI), published in November 2025, was not planned as a successor to *E-missions*; it emerged from the same reflective habit. Meanwhile, broader societal movements, like a national coalition for sustainable digitalisation, and companies now offering services in digital sustainability, have taken shape around precisely the terrain the *E-missions* project had first made tangible and experienceable. None of this was foreseen. All of it, in hindsight, keeps growing from the seed that *E-missions* continues to be.

Endnotes

¹ The complete white paper of PESETABS: <https://www.in4art.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Pesetabs-in4art-whitepaper-january-2023.pdf>

² https://www.zapp.nl/programmas/de-dikke-data-show/gemist/VPWON_1350398

³ <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2023/02/28/denk-na-voor-je-op-post-share-of-like-klikt-a4158268>



LIJA and RODOLFO GROENEWOUD VAN VLIET are the co-founders of In4Art, an independent R&D organisation pioneering art-driven innovation since 2015. Together they developed the Art-Driven Innovation methodology, which helps channel artistic experiments and insights into green and care transitions, finding paths to progress that lead to responsible innovation. Lija leads creative direction, research and talent development, while Rodolfo brings a background in international business development and innovation management, focusing on partnerships, investment portfolios, and strategic advisory across industry, public institutions, and policy. Together they have guided over fifty experimental projects at the intersection of digital technologies, food systems, and materials research across Europe, and co-authored *Co-living with AI*, exploring six distinct species of artificial intelligence.

The Meaning of Invisible Impact: Not Measurable, Infinite Value

MARJOLIJN ZWAKMAN

‘You have a lot of energy, don’t you?’ my father asked me. He was lying in his hospital bed in the final phase of his life. It was enough for him, he longed for death, was 88 years old and decided to stop eating and drinking.

‘Yes, I do have energy,’ I answered. I was surprised. During his life he never used a word like ‘energy.’ He was married to my mother, a jewelry designer and artist, but his own background was in the navy—‘the best time of my life’—and afterwards a train engineer—‘wonderful, alone in the cockpit, no hassle with other people.’

A word like ‘energy’ or ‘energetic sensitivity’ did not fit into his vocabulary.

Now he was lying there. Even thinner than he had always been (185cm, 65 kilos). Vulnerable. Calm. Gentle. Quiet.

‘Can’t you give me some of your energy?’ he asked me. ‘If you have enough anyway?’

Internally I had to laugh. Is this really happening? What is dad actually saying? But it was not the moment to start a witty discussion about it.

1. Energetic Dance

‘Yes, I can give you some,’ I said. I walked to his bed and we had a beautiful experience together. I gently moved his fragile feet, his thin hands; stroked the skin of his head and then took some distance. Just above his body, I held my hands. I felt the space between my hands and his body becoming warmer.

I am a visual thinker. I saw a golden glow, a kind of network of golden threads over his body that gradually filled the room.

Then it was enough. I took a step back. ‘Yes, thank you, something like that, yes,’ he said.

Two days later he passed away, with a gentle smile around his lips.

The impact of what happened was not visible to the eye or measurable. Between my father’s body and my body a warmth emerged. The separation between me as ‘impact maker’ and my father as ‘impact receiver’ disappeared. In place of that separation something emerged in the space between us.

This moment that I shared with my father represents a way of being together that I also want to cultivate in the artistic exploration spaces that I create as an artist. There is room for pre-verbal knowledge; there is room for energy that can flow between people. In these spaces, something can emerge that is not immediately visible or explainable. It does not follow a clear line from action to result and cannot easily be captured in words. Precisely there, in that in-between space, something shifts. Another way of relating becomes possible; another way of sensing what is at stake.



The dance I performed during the funeral of my father, Pieter Zwakman, on August 10, 2024.

2. *Impact as Mystery*

Freeing Impact from Its Tight Jacket

As an artist-researcher I am affiliated with the professorship Change Management of The Hague University of Applied Sciences where I work on questions around innovation in organizations. Together with professionals, I explore recognizable organizational issues (for example, ‘How to deal with uncertainty?’) in an artistic way. With performances and experiential installations, I address other layers than the mental field of cause and effect. The idea: precisely in the shared experience of a performance something new can reveal itself in relation to the issue. But then the fluorescent lights come on, we return to work and the question is: How does what happened in the performance continue to work in everyday practice? What is the impact and how do we measure it?

Practice-oriented researchers are expected to realize demonstrable impact on societal issues with their work. Impact is often reduced to what is measurable: numbers, reach, visibility. Working in organizations, I recognize the need to make impact visible. And I understand that desire. We want our work to matter. At the same time, discomfort is growing among researchers and artists about this reduction. It narrows what we can perceive. What can be counted becomes central, but how do we speak about impact that cannot be captured in numbers?

Some problems can be clearly delineated and solved. But many issues are complex, ambiguous and relational in nature; so-called wicked problems—complex challenges without unambiguous solutions in which different values, interests and forms of knowledge come together (Rittel & Webber, 1973). They require not only optimization, but the emergence of new ways of thinking and acting. In that context, impact is not only technical or policy-driven, but also cultural, emotional and imaginative.



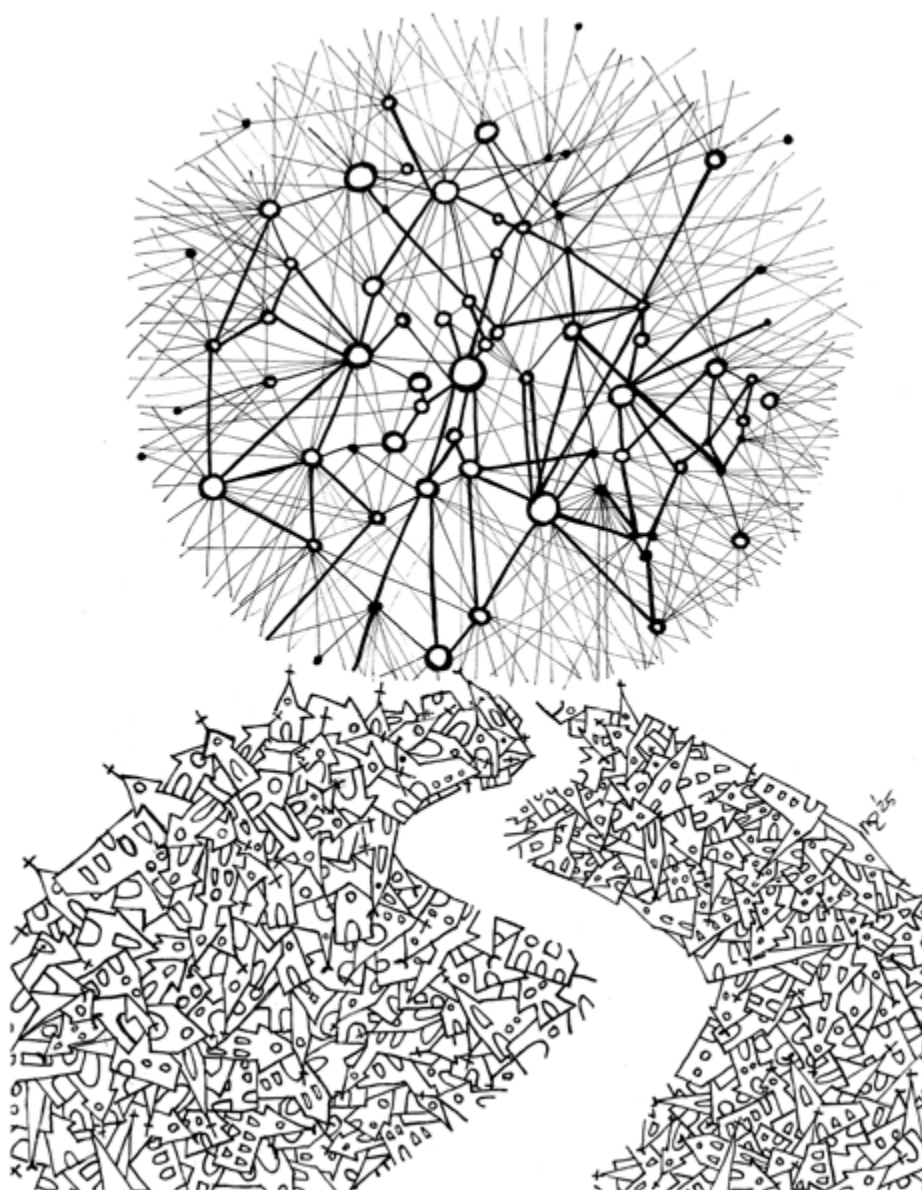
Impact as Mystery. Video stills from the video I developed for the Impact Event on January 28, 2026. The imagery was created in collaboration with artist Annemiek Vera.

3. *Scaling Deep*

In my work, I create—through performances, installations and shared experiences—situations in which something can emerge that is not fully predetermined. Something that moves between people, that lingers, that returns in unexpected ways. This work moves between making and reflection, between experience and interpretation, and tries to stay as close as possible to how impact arises in practice. These are the kinds of shifts that are also needed in transitions. Not only changes in systems or structures, but changes in how we perceive, relate to each other and create meaning. Subtle movements, often barely notice-

able, but with the potential for something else to emerge. What happens is often relational, distributed, sometimes quiet, sometimes intense, and not always immediately recognizable, let alone measurable.

To truly be able to change, we also need the imagination of artists and researchers, makers, thinkers and dreamers who open up other futures. But how do we relate to the workings of such processes? And what language helps us to speak about them? To deepen this further I spoke with professors in higher professional education: What dilemmas do they experience in ‘measuring’ ‘immeasurable’ impact?

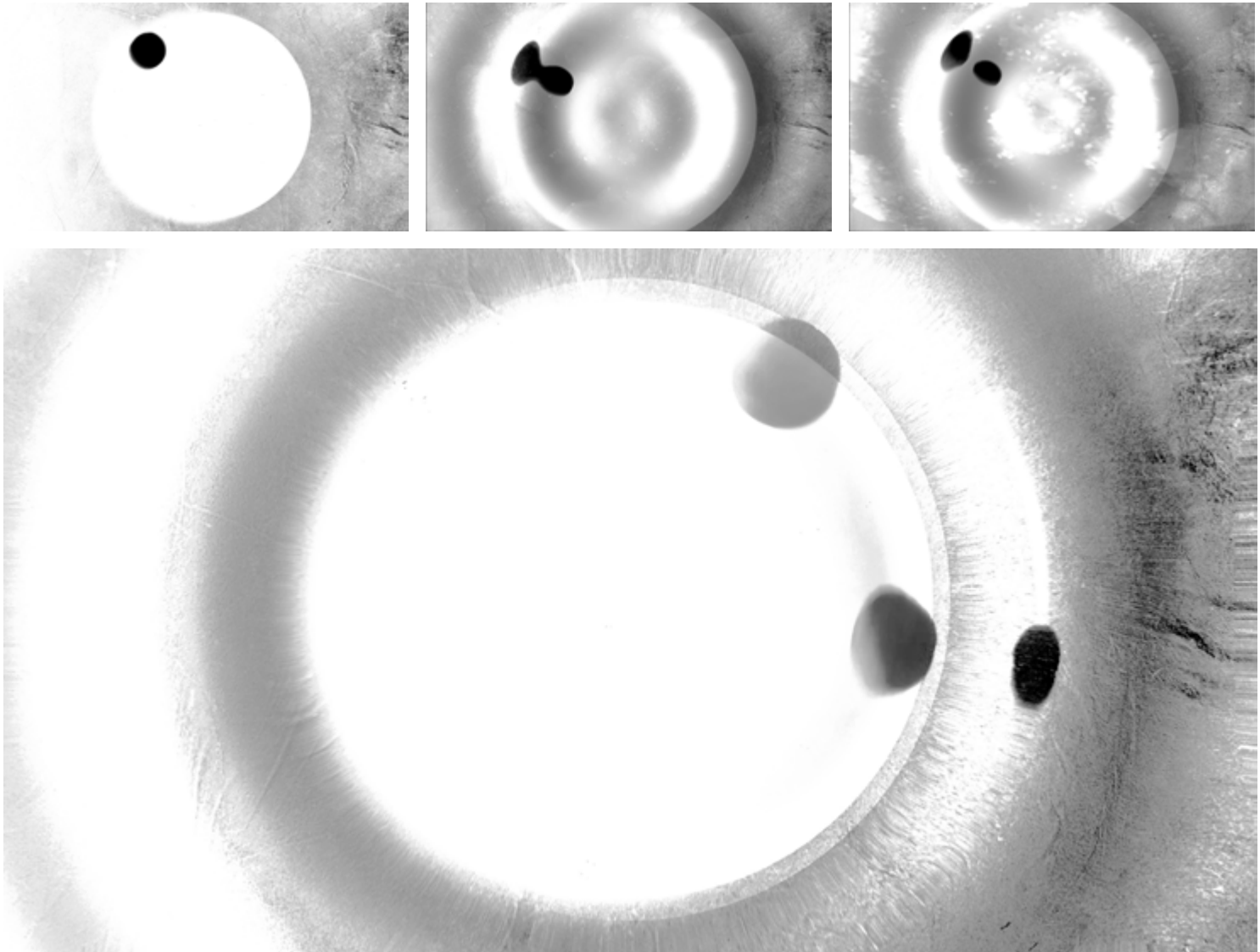


Scaling Deep. A drawing I made in 2025 titled Established Dogmas: How do you let go of established dogmas to make space for the energy that wants to flow between people?

4. *Impact as a Cloud of Meaning*

Professor ‘Impact as response-ability’ Theo Niessen expressed concern that the concepts ‘impact’ and ‘societal challenge’ solidify into nouns. In reality, according to him, they refer to a dynamic in which people affect and influence each other. Impact is then more like a ‘cloud of meaning’ that comes into being in a meandering way (Zwakman, M. 2025). The researcher is not the solution designer but a process facilitator, co-discoverer and enabler.

In my art practice I indeed create ‘spaces’ in organizations in which such a cloud of meaning can arise. I work in a combination of preparation, a design for an intervention, and then I let go of the outcome. I call that a space in which an autonomous process can emerge. Impact is not an end goal we have to achieve, but an autonomous flow that we must make space for. I start the projects I do by creating the ‘content’ myself from form; by dancing, experimenting with objects and video. This happens from intuition, without already having a conclusion about what the form means for me (or the other). What follows in sharing this work is a conversation, still without conclusion. ‘The other’ is needed to give the work meaning.



Impact as a Cloud of Meaning. Video stills from the video I developed for the Impact Event on January 28, 2026. The imagery was created in collaboration with artist Annemiek Vera.

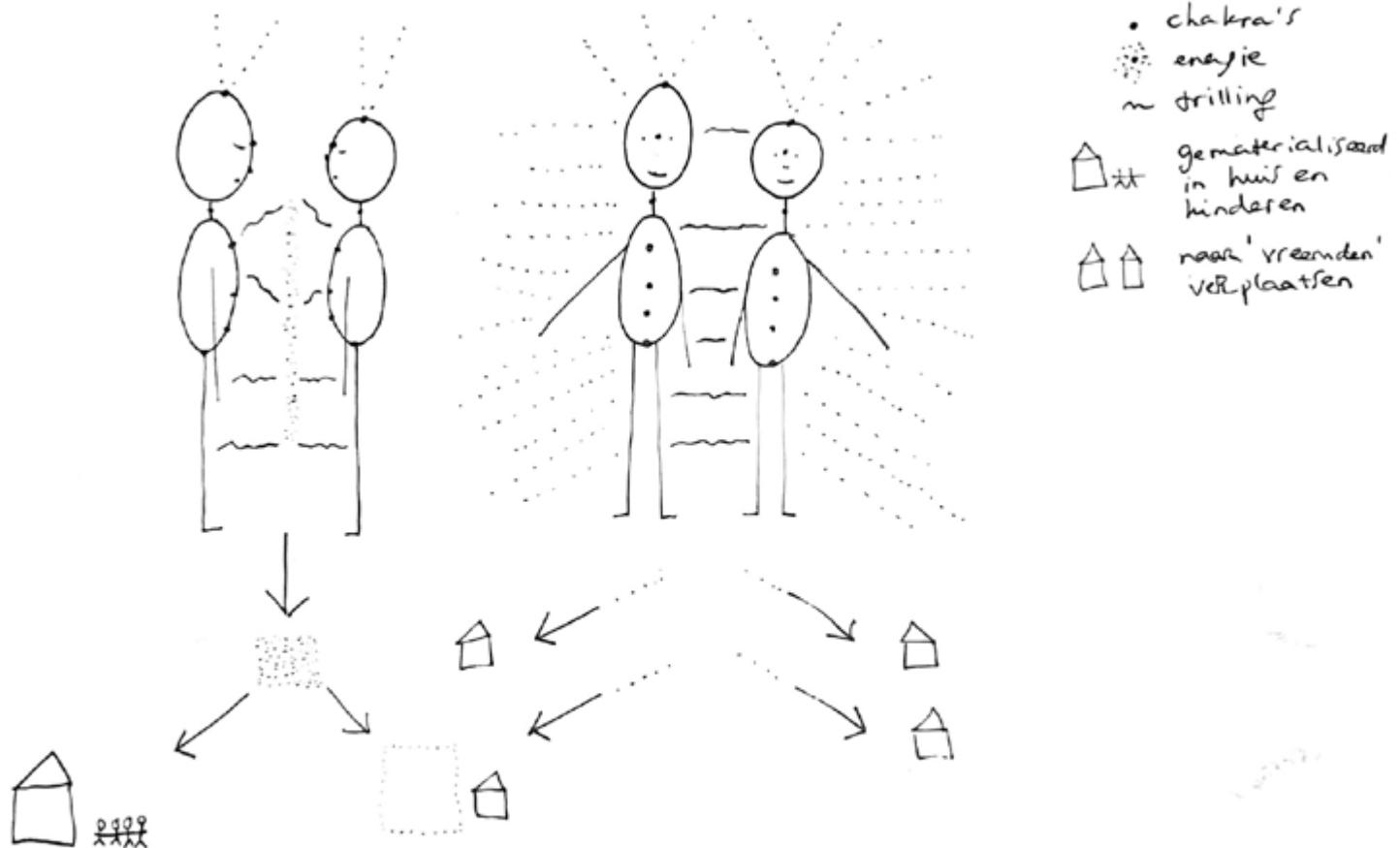
5. Life Force Energy

Impact: Exchange Between Maker and Receiver

Professor 'Change Management' Jacco van Uden (The Hague University of Applied Sciences) pointed out that when impact is viewed mainly through a controlling lens, essential information disappears. Impact depends on the receiver; the separation between 'maker' and 'receiver' is artificial (Zwakman, M. 2025). In my own work, I indeed experience impact as a shared field in which everyone takes something different with them. In the example of the interaction with my father at his deathbed, while I experienced a network of 'golden threads' that taught me something about energy, he may have mainly experienced a deep calm and attention. The artistic forms I use open a state of being in which exchange and insight can arise, without those experiences having to be unambiguous. The audience becomes participant.

It is precisely this ambiguity—in which different meanings may exist alongside each other—that clashes with contexts such as higher professional education, where decision-making often requires clarity and unambiguity. Then the misconception can arise that these are individual, separate experiences though it is precisely these inner processes and individual experiences that form the breeding ground for broader change.

What if impact is not a 'thing' that you make or transfer, but something that arises in the encounter, something that moves through us in (inter)action? In that perspective, impact shifts from measurable result to a relational and experiential process. That requires a view of humanity in which not only the mental and rational count, but also the sensory, emotional and perhaps even the spiritual. In this way, space arises to not only measure or explain impact, but also to experience it, live through it and collectively interpret it.



Life Force Energy. A drawing I made in 2013 titled Life Force Energy. Chakras, energy, and vibration can be materialized into a house and children; you can also direct this energy toward 'strangers,' into projects.

6. Impact Event Embodied Research

Impact: Meaning-making Afterwards

Professor 'Art Culture and Transitions' (HZ University of Applied Sciences) Godelieve Spaas points out that we have placed scientific knowledge above other forms of knowing. While forms of knowing such as experiential knowledge and spiritual knowledge are also essential but cannot be reduced to causality (Zwakman, M. 2025) it requires something new from us not to see this cause-effect thinking as the only way to give 'direction.' It seems appealing: 'I do this, and then that happens; I take responsibility.' And the sharpness of our mind is also very helpful. But perhaps we need to give our linear thinking, which helps us to create overview and interpret a situation, a different place. Not so dominant at the start of a process, as a condition to begin, but occasionally in between, and at the end. If we have taken the time to

let a process take its own course (autonomous process), and we have been able to learn from the shared experience, then we derive new meaning and direction from it.

In this way, the various professors and I came together with a group of about 100 people for an 'Impact event' in a theater in The Hague. Based on the interviews I conducted with them, we explored four aspects of impact, both physically and in collaboration with the professors themselves as well as the artists and researchers. Not only by talking about impact, but precisely by letting thoughts and dilemmas around impact flow through us, feeling them and experiencing them. For this I used the principles of experiential learning and reflection that I learned at the Werkplaats Muzisch Onderzoek (Musework, 2014):

- first experience/expression
- later interpretation, analysis or formulation of questions
- 1 Impact as Responsibility of the Researcher earning as subsequent meaning-making



Impact Event Embodied Research. Photographic documentation of live Impact performances by various professors, artists, and researchers during the Impact Event on January 28, 2026. Photography by Sophie Blommers.

7. *Impact Event Embodied Lecture*

Scaling Deep, the Invisible Impact that Makes Change Possible

To see meaning-making as a way of learning and also to see the value of invisible impact, I find the work of Tatiana Fraser on Scaling deep (Fraser, 2023; Moore et al., 2015) very helpful. She describes this as anchoring change by transforming culture, values and relationships. Whereas

scaling up and scaling out focus on growth and dissemination, scaling deep goes to the cultural roots of change.

- In my work I see that this deep impact takes place in relational and emotional processes that are difficult to capture, but essential for transformation. It is about creating conditions for change. Practices of scaling deep focus on collective learning, connection and healing. They shift the focus from solving to meaning-making, from accelerating to slowing down, from control to relationship.



Impact Event Embodied Lecture. Photographic documentation of my embodied lecture: What if 'impact' is not a 'thing,' but something that wants to flow through us, in interaction? Impact Event on January 28, 2026. Photography by Sophie Blommers.

- **Collective learning** shifts the focus from measurable indicators to shared meaning-making. It brings together diverse perspectives to see what becomes visible as a whole and supports collaboration across differences, appreciation of multiple forms of knowing and wise action in an iterative process.
- **Connection** focuses on restoring relationships—between head and body, human and earth, and between people themselves. These practices slow down the pace, create space for the relational domain and promote somatic and relational attunement.
- **Healing** shifts the idea that problems must be ‘solved.’ Instead, they can be seen as signals of systemic imbalance, inviting awareness, restoration of relationships and the re-finding of balance.
- Perhaps that is what my father showed me in his final days—that impact is not something you possess, produce or transfer, but something that arises in the quality of presence. In that silent moment between us nothing was measured, nothing proven, and yet exactly what mattered happened. If we dare to approach impact in this way, as a shared, relational and often invisible process, space may arise to truly touch what makes change possible.

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MARJOLIJN ZWAKMAN is a multidisciplinary artist with a background in theatre (BA, Toneelacademie Maastricht), visual arts (MA, Sandberg Institute, Gerrit Rietveld Academie), and music theatre (MA, Royal Conservatoire The Hague, cum laude). She develops interactive performances, video installations, and workshops in which she collaborates with co-learning partners to create temporary spaces where the rules and protocols of the system are set aside.

Within these encounters, she explores the tensions and possibilities that emerge, and what can be learned when we put our assumptions at stake. Since 2013, she has used her artistic practice to open up space within social and organizational transitions, in collaboration with other artists. She is affiliated as a researcher with the Research Group Change Management at The Hague University of Applied Sciences.

When I Pronounce the Word Silence

JULIA MULLIÉ

My parents sometimes took me to cultural events, something I didn't always enjoy as a child. When I was around eight years old, I was taken to an event where Jan Wolkers (1925-2007), a prominent Dutch writer, artist, and advocate for environmental conservation and animal rights, was present. During one of the breaks, I struck up a conversation with him, and it made a deep impression on me. We talked about our love for animals and the special bond one can have with a pet. He shared a story about his cat that had come to lie on his lap to die. I think it was the first time I spoke to someone who had a similar 'intuitive understanding' of the importance and power of relationships between people and animals, an awareness of how animals affect our sense of self, our memories, and our behavior.

What stayed with me from that encounter was not only the story itself, but a certain way of sensing the world, one in which relationships between humans and animals, memory and presence, are deeply intertwined. The same can be achieved through art: sensing, understanding, and relating through memory, perception, and the subtle interplay between human and more-than-human worlds.

What follows is an exploration of how identity, meaning, and reality emerge within a field of relations, always partial, shifting, and in the making. In this way, the text can be read as a gesture itself, one not offering resolution, but participating in an ongoing process of attunement, interpretation, and re-signification.

Seen from this perspective, the encounter I describe is not merely anecdotal, but a point of departure. It introduces a sensibility that resonates throughout Rodrigo Hernández's work, in which figures, memories, and materials continuously reappear, dissolve, and transform.

His recent exhibition—*Conchita* (2024, CarrerasMugica, Bilbao)—evoked a similarly tender, precarious, and loving relationship between people, animals, and memories. The exhibition took its title from the name of Rodrigo's grandmother and means 'little shell.' At the same time, it refers to 'conception' and is

thus a typical Catholic woman's name. Looking at photographs of Rodrigo's grandmother as a three-year-old girl and a young woman, you wouldn't imagine her life would be tragic.

To escape the Civil War, Conchita was taken by boat from a place near Bilbao in Spain to Mexico with other small children. For the exhibition, Rodrigo gathered all the pieces of information that he could find about his grandmother's life. She, Rodrigo himself, and a wolf—an important figure in the iconography of Bilbao—are the exhibition's three protagonists in the exhibition. They reappear in various configurations as bronze sculptures: scattered across the floor or held in place by stands that keep them in specific positions as distorted bodies. The sculptures play with abstraction versus figuration, where the images become symbols for certain ideas. The wolf, Rodrigo, and the shell all represent their own complex stories. Rodrigo's exhibitions, and particularly *Conchita*, remind me of the literary genre of autofiction, blending autobiography and historical fiction. The passage of time is portrayed as both a source of melancholy and a force that erodes certainty, making the past increasingly difficult to grasp.

The image representing the artist himself, as seen in *Conchita*, recurs frequently in Rodrigo's work. Sometimes the artist makes a direct appearance, as in Bilbao, but perhaps even more often his presence is quite subtle. I immediately think of the small oil paintings on panel and papier-mâché works that Rodrigo made around 2018. They are often surrealistic, enigmatic landscapes in which a solitary figure emerges. His silhouette floats in a starry sky, or his profile appears from the colorful papier-mâché. Only after encountering the solitary, anonymous figure more frequently in various works did I begin to wonder to what extent they were self-portraits. Like authors of autofiction, Rodrigo frequently delves into the complexities of identity, self-perception, and the process of self-construction. The 'autofiction method' allows him to explore his inner life and personal history while also playing with narrative techniques and fictional constructs, inviting the viewer to engage with these complex questions.



Conchita (Iorea), Rodrigo Hernández, 2024.

This oscillation between presence and absence, between self-construction and dissolution, extends beyond the visual language of Hernández's work. It resonates with literary explorations of identity as something that must be pieced together from fragments, rather than assumed as given.

Since some figures reappear across different series, all of Rodrigo's works and exhibitions are interconnected. For his exhibition *I Am Nothing* (2016, Heidelberger Kunstverein), Rodrigo used a previously created sculpture of a figure as the starting point. He created the other works in response to this piece, 'as satellites floating around it,' in his own words. In this way, the works were not developed around a narrative but around a figure, allowing for entirely intuitive connections to emerge. Rodrigo says, 'The connections feel in place, so you don't have to think about them too much. A sculpture is a third person creating a story.' The exhibition's title, *I Am Nothing*, was borrowed from Patrick Modiano (1945), a French novelist renowned for his exploration of memory, identity, and the impact of history on individual lives. Modiano's novel *Missing Person* (originally *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, 1978) opens with the sentence 'I am nothing,' which deeply resonates with Rodrigo. The artist strongly admires and appreciates Modiano's novels, which delve into the puzzle of identity and of trying to track evidence of existence through traces of the past. In *Missing Person* we follow Guy Roland, a private detective who suffers from amnesia and is struggling to piece together his lost identity. Roland's journey begins when he starts to investigate his own past after finding a mysterious letter addressed to him. He gradually uncovers fragments of his life, tracing back to his family, his work, and his relationships, while also delving into the historical and personal events that have shaped him. The protagonist receives boxes filled with all kinds of memories from various people, including photographs. On the backs of the photographs are the names of the people in those photos. When reading this passage, I am immediately reminded of the photos of Rodrigo's grandmother, which tell a similar kind of fragmentary 'truth.'

The organic emergence of coherence aligns with the way Rodrigo titles his works: all the pieces in an exhibition are given the title of the exhibition followed by a number, similar to the tracks on an album. Like a musician, Rodrigo considers how one piece on an album relates to another. It is a unique organizing principle: although exhibitions may not appear to be related, there is a certain continuity. The somewhat old-fashioned concept of the album provides a framework in a time when there are more EPs than albums being produced: due to fragmentation, a discography is lost. This inclination toward order and the paradoxical desire for a grip on the world is likely one of the reasons for Rodrigo's fascination with early modern science.

Premodern theories encompass a wide range of ideas and beliefs that shaped the understanding of the world and were deeply intertwined with religion, tradition, and the



Figure 1 / Мо заика, Rodrigo Hernández, 2013/2016.

natural world. 'We think these theories have been tested and proven wrong, but there might be ways of seeing the world that are forgotten in the current world,' Rodrigo says. While we may believe we have advanced significantly, we might have overlooked important insights. The shift from medieval to early modern thinking involved a move toward reason, individualism, and empirical investigation, leading to many of the intellectual and cultural foundations that continue to influence contemporary thought. By researching the origins of certain theories and inventions, Rodrigo unravels ideas that once played a role but were later (perhaps unjustly) dismissed as insignificant. Although his work shows a deep interest in natural sciences and technological developments, it is far from technological. The artist does not use the latest techniques but rather traditional media to create his work. The various materials and techniques he employs result in a diverse range of works, including bronze sculptures, hand-hammered brass panels, papier-mâché sculptures, murals, and oil on wood paintings.

Although Rodrigo's works always possess a sculptural quality, they are consistently connected to painting. A few years ago, he told me: 'I wanted to paint but also wanted to create something instead of just using a white plane. When you start a painting, you start on a surface; there is a new world impregnated in this. Some people call a painting 'a window onto another world.' I wanted to influence the shape of that window*.' The papier-mâché works are probably the most exemplary of this approach. Take his exhibition *Dampclood* (2020, Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam), where he presented nine papier-mâché sculptures on a big pedestal in the center of the gallery space. Although the shapes are organic, they retain a kind of angularity due to his technique, which emphasizes their handmade quality, but does not hinder their fluid forms. The colorful patterns and the interplay between positive and negative shapes create a coherence among the works, achieving a kind of equilibrium. This attention to form is never merely formal. It points toward a deeper inquiry into how perception itself is shaped, and how the act of seeing is entangled with the structures of thought.

Rodrigo often plays with so-called oppositions and the paradox of observation. Take the well-known example of a flowing river that is always the same yet always different. The artist is fascinated by these kinds of 'mind problems' and studies them in the context of Zen philosophy. In Zen, 'mind problems' are understood as obstacles created by the mind that hinder direct and complete experience of reality. Zen practice focuses on identifying and transcending these barriers to achieve a state of pure awareness. The

goal is to dissolve these 'mind problems' and uncover one's true nature, which lies beyond dualistic thinking. This attempt to move beyond the structures of thought also touches upon the limits of language itself which reminds me of the poem 'The Three Oddest Words' by Wisława Szymborska (1923-2012):

*When I pronounce the word Future,
the first syllable already belongs to the past.*

*When I pronounce the word Silence,
I destroy it.*

*When I pronounce the word Nothing,
I make something no non-being can hold.*

The poem, with all its contradictions, reflects a similar understanding of the complexities of existence and touches upon the temporary and elusive in a way that resonates with Rodrigo's practice.

This sense of the temporary and elusiveness is not only articulated through language, but also inscribed in matter itself. Transformation here is not a movement from one state to another, but a continuous shifting of form and meaning, unfolding across language, perception, and material.

Take, for example, his hand-hammered metal reliefs in which figures and backgrounds interlock. They remind me of the carved and eroded reliefs in Petra. Located in southern Jordan, Petra was the capital of the Nabataean Kingdom from the fourth century BCE to the second century CE. I visited the elaborate rock-cut architecture and reliefs in 2019. As the wind blows sand across the reliefs, they are slowly but surely eroding and thus disappearing. The figures in the reliefs seem to merge into the background. It also reminds me of a passage from Modiano's *Missing Person*, where 'the beach man' is described. He is a man who has been coming to the beach for forty years and must therefore appear in thousands of vacation photos taken by strangers. I often wonder how many photos of others I might unintentionally or unconsciously appear in. It is a strange kind of temporary presence in someone's life that vanishes quickly, while the photo remains. As a person, both in a photo and beyond, you continually merge into other people's backgrounds.

Rodrigo's hammered reliefs were part of his recent exhibition *with what eyes?* (Wattis Institute, San Francisco, 2023-24). In various works, monkeys are depicted closely examining each other or items in their hands. In one scene, two abandoned figures sit opposite each other. They look into each other's eyes but also seem to be staring off into the distance, as if they are not aware of the presence of another being right in front of them. Another monkey studies an object it holds in its hand, up close. The monkeys also remind me of the figures that sometimes seem to function as self-portraits. This thought naturally raises the questions: With what eyes? How do the figures in the reliefs view each other and the world? And how do I view these monkeys? Do they also look at me? These questions bring

* *Conversation with Rodrigo, April 2021.*



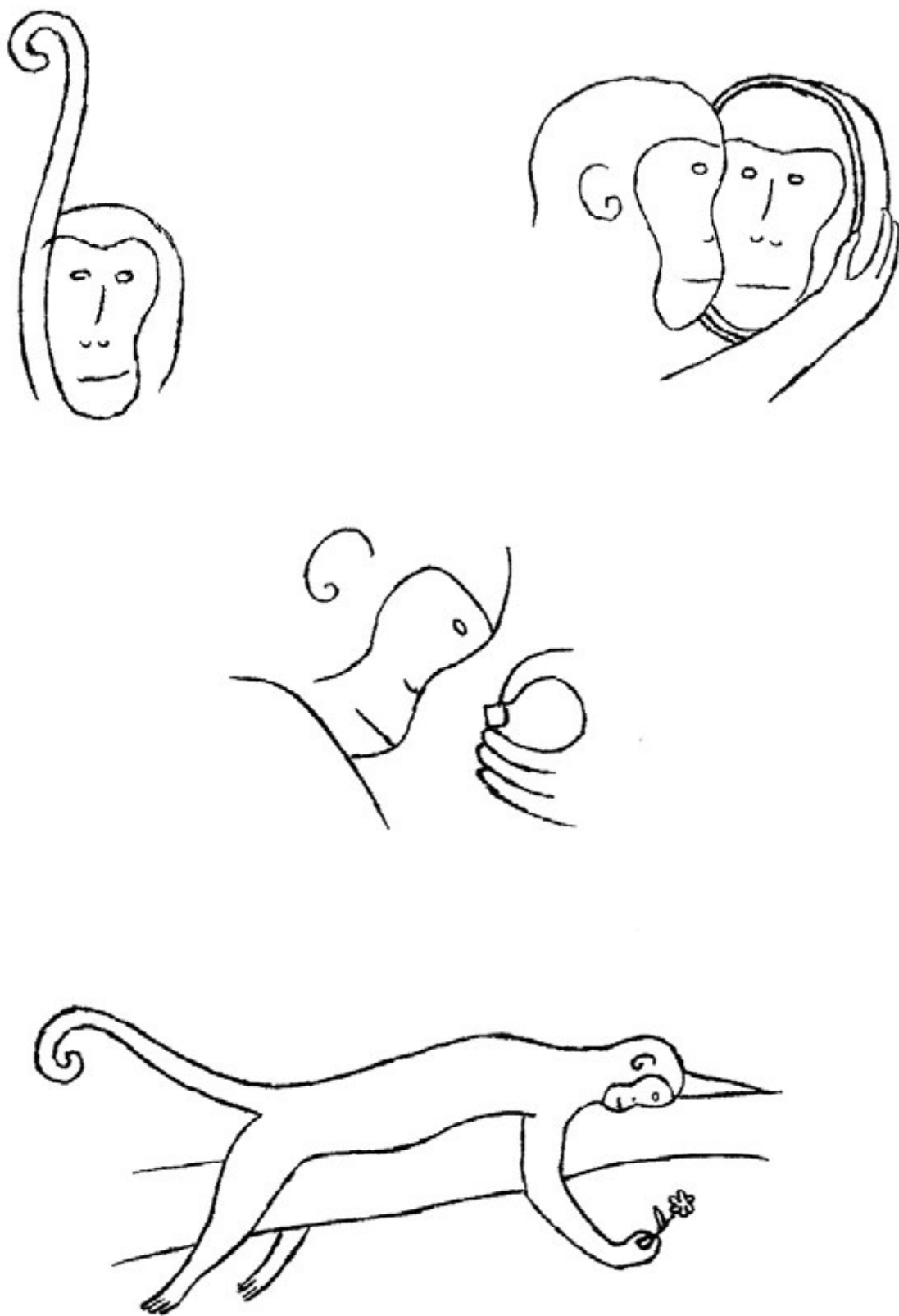
with what eyes #9, *Rodrigo Hernández*, 2023.

me to Rodrigo's fascination for Zen koans. Like Zen koans, his reliefs encourage deep contemplation by providing a dialectical method for addressing existential questions.

In a material sense as well, Rodrigo frequently employs oppositions. In this regard, the process of bronze casting serves as a fitting metaphor. The lost-wax technique involves creating a model (positive), which is then melted away after adding a mould (negative). The mould can then be used to pour in the bronze (positive). The bronze essentially serves as a memory of the model. The poetic tenderness and presentation of Rodrigo's bronze figure in the aforementioned exhibition *Conchita*, are reminiscent of Constantin Brâncuși's *Sleeping Muse* (1910). While Rodrigo's head rests on two little gloves, a nod to art handling and the careful treatment of delicate objects/subjects, Brâncuși's head is ideally exhibited on a pillow. He is said to have even suggested that the ideal presentation would be in the lap of a person. Jan Wolkers' cat probably thought the same.

To see, then, is never a neutral act, but a way of entering into relation, where figures, memories, and meanings continuously shift, dissolve, and reappear. What emerges here is not a conclusion, but an ongoing movement of transformation, unfolding through association rather than resolution.

This movement continues in the text that follows. What connects David Peña-Guzmán's contribution to Rodrigo Hernández's work is not a shared subject, but a shared form of attention. Both inhabit a world in which beings take shape through relations, perception, and time. In Rodrigo's work, figures emerge, dissolve, and reappear across materials and narratives, never fully graspable, always in transformation. In David's writing, a world unfolds through the perspective of an animal, where experience, memory, and relation are sensed from within, opening up a more-than-human field of perception.



with what eyes?, *Rodrigo Hernández*, 2023.

In both, meaning arises through proximity, through being with rather than looking at. Thought is shaped through relation, not distance, by staying with what changes and attending to what emerges in between.

There is nothing remarkable about my human. As far as humans go, she strikes me as impossibly average in practically every regard (not that I am an authority on the matter of human measurement). Her body is neither big nor small, the movements of her limbs fall neatly between fast and slow, and her character isn't bold enough to be exciting or shy enough to be eccentric. She embodies everything conveyed by the word 'conventional.'

The only interesting thing about her is that she, and she alone, is the creature that the universe, by whatever cosmic calculus, selected to be my companion in this life. This alone makes her, in my eyes if not in anybody else's, a veritable miracle. An absolutely uninteresting miracle perhaps, but a miracle nonetheless. My miracle. When I am alone and surrender to rumination, which I do often, I think of her not only as my personal miracle, but also as the world's only conventional one. An absurd idea, I am aware, but one that brings me immense joy, almost as much as bounding through fields kissed by the scents of vanilla, rose, and linalool.

Miracle or not, this human and I share a world. In fact, we've been sharing one ever since I can remember. There is nothing I feel or think that doesn't have a trace, however vague and miniscule, of her in it: of that orotund voice that echoes whenever she calls my name; of that sympathetic face, with its wrinkled skin, puny lips, and sunken but fiery eyes; and, of course, of those reassuring hands that have soothed me to sleep more times than I care to remember. This human is part of me. Her form imbues mine like veins of crystallized mineral running through ancestral rock. Even my most recondite memories are embossed with features of the space I share with her, this two-storey Victorian near the top of a hill, with squeaky hardwood floors, high ceilings, and light ecru walls.

David Peña-Guzmán

This is a revised version of a text that was originally published in *Rodrigo Hernández: With What Eyes?* published by BOM DIA BOA TARDE BOA NOITE, Berlin, and CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 2025.

This book on the work of Rodrigo Hernández followed his solo exhibition at CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco. An important point of departure for this exhibition was the book *When Animals Dream: The Hidden World of Animal Consciousness*, by Dr. David Peña-Guzmán, associate professor at San Francisco State University.

David is a philosopher whose interests bring him into close dialogue with science. His book opened up so many avenues that, even after Rodrigo's exhibition, we felt there was still more to explore. And so Rodrigo and I decided to create the book from which the above text is drawn. Of course we invited David to contribute to the publication as well, given his compelling book *When Animals Dream*. We never expected him to propose writing fiction—his first attempt at it. That was not only a great honor, but also made perfect sense in this context. The fragment of his text marks the beginning of David's contribution.



Art historian **JULIA MULLIÉ** is an independent researcher and PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. Her practice focuses on developing exhibitions and publications through research-driven and interdisciplinary approaches. She regularly edits and contributes to exhibition catalogues and artist publications. Her work explores archival research, artistic methodologies, and new ways of presenting art historical scholarship through curatorial and editorial formats, bringing together historical research and contemporary art.

Art and Society

JEFF DUNNE



Modern western society has a rather curious relationship with art. On the one hand, we crave it. According to an article* by the Russell Collection, people spent over \$50B in 2024 purchasing art. While certainly some of that is a matter of financial investing, that we value the world's art resources at over half a trillion dollars today is an unequivocal statement: we value art very highly. And these numbers are based on a relatively modest definition of art. When you consider that the entertainment industry is essentially an arts production machine, or that art (in so many dimensions) is the backbone of the marketing and advertising worlds, these numbers would skyrocket.

This is not surprising, for beauty has been one of the most powerful motivators throughout human history, and it appears in so many dimensions that we often do not even think about it when we see the word 'art' on the page. There's a reason we often describe exquisite athletic performance as 'pure artistry,' that mathematicians fall in love with the field because of the beauty they see in the principles and equations.

And yet...

While art remains a part of the curriculum in most public schools, the richness of those offering continues to fade, and art programs are often on the front lines of budget cut agendas. With the exception of the elite (e.g. famous musicians or sports figures), artists are typically at the lower end of compensation scales and often facing the greatest job insecurity. When we hire the legal or technical services, it often doesn't even occur to us to negotiate for a lower price, but the usual artist experience is quite different.

I have an atypical perspective in this, having formal education as an engineer and a physicist, but also nearly fifty years of experience in a wide variety of artistic endeavors. I've been paid as a playwright, screenwriter, actor, novelist, and an avant-garde turnip choreographer. Okay, maybe not that last one, but you get my point; I am a little further along the road of professional artist than someone who just doodles in the margins of their chemistry notebook. When people ask me what I do, I choose amongst the different possible answers and have studied the responses I get—in expressions, levels of respect, degrees of being taken seriously, and the paths of follow-up conversation. People tend to find the nuclear physicist Jeff to be intimidating and brilliant, while the songwriter Jeff is considered a cognitive lightweight by comparison, and more likely to get an 'aww, that's so cute, maybe you can play a song for us later but now I'm going to find someone more interesting to talk to.' As you can imagine, the meta-physical philosopher Jeff... well, never mind that.

We respect artists... differently. And as a result, artists respect themselves... differently. We artists are desperate for validation and respect, and frequently find ourselves feeling the need to defend our choice to embrace artistry in a significant way, as if art was something you do when you are not capable of doing something more 'productive.' When I commenced upon the playwright journey, I was astonished to discover the degree to which the community simultaneously devalues itself and gets angry at others for devaluing them. At the amateur-to semi-professional level, we rail against theatres that charge us to have our work considered by them (yes, many theatres still charge reading fees), but many playwrights still pay. We agree to allow theatres to use scripts for free, often because we are artistically 'starving' to have our words heard by an audience somewhere (the 'no royalties but great exposure' payment method), and unwilling to admit to ourselves that doing so dilutes the perceived value of our work. And of course, we also do all the things that humans do in every profession—tearing each other down in hopes that one fewer playwright in the mix will increase the odds that our own scripts will find a stage.

* <https://russell-collection.com/art-statistics/>

Why do artists do this? What is it about society that has brought us to this point, where we will pay enormous sums of money for the things that we are told represent ‘great art,’ yet are hesitant to pay for other things that we find pleasing or inspiring? How did it come to pass that we (pardon the upcoming U.S.-centric example) think it is okay to build a modern Los Angeles of cost-efficient skyscrapers, and then lament that we must travel to Europe to enjoy cities with charm, warmth, and character? We want art, even need art, but are unwilling to put in the time and effort to incorporate it in what we do.

The price we pay for this is steeper than generally appreciated, although we’ll return to that later. For the moment, let’s explore some potential reasons for this unfortunate, even misguided, prioritization of how we live in modern society.

The first and most obvious reason is that we are in a rush. Most people are taught to measure success based on the quantity of our accomplishments rather than their quality. Second, we are unendingly—almost pathologically—distracted. Unless we are on vacation, studying grand architecture in that canonical European city, we do not take the time to truly appreciate the fine details around us. And if nobody is going to notice the artistry we put into creating something, even/especially a simple thing like this essay (‘Is that exactly the right word? Should I use parentheses or em-dashes?’), we tell ourselves it doesn’t matter, that it is not worth the time to make it as good as we possibly can. And this shines a light on an unfortunate undercurrent of the state of society: our motivations are misplaced. While perhaps impossible to prove, I suspect our societal attitude towards art would be much healthier if we thought first about whether we will feel pride in our own achievements, and only later ask if others will like them too.

That latter question, ‘will others like this?’, further highlights an important issue when it comes to art. We don’t all like the same things. Example... When I completed my first full-length play, I submitted it to the Baltimore Playwrights Festival, who does their evaluation by having three independent reviewers provide feedback on each script. Here, in highly abridged form, is the feedback I received:

- Reviewer 1: This is brilliant, and absolutely needs to be produced!
- Reviewer 2: This is brilliant, and absolutely needs to be produced!
- Reviewer 3: This is the worst piece of garbage I have ever read. Do not try to fix it, just throw it away and move on.

Art is about resonance, and different people resonate with different things. There is no objective metric by which we may objectively conclude what is good or bad. I personally cannot stand the art of Picasso; the work doesn’t speak to me and I would prefer to look at the walls behind them than the paintings themselves. Sorry, Pablo.

Nothing personal. But I really like the scenes by Thomas Kinkade (yeah, I know that puts me in ‘a category’) and I adore any and all pictures drawn by children. As with all of us, I like some music and have a distaste for other genres (even ones that are historically quite popular).

Perhaps the problem our society faces in this respect is a matter of *expectations*, i.e. the expectation that a piece of art will have some objective sense of quality, that everyone will have some measure of appreciation—or at least understanding—of the banana taped to a wall. But here we must recognize two important facets of the overall issue: 1) art is not about the piece unto itself, but rather emergent from the relationship between the artwork and the observer, and 2) what constitutes a work of art cannot be objectively defined. Is there anything in reality that could not be a work of art, at least to someone? For issue #1, all we can really say is that recognizing the role of the observer in the expression of art would be worth emphasizing... in school, at home, in life, etc.

For the latter, this raises perhaps the most critical question. What is art? We can adopt a ‘particle / reductionist’ perspective—i.e. a thing X is either a work of art or not a work of art—but a potentially more interesting and useful angle is to consider the nature of art and artistic expression in the human experience. In this respect, we can think of art as a *language* and works of art as expressions made using that language. Considered this way, the determination of ‘X is/isn’t art’ becomes more obviously dependent on the observer. Just as symbols in an unknown language do not carry their intended meaning and can potentially be interpreted as noise instead of signal (something that happens more than we realize in the context of non-spoken, and especially non-human, language), what was intended as art does not land as such; and sometimes things that were not intended as art end up becoming so.

Languages are curious things. Every language is custom designed (generally in an evolutionary sense) for its use. Workaday spoken language is optimized to fit culture, and typically to permit the socially-appropriate degree of ambiguity—enough to enable efficient exchange of functionally useful ideas, yet not so much to make misunderstanding overly burdensome (although miscommunication remains a significant and ubiquitous problem). The language of mathematics, in contrast, is extremely precise; it brooks very little ambiguity, but at the cost of greater complex (in some respects) and a significantly more limited scope of discourse.

If we place spoken languages in the middle of the spectrum with mathematics at the extreme of precision, art sits at the opposite end. It is a language of emotion, of the unspoken, the unspeakable, the fundamentally subjective; it’s a language optimized for the expression of feelings, of concepts that are subjective to the point of being so dependent upon mood that we could not even tie down a specific, static interpretation. As with the assessment of my first play, it’s a language where ambiguity and uncertainty are essential to the message. Was the play fantastic or complete garbage? It depends on who is reading it, the mood they’re in, their current needs, and so many other factors.

This is particularly important because language does not simply reflect our culture, needs, and focus. *It shapes how we think.* We gravitate to ideas and interpretations based on what language tells us is reasonable to say. Or not. Anyone who has tried to have a conversation regarding the possibility that time is not a fundamental property of the universe knows that language can snare us into ways of thinking in the most subtle ways.

For this reason, art is not simply an expression of our inner feelings, nor a mere reflection of our culture. It is an informing, self-reinforcing *catalyst* acting at the subconscious level that shapes the character of our cultures and influences the way we think, feel, and understand the world. So when we consider our relationship with art, what does it say that we simultaneously crave and undervalue art and artists? What are the implications that, within the course of a given day, we invest more attention on balancing budgets than seeking, recognizing, and appreciating beauty?

The consequences are not difficult to predict. Simply consider what happens when we reduce our focus on anything: we become less capable. Stop exercising, we get weak and inflexible. Stop problem-solving, we lose the ability to reason effectively. Stop loving, we become numb to the love of others. When it comes to art, the pattern is likely to be the same.

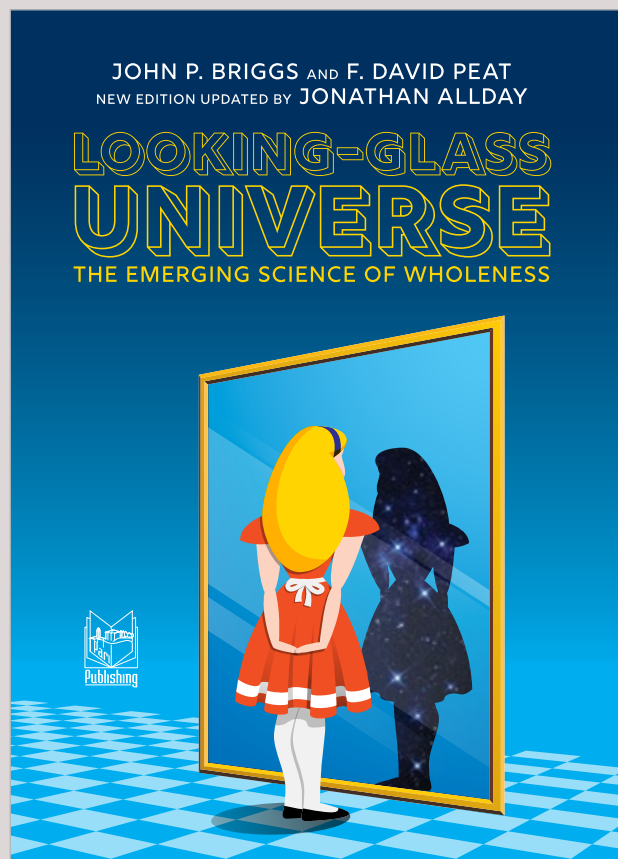
A society that views art as incidental, as an unpredictable gift rather than a trainable skill, is a society that loses the ability to discern different forms of beauty. It ceases to be able to recognize art unless it's thrust into our faces, confusing magnitude for quality until we only recognize beauty when an 'authority' labels it as such: *this* is art (and *that* is not). We see it happening already, of course, and in some areas—notably body image—to an extent that is causing real and often extreme psychological (and physiological) harm.

For some people, this atrophy manifests as a mechanism of self-limitation, of self-censorship. When we view art as 'something professionals do,' we convince ourselves that our own efforts are insufficient to move or inspire others. The opposite side of this coin (highlighted in our feeling that we should not have to pay artists) is no better: that art is a joke, or that all art is equivalent because we cannot objectively measure goodness. We see an example of this in the millions of books that are self-published every year by 'authors' who never take the time to hone their writing skills or even employ an editor. This has resulted in a curious shift in the publishing industry, one that looks positive on the surface, but is insidiously not at depth. Once we would only see the best books because authors had to convince publishers that their work had merit. The publishers controlled the industry by asserting their own definitions of 'good.' Now anyone can publish, but the market is so overly saturated that a book only rises to the top when it is heavily marketed. In other words, we exchanged a clear control by big publishers to hidden control by the same publishers. Despite the appearance of independence, we are still being told what represents a great novel.

So how do we take back control? Step one comes from recognizing what art truly is, why it matters, and why ***it is not optional***. Art is training for arguably some of the most important skills for being a successful human: creativity, imagination, and fluency with the subjective matters that are the heart and soul of what it means to be alive. We need these skills if we are to be more than machines. Step two is that we must build fluency with beauty, with what makes us beautiful, and with what allows us to recognize the beauty in others (human and non-human alike). And the third and final step: we must reforge society around those principles, diminishing the lure of efficiency and profit so those things that truly provide satisfaction in life can shine through.



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