

Putting Art into ARTS

Exploring the Role of Art in Sustainability Transitions

This Transition Read summarizes the reflections and lessons learned from an experimental exercise that sought to connect researchers to local transition initiatives using art and the creative process as a bridge. Transition Reads are published as part of the ARTS project, an EU-funded research project which aims to benefit theory, policy and practice related to accelerating sustainability transitions.

Stop someone on the street. Start chatting about climate mitigation or resilience or simply make a few general points about the need to quickly address climate change, and observe this: their head nods in affirmation, they might say a few words about the need for change, and then their eyes start to glaze over. It is a problem that political leaders, environmental activists and researchers struggle with constantly. “We already know the answers to solve problems with sustainability; our answers are just not getting through,” said Dr. Leen Gorissen, the Transition Research Coordinator at VITO in Belgium.

But researchers aren't the only ones with the answers. Citizen-led sustainability transition initiatives are happening at every level throughout Europe and there is a vast store of knowledge to share with the research community. How can we create better connections between local transition initiatives and researchers? How can we broaden their networks and help them find “unusual suspects”? Together, how can researchers and local transition initiatives to connect different types of knowledge and inspire more people to find and support sustainable solutions?

“Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.”

- Banksy

Seeding a Question: Is Art the Answer?

Artistic expression has value on the way processes of change are being captured and understood. Art and the creative process have their unique roles in the way emotions, social tensions, symbols and stereotypes have been imprinted throughout history. Art is a way to express, imprint and impress, and engage hearts and imaginations about the present and the future. We think that the more hearts and minds we can touch, the more positive change we will see.

So we asked ourselves: How can we connect researchers and local transition initiatives so that they can better engage with the hearts and the minds of people in cities where these transformation processes are happening and *can we do it with art and the creative process?*

We had an idea - a little seed of an idea. What if we collaborated with the arts and culture community and used the creative process as a vehicle for engagement? What if we directly

worked with people who think, process information, and express themselves differently from ourselves? We thought that it would not only create opportunities to share information about sustainability with a more diverse audience, but that the process itself might also reveal different approaches, methods and responses to sustainability issues. It might reveal things we never thought to look for. It might improve our understanding, knowledge and interactions with people living in the ARTS regions. It might inspire us.

We had the fortunate opportunity to plant our seed idea with the three-year, EU-funded ARTS project. Don't be confused: The ARTS (Accelerating and Rescaling Transitions to Sustainability) project isn't about art. Rather, it is a project that brings together researchers, artists, and practitioners to study the role and impact of transition initiatives in cities. The ARTS objective is to look at the conditions around local sustainability transition initiatives and work with them to accelerate the change necessary for sustainable, low-carbon societies. Specifically, the project studies transition initiatives and their interactions with one another in five European city-regions:

- *Brighton, United Kingdom*
- *Budapest, Hungary*
- *Dresden, Germany*
- *Genk, Belgium*
- *Stockholm, Sweden*

Since we were interested in exploring how art could fit into ARTS, we introduced an exercise that asked the project's researchers to push beyond their typical professional networks and comfort zones. We provided a little bit of seed money (1000€) and asked them to engage with their local arts and culture scene to host a local arts competition.

One Plant, Many Colourful Blooms

The art competition concept was open to interpretation; the project researchers had flexibility to do what worked best in each city and were simply directed to produce "something tangible" in the end. The intent of the exercise was not only about producing art, but to also create opportunities for the researchers and the arts community that may not have been available to them before: to broaden professional networks; to deeply engage with people whose thought processes and perspectives may be radically different than their own; and to test unconventional research and dissemination methods. We wanted to see how art and the creative process could be used as a way to discuss sustainability with a broader audience. After three short months of work, we found that the "something tangible" from each exercise was as different as the cities themselves.

In Dresden, the Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development (IÖR) teamed up with an established arts and sustainability initiative, Sukuma Arts, and a local Transition Towns initiative, Dresden im Wandel, to host a film competition about Dresden's transition initiatives ("Stories of Change"). The winner of the film competition was given the opportunity to professionally produce their film with technical and creative assistance from Sukuma Arts.

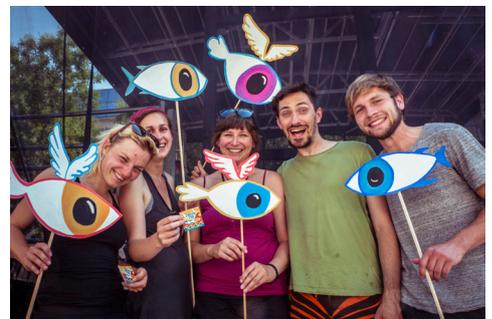
In Brighton, the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU), Sussex University team, collaborated with a relatively new arts initiative and gallery space, ONCA – Centre for Arts and Ecology, to produce an audio installation that was intended to acknowledge the great work done by local initiatives and offer them an opportunity to promote their success as they reflected on their work from the future ("Voicemails from the Future"). They also hosted two visioning workshops, to create space for people to talk about art and sustainability. The participants were provoked by the idea of issues led creativity, asking whether art can be better when one engages with environmental, ecological, and resource-relationship questions.

The Stockholm Resilience Centre (SRC) team used the opportunity to initiate a long-term partnership between transition researchers, local transition initiatives and artists with a strong interest in sustainable development. The artist dialogue process invited five regionally-active artists to participate in all project events over a six month period, including joint reflection sessions and co-creation seminars. The main outcomes were the cross-fertilization of competences, the identified joint interests and challenges, and the opportunity to weave the creative process into the project.

Budapest ARTS partners teamed up with organizers from the SUSCO Central European Conference on Sustainable Development to host an art competition and traveling exhibition that addressed future visions of a sustainable Budapest.

The Flemish Institute for Technological Research (VITO) team in collaboration with the City of Genk worked with the city's Cultural Department, and children and teachers at both the Art Academy and the Music Academy, to produce a short movie documenting the children's visioning exercise for a new, united "Genk Art and Music Academy of the Future." The film's soundtrack was composed and performed by students of the Music Academy.

Stories of Change, Dresden



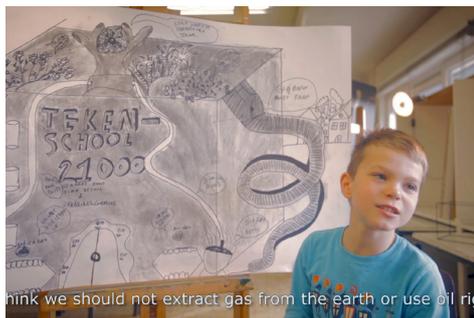
FUTUREROOTS spoken work installation and creative workshops in Brighton, UK



Interactive process workshop in Stockholm, Sweden



Scenes from the Genk "Academy of the Future" film, Belgium



Reflection

Now that the exercise is over, we asked the ARTS partners to reflect on their experiences with it. We were interested in hearing about their experiences, but we also wanted to know how the idea could be improved, scaled up and what could be done differently next time. We wanted to know:

- *Is there value in reaching out to arts and culture groups and using the creative process as an engagement and dissemination tool for research?*
- *How did the exercise inspire you?*
- *Was there more engagement? Were new audiences reached?*
- *What lessons can be shared forward to other researchers and transition initiatives who are interested in playing with this idea?*

This exercise undoubtedly pushed both project researchers and arts and culture initiatives out of their comfort zones... in a good way. Despite some minor frustration along the way, everyone agreed that they found the exercise to be a valuable experience and that they learned a lot from the process. Every project team considered their project successful and worth the time and energy spent to execute it.

"I now have a much higher awareness of what artists and researchers can do together and how it can be translated for the general public," said Dr. Markus Egermann, the lead ARTS researcher from IÖR in Dresden. "It was a good reminder that there are a lot of different ways to do things," said Dr. Jake Barnes, a researcher at SPRU. "I have always wanted to do something like this, so it was a great opportunity to try something different," said Dr. Leen Gorissen. "This has expanded my idea of what competences are needed in research and co-creative knowledge generation," said Dr. Sara Borgström at the Stockholm Resilience Centre.

The partners said that they will either continue to cultivate the professional connections they made during the exercise and that the researchers would now consider the arts community as a legitimate and interesting vehicle for future research collaboration and dissemination. In fact, in Stockholm, researchers have already started collaborating with artists to bring a different approach to engagement processes, pairing tools like expressive movement, visual arts, spoken word and improvisation with flip charts and sticky notes for deeper engagement.

"For my next projects, I will look for good ideas or chances to collaborate with arts and culture organizations. I am better aware of what we can do with artists and would like to continue with that and discover more," said Dr. Egermann. Others said that this exercise provided a good model for giving space for research proposals to be out of the box and engage in a lot of dialogs, which are key ingredients for innovation and break-through research. "In order to seriously collaborate with the artist community, there is a need to include artists at an early stage to co-design research projects together," said Dr. Borgström.

Since everyone generally agreed that the art-as-engagement idea has value, we can take a closer look at some of the big take-aways and lessons learned, and ask ourselves how we can continue to move ideas and relationships forward.

"In order to seriously collaborate with the artist community, there is a need to include artists at an early stage to co-design research projects together."

- Dr. Sara Borgström

Sustenance

It's impossible to talk about the lessons learned from this exercise without first talking about money. It was the number one issue for all partners and highlighted some bigger social issues about worth and traditionally undervalued professions.

"[1000€] is insulting!" said Persephone Pearl, who works with ONCA – Centre for Arts and Ecology. It is insulting to both artists, whose work is habitually undervalued, and to transition initiatives, where burnout and attrition are constant challenges because they rely primarily on volunteer labor. The feeling was the same in Stockholm. The magic moment for researchers happened over lunch one day when a Stockholm artist kindly explained why 1000€ was insulting. The conversation inspired the research team to re-frame the scope of the project and start a dialogue to carefully listen and learn about what artists needed for the process to be valuable for them beyond monetary compensation.

Dresden was very fortunate to find partner initiatives and arts organizations who were willing to meet more than halfway (with both money and time) to develop an ambitious project. "Implementation of the film competition could only happen because of the extra funding from outside sources, voluntary time and utilization of our partner's network of professionals, who offered discounted services and time investments. The actual rough calculation of what you need to complete the task was in the range of 10,000€ - 12000€. You can't repeat this over and over with only 1000€," said Dr. Markus Egermann.

In many cases, the tiny budget limited the ability to expand professional networks because potential partner organizations did not have the financial capacity to participate in the project. A story from Prof. Gordon MacKerron in Brighton illustrates this well: "[Through various channels], we got access to the local museum service, on the basis that they already did outreach work with young people, including on environment, and had excellent public space, with heavy footfall, in which we might be able to display outcomes. The museum service was initially enthusiastic about reaching out using their existing contacts to a sample of local schools/sixth form colleges and to help develop ideas about what young people might do. Unfortunately after a few weeks they came back and said they didn't have the resources to take part, as they could not do it on 1000€."

It should be noted that this exercise was never intended to intentionally insult or devalue anyone's work. While there are examples of projects that have been successful with a committed community and little funding, we recognize that a funding model based on altruism is inherently unsustainable. No one should be taken advantage of, even if it is to save the world.

What was initially intended to be a very small exercise in the ARTS project work plan, evolved into more ambitious projects as each partner got excited to see what they could accomplish. It should also be noted that four of the five project partners invested additional time and money from their own organizations to take the projects much further than outlined in the work plan, to better test and grow their ideas. The level of enthusiasm and commitment from all partner organizations is laudable and points to a latent demand for more co-creation and collaborative processes.

Preparation

The exploratory process to first find partners and then agree on a project took significantly more time than anyone initially thought. Many of the arts and transition initiatives were initially wary when they were approached by research teams, for fear of being used only for research outcomes. They were not interested in being studied. Rather, they wanted the partnership to be just that: a mutually-beneficial, collaborative, professional relationship. They wanted

No one should be taken advantage of, even if it is to save the world.

to work together as co-creators. "It is important to understand the relationships: who has come before and how can you build trust for a deeper understanding of the process and relationship," warned Dr. Markus Egermann. "You really have to take the initiatives seriously as researchers. You need to be convinced as a researcher that it is valuable and treat the initiatives with respect and attention and importance."

What is clear is that no one was really prepared for how much time was necessary to build a productive, collaborative relationship between two organizations coming from very different backgrounds. Before any of the real work could begin, the partners had to start speaking the same "language" and come to a common understanding about the relationship, processes, outcomes, and expectations of the exercise. It is also clear that those who invested the most time (and, subsequently, money) to deeply engage with their partner organizations were more satisfied with their project outcomes.

“ In order to allow genuine co-creation of ways forward to happen, a significant amount of time needs to be invested in organizing dialogues with all the partners. You have to let them figure it out collectively. It takes more time in the beginning, but less in the end because co-creation promotes ownership. ”

- Dr. Leen Gorissen



The Hairy Monster, an illustration representing the various ways that artists in Stockholm can contribute to the co-creation process with scientific researchers.

In Stockholm, the exercise became the vehicle to discuss co-creation and how to best collaborate with one another. Researchers and artists had a number of meetings to exchange views and have a dialog about what was needed, what was possible, and what everyone could bring to the process. During one of the meetings, a group of artists created a fantastical drawing of a multi-armed and tailed creature (opposite page) that represented how they saw themselves contributing to the co-creation process. They thought they could bring both a soul and a systems-thinking approach to research. The many arms and tails show that they can reach out in any direction and represent the many connections the ARTS-artist network has to other networks, activities and approaches. The many arms and tails also represent how artists often use multi-faceted exploratory processes and aren't afraid to try many different things and pathways.

The dandelion seeds represent the spreading of ideas from the artists-scientist collaboration. They believe that there is the potential to create many seeds that can catch the wind and be blown to many different areas (a dispersion of ideas), but that there are many external influences that will determine whether the seeds will germinate and grow into healthy plants (maturation of ideas).

Upon reflection, Dr. Barnes said that he would have liked to invest more time in the project development process, particularly when it came to the initial collaboration. "In future collaborations I would like to spend more time exploring potential ways to build fruitful, collaborative relationships, perhaps by bringing researchers and artists together first and brainstorming ideas about engagement to try to find synergies," he said.

It also took time to work through procedural issues, like agreeing on how to make decisions and evaluate the results. The decision-making process proved to be surprisingly time consuming, as different assessment and evaluation methods clashed between groups. The issues were always resolved, but it wasn't as straightforward or as quick as anyone had thought it would be. "We had many, many meetings to decide on to how to decide," reminisced Dr. Egermann.

Nurture

Laure Cops, one of the filmmakers working with the Genk Art and Music Academies, saw huge potential for widespread community engagement by building on the foundation the process started: "We could make something more in-depth, like an interactive documentary and a social campaign around the 'Academy of the Future' story...make a community around it. It could create a lot of impact and engagement!" Her enthusiasm was palpable and contagious – exactly the type of energy needed to capture hearts and minds and inspire people.

Ms. Pearl in Brighton conveyed the same enthusiasm and is pleased with the results of the project, but still feels disappointed that there wasn't more time or money to take the project further. She has big dreams about what the project could bloom into if there was a structure and resources to support it. ONCA hopes to find outside funding to finish the project and make it part of a larger initiative, but this is a slow and laborious process and there are bigger priorities for the organization.

Dresden's project perhaps has the most legacy from this exercise, as it was also the one that had the most outside investment. In this case, Sukuma Arts and Dresden im Wandel were the ones who developed the project concept (building on an existing idea from the initiative) and then saw it through to its completion. Today, it continues to function as part of a larger, on-going project on sustainability in the city.

A project's legacy is something that needs to be discussed at the very beginning of the process. It's important to ask a few simple questions, if just to clarify the limitations of a collaborative project. What will happen with the project? Who will carry it forward? How many resources does it require to keep it moving forward? How will it be institutionalized or documented so that it can be picked up again when there is support?

Researchers in Brighton remarked that engaging in the co-creation process is important in itself, but that it is also important to carefully think through how much time and how many resources it takes to move the ideas forward and how it fits into existing work so that the process feels valuable for everyone.

A New Kind of Garden

We started this project with the idea that art and the creative process could be used as bridge to better connect researchers and local transition initiatives. We learned that it is not only possible, but considered an exciting and potentially ground-breaking way to improve research, connect more people, and catalyze change. The conversations with researchers and some of their partner organizations indicated overwhelming enthusiasm for artist/cultural collaboration and using co-creation processes for future research and communication projects. Minds and doors have been opened and new opportunities for collaboration have been identified for both researchers and artists. "Unusual suspects" have been connected and space has been created for these groups to work together as peers to advance their work, either by building on what was completed as part of this exercise or by co-creating future projects.

We know now that the framework for the idea was flawed - that there weren't enough resources to properly deal with a new concept in such a short period of time - but that the experiences, common ideas and knowledge gained from planting the seed are worth saving and sowing again, together as collaborators, into a new garden in the future. It is a very exciting prospect and one we will happily help grow.

We are currently present in the following regions



Contact

Dr. Niki Frantzeskaki
Dutch Research Institute For Transitions
tel: +31-10-4088775
e-mail: arts@drift.eur.nl
www.acceleratingtransitions.eu
@ARTS_EU

Project partners



This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 603654.

The content of this publication does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the author(s).