

# RADICAL IMAGINATION IN TRANSITION

*A vision written by Julia de Koning and Steve Elbers*

# JUST TRANSITIONS, RADICAL IMAGINATION, AND SOCIAL ART PRACTICES

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As we grapple with issues such as climate change, social inequality, and global health crises, the imperative for just transitions becomes more critical than ever.

Transformative research is aimed at contributing to addressing these societal problems and demonstrating a clear commitment to engaging with society<sup>1</sup>. To address these societal problems in research, it is important to use new ways of doing research and education and with this, have radical new ideas of envisioning the future.

Thus, radical imagination emerges as a vital force<sup>2</sup>. Radical imagination is the ability that everyone has to imagine the world, life, and social institutions not as they are but as they could be, often in a more just, equitable, and sustainable way<sup>3</sup>. It is a crucial aspect of social movements, as it allows individuals and groups to envision a better future and work towards creating it<sup>4</sup>.

Artists and designers working with a wide range of disciplines, like visual arts, performing arts or fashion, are masters of imagining. By using their imagination, artists can create innovative art practices with a real social value, encompassing meaningful improvements in lives and well-being of (non)humans<sup>5</sup>.

There is a wide variety in art practices. In a social art (or socially engaged art and design) practice, changes in society give rise to initiatives and involve individual people,

communities, and organisations in the artistic process<sup>6</sup>. Such practices adopt a personal, open-minded perspective with social involvement, exploring unconventional angles<sup>7</sup>. Social art practitioners can rearrange the rules of the game in a unique way, on a small and large scale, personal and structural. This creates different roles and relationships between maker, audience, and other stakeholders<sup>9</sup>, and different views of the world and meaningful changes.

*An example of such a social art practice is 'Huis van de Toekomst', in which a team of artists (including Melle Smets, Klaas Burger, Bart Groenewegen), residents, and researchers are looking for different ways to turn social inequality into a resilient force by using manpower in energy-transition in a Rotterdam community<sup>8</sup>.*


# RADICAL IMAGINATION IN TRANSITION THE PROJECT

*Can social art practices infused with radical imagination empower transformative research practices? What happens when we try to strengthen connections between social artist and transformative researchers? What intersections between academia and social art practices already exist? What can these practices learn from each other?*

In the Radical Imagination in Transition project, we try to address these questions. The project is an initiative from the Design Impact Transition (DIT) platform and partially funded by the DOEN foundation.

The core of the project is dedicated to exploring the transformative potential of connecting social art practices with scientific transition practices infused with radical imagination. Connecting the alternative perspectives artists and scientists has the potency of shifting perspectives and strengthening the transformative force, to move to justice.

We want to explore where radical imagination of artists already takes shape within science, and investigate how artists, through their unique processes and techniques, generate knowledge that could be deemed "robust" according to scientific standards. We want to explore what art and transition practices can learn from each other, what windows of opportunities are present in this realm, and in which way we can make use of them. Therefore the "Radical Imagination in Transition" project seeks to create a (stronger) connection between arts and transition practices.



*Staging Wood is an example of radical imagination in which a coalition of artists, thinkers, local artisans, scientists, islanders, forest managers, and activists, try to find ways to let the forest itself form the basis for new, just ways of thinking, working, and producing<sup>10</sup>.*

Through these efforts, the initiative seeks to energize and strengthen transformative movements, radical imagination, and ultimately move towards a more just world. In pursuit of our objectives, we have outlined four key goals for this project:

**Build a bridge between social art practices and (scientific) transition practices**

By facilitating dialogue and collaboration we aim to contribute to create (stronger) connections between social art practices, with the force of radical imagination and transition practices.

**Enlarge the range of the Erasmus University Rotterdam**

By linking with existing transformative art practices in Rotterdam and beyond, along with their stakeholders and communities, we aim to expand the scope of the EUR. This project aims to utilize ongoing transformative research projects within the DIT platform to strengthen transformative and transdisciplinary research.

**Give an impulse to transformative movements**

By bridging social art practices and (scientific) transition practice and determining bridging tools and methods, we aim to increase the transformative potential of the practices. We believe that both sides can learn from and support each other in strengthening radical visions of futures.

**Create a long-term network of artists and scientists**

Our goal is to create an effect that will last longer than the project itself. We aim to create a long-term network which can be used as a setup of collaboration and inspiration that will have a snowball effect on transition practices in arts and science.

## CORE VALUES

In alignment with our goals, the initiative is guided by four core values:

First, it is essential for the setup and process of the project to be inclusive. We want to ensure that the initiative is accessible and involves the active participation of a diverse range of voices, fostering inclusivity throughout its development and execution.

Secondly, we recognize the power of language in our project, and the dynamic nature of values, emphasizing their role in shaping perspectives and driving meaningful change. The language of social artists and transformative researchers may differ, which can cause for tensions that can counteract our efforts of bridging both parties. We acknowledge that it is our responsibility to also bridge these differences and with this, our language in the project may change over time.

Thirdly, in our work the focus will be not just be on objectives, but also the process itself

Lastly, we acknowledge the importance of allowing for thoughtful consideration and reflection, recognizing that meaningful change requires time and space for exploration.



WHERE LIFE  
AND ART  
MERGE

DAAR WAAR LEVEN EN KUNST  
VERSMELTEN

27. Where life and art merge  
An art of living exhibition with,  
among others, Fredie Beckmann, Joost  
Gonijn, Gilbert and George, Kimmelman,  
Christoph Schlingensiefel

1011



*This vision paper is a work in progress. This version was uploaded in March 2024. During the project-year 2024 the paper will be updated with insights, discussed, and grow in a reflexive way.*

## References

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<sup>2</sup> Demos, T. J. (2023). *Radical futurisms: Ecologies of Collapse, Chronopolitics, and Justice-to-Come*. MIT Press.

<sup>3</sup> Khasnabish, A., & Haiven, M. (2014, 22 July). *Why social movements need the radical imagination*. openDemocracy from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/why-social-movements-need-radical-imagination/>

<sup>4</sup> Haiven, M., & Khasnabish, A. (2014). *The radical imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity*.

<sup>5</sup> Galafassi, D., (2018). *The Transformative Imagination, Re-imagining the world towards sustainability*

<sup>6</sup> Trienekens, S. (2020). *Participatieve kunst. Gewoon kunst in moeilijke omstandigheden*.

<sup>7</sup> Lenz, T. (2022). *Radicale Verbeelding, explorerend onderzoek naar sociale kunstpraktijken*.

<sup>8</sup> *Huis van de Toekomst*. (n.d.).

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<sup>9</sup> Oosterling, H. a. F. (2020). *Verzet in ecopanische tijden: van ego-emancipatie naar eco-emancipatie*.

<sup>10</sup> *Verhalen – StagingWood*. (n.d.).

<https://stagingwood.org/stories/phase/ontkiemen/>