

THE LETTERS OF UTRECHT A CELEBRATION OF THE FIRST TEN YEARS

Minutes of the round table in the Fundatie van Renswoude, Agnietenstraat 5 (9:30 – 11:50):

“What can art do for the future?”

Introductions

The participants introduce themselves. Kritika points out that the philanthropic building we gather in was built in 1761 as a school for orphan boys, it lies in the path of the Letters of Utrecht, about 100 years from now. Anne Beate introduces Future Library, Volker Schäfer introduces Joseph Beuys 7,000 Oaks, Erlijn Mulder introduces the Letters of Utrecht. Michael Münker reports that Gareth Evans and Jem Finer of Longplayer (London), Werner Waimann (Time Pyramid, Wemding) and Bogomir Ecker (Dripstone Machine, Hamburg) could not attend but send their greetings. (The fourth block

of the Time Pyramid will be placed in Wemding, Bavaria, a bit more than 1 hour West of Munich, in the afternoon of September 9th, 2023.)

Question: what can art do for the future?

Ruben: “Society and civilization has all kind of rules, practical circumstances. Art is the only way that expresses the existence. Historical paintings had different rules back then, different times and we can still relate because of that art.”

Anne Beate: “What has Future Library resonates all over the world. Margaret Atwood said: art makes the world felt.”

“I come from a very old farm of 14 generations. I’m carrying a lot of knowledge about farming and foresting and that shapes Future Library as well Urban farm and future farms. *The Denial of Nature Environmental philosophy in the era of global capitalism* By Arne Johan Vetlesen.”

“We have to make sure that our urban kids gain knowledge about physical soil and make space available to gain empathy for the neighborhood. ‘Soil literacy to gather time literacy is what makes our future livable. The essence of Future Library is about crucial needs and are in need of now, Future Library offers rituals and hope. The third thing is trust. The way art moves us into the future. Education is needed as well.”

Rainer: “John Cage’s music is just sound and empty mind without judgement. Good



Participants

Dick Sijtsma
Letters van Utrecht

Erlijn Mulder
Letters van Utrecht

Hanneke Verheijke
Letters van Utrecht

Kritika Maheshwari
University of Groningen

Martijn Klop
Effective Altruism Netherlands

Michael Münker
Milliongenerations.org, Utrecht

Rainer Neugebauer
ORGAN2/ASLSP, Halberstadt

Ruben van Gogh
Letters van Utrecht

Mallory Imler Powell
Writer, New York

On screen

Anne Beate Hovind
Future Library, Oslo

Volker Schäfer
7000 Eichen, Kassel

Jörg Tremmel
Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations, Stuttgart (while travelling)



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authentic art is difficult. Some previews about society without fear. All the sound, all the art work has its own worth. This may be for the most visitors. Thinking about time and future create consciousness. Art is like a motor to think about, and a motivation to work on your own politics, things that go on and on. As a balance for all the pessimism. Art is not political. There must be a mutual trust between future generations and us, we need to trust them and they need to trust us."

Ruben: "The letters are infinite. Trust of the future generations is key. And the future generations have to trust us as well. All these art projects symbolize that."

Anne Beate: "Atwood always stresses the hope: 'The best way to predict your future is to create it.' Meeting lots of young people, they are all worried about the future. That is also a reason to create an Utopia. We need Utopia's to create safe spaces. Art has ways to touch people that creates an opportunity for the future, and a responsibility for us as stewards."



Martijn: "Most people would rather be alive, add as much positivity as possible. But how many generations are possible after us? It is fashionable to be cynical. That is a cultural undercurrent. Knowledge and wisdom are the main pillar. Where does that leave art?"

"Art helps us to get in touch with humanity through amazement, playfulness. There is no limit to what art can do to counter cynicism. As an antidote."

Michael: "The Letters have so many aspects and unexpected layers. The people who contribute do not only add the

means to keep the project running but add their own stories. This way every week more people have an interest to keep this going, safeguarding the letters. We have placed year-markers in the streets along the route the poem takes up to 2300. But I fear that we will not reach the last of them, because of the rise of the sea-level. What will remain in the future?"

Rainer: "Art is a way to remember the future. Art is not only rational. We feel a sense of responsibility for the next generations."

How can we work together? What can we do to ensure the projects continue, and to make it more likely there will be a future?

It is important to know of each other's existence. Assemble them together, find togetherness and find ways to communicate. All different projects with different



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contents and contexts. Perhaps a portal website? Find a way of an exhibition?

Martijn: "What is the essence of long-term art? What binds all the projects to each other? What is the common ground?"

Michael: "That is a fair question, many possible answers. I tend to think of something that is set up to last for at least 100 years, something that needs stewards, that requires continued involvement of many different people, something that is open and accessible, for public benefit. Old pyramids or cathedrals were not dedicated to the future. I would exclude them. I am fascinated with Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture that started with the 7,000 oaks, would think of projects that continuously interacts with people in the present, passing down to the next generation. Something that each generation to keep it going, and it can be nice if each generation not only maintains it but develops it further, lets it evolves, is open. We don't know what decisions the people take in 100 years. At the Letters we can't calculate where the future poets will be for instance."

"We need the next generations to keep the work going. The letters started without institutional money and continue that way so far. No amount of money at one point can make a safe future forever. We work to let this project survive us and hand it down to the future. How will we tackle practical problems? Like, can

we get the money for the next 5 years?"

"How do we find the long term art projects that we are not (yet) in contact with? How do we get to know them?"

Anne Beate: "Future Library has a very local impact and a global outreach as well. Dilemma: making this work happen is a big challenge in itself. To make people believe in it and engage in it. How to involve people locally and globally. How do we fundraise for these kind of art works?"

"We have also sold pieces of art and certificates, all the famous Universities have bought it and the money goes into a trust."

"Future Library next week expects to sign a contract for 100 years with the municipality of Oslo which is bold for the politicians. The right to the forest and the

room in the public library is reserved and saved. That is big milestone for the Future Library. The Letters have only permits for ten years so far to sculpture the cobblestones every Saturday, but longer ones have been suggested. In a way the works are social sculptures as well. It is happening and growing in some kind of way."

"We could make a Wikipedia page. The collaboration is a way in itself to find new projects all over the world as well. We didn't know each other before today. And it is a chance to broaden the thoughts about the long-term as well. To reach out and create monuments for the future. Not everyone agrees on the term monument for the future though, because it is fixed in a way."



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Rainer: "All the projects are messages to the future (like a message in a bottle), we don't know who and what will happen with it in the future. All the projects have different messages: words, sounds, printed novels in 100 years, trees, etc. Each projects needs a future to be successful."

Ruben: "If we start with a portal-website or exhibition we have a different message as well. We could aim for an exhibition at the UN general assembly that showcases the projects and encourages other countries to add a project in order to have a more representative idea and how to fund the ideas?"

"Can we find someone to fund grants to start new long-term projects around the world? Valuing all these projects and safe guarding it. Every 5 or 10 years to connect? And how do we ensure it doesn't become too elite?"

"What do we want to be the core principals? Voice and spread the word. But also be very solid about the core principals and the inclusivity."

"The Letters have an organic growth, they grow continuously with only only one letter on one stone each week - the route is clear and the procedure is clear too."

Rainer: "Sound is fluid , it is windy and fading away. No hard core material, just air and time."

Anne Beate: "Try to be part of that summit and what do we have to achieve together? What do we have in common? What is our shared goal?"

"Art is the binding factor. We all need to connect people emotionally in order to exist for the upcoming 100 years and more. Every long term art work evolves with the years. The goal is to create and find other projects to help envision the future and create consciousness about existential risks."



A website or Wikipedia page linking the projects seems a possible start. Links to the website of other projects already are on the websites of Time Pyramid and the Letters of Utrecht.

Project proposals to funders could be a next step. Michael plans to send a proposal for possible next steps.

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Later in the day

After the roundtable, the participants walked to the Central Museum. Otto Barten (Existential Risk Observatory, Amsterdam), Jörg and Finn Tremmel and stone mason Gerrit Peele as well as Fred Nuwenhuis of the Gemeente Utrecht joined in person.

Jacqueline Rutten, head of communication of Central Museum, welcomed them in the garden of the museum.

On behalf of the Foundation Letters of Utrecht, Ruben van Gogh presented a stone with number 6389 for a Letter of Utrecht to be made and placed in the row of Letters somewhere near the museum Saturday 6 June 2122. He explained that the line of Letters passes the museum when writing a U in the city map. Which letter of the alphabet will be carved into the stone is not known: the poet writing the part of the poem that the letter belongs to still



has to be born - maybe only 80 years from now? Letter 6389 is dedicated to the museum and bears the inscription "What can art to do for the future?".

Jacqueline replied that the stone would become part of the history collection, as the first object from the future. Gerrit Peele presented his own hammer and chisel to the museum to be waiting for the stone mason in 100 years.

The participants then headed to Geertebrug, corner of Oudegracht, where stone mason Frank Peele (son of Gerrit) carved Letter 1171,

an E and placed it back into the street, to be part of the second word of the part of the poem contributed by Anne Broeksma, the ninth poet of the Letters of Utrecht.

The letter had been contributed by familie Hoekman - Kocken and dedicated to their grandmother and mother Lineke Schokkenbroek.



Celebrations continued in the afternoon at Café Morgenster and ended in the evening with dinner with poet Onno Kusters and musician Kees Wennekendonk.

During the afternoon Jörg Tremmel suggested that long term art projects might play a role in safeguarding nuclear waste storage sites.

