

ZCB and creative practice

The Great Imagining: making art as if the world mattered

Lucy Neal



It's believed the 'Lion Man' statuette found in a cave in the Swabian Alps (British Museum, 2013), took someone 400 hours to carve 40,000 years ago. With a human body and a lion's head, it is evidence of our early ability to conjure in our 'mind's eye', giving form to things we first imagine. Whether or not art then played a role in communicating with the supernatural, social ritual, song or storytelling, it shows an impulse to articulate our place and survival in the web of life.

Today, ZCB asks how our 21st century skills can help us rehearse the survival of our own and

other species over the coming decades. It squares up to the challenge that will dominate the arts and culture, and all of society, for the foreseeable future: our human relationship with energy. The report gives clear evidence that business as usual is not an option. Decarbonisation scenarios show how rapid change in our homes, transport, food production and lifestyles is possible. It is a framework for life in our current unsustainable energy system (which we Power Down) that imagines and creates an alternative (which we Power Up). It feels an intense task to live two 'realities' at once like this – but, if we keep our focus, it can change world orders. It also has precedents: playwright Vaclav Havel called it 'living in truth' – living 'as if' he were a free man, even when imprisoned. He saw the alternative in his mind's eye and, by believing it, brought that reality into being.

"Believe you can and you're halfway there."

Theodore Roosevelt

ZCB's robust research gives the building blocks to live our lives 'as if' a zero carbon Britain by 2030 were possible: it gets us 'halfway there'. In the arts, it has already inspired new work – Kaleider in Devon invites artists to imagine a future 30 years from now:

"We use this idea of an imagined future to pull artists into a creative space where they might be able to deal with some of the big challenges without freezing in the face of their magnitude: we can ask open questions without a need to campaign."

Seth Honor, Kaleider

ZCB's clarity "enables us to grasp the sense of urgency with which we have to tackle carbon reduction" and "the role that all those working with arts and culture can play in achieving that critically important goal", says Clare Cooper of Mission Models Money. In turn, the arts and culture have a distinct role to play in inspiring a wholly different way of living within the ecological limits of a finite planet, and in remodelling society – reinventing its rules and values. The arts have a tradition of sparking cultural change and 'speaking differently' (Prof.

Richard Rorty). There's a sense that science and technology alone cannot play the role of interpreting the challenges we face or questioning what values underpin the need for change.

On the surface, contemporary mainstream culture appears unable to conjure with pictures of the future that are not apocalyptic. ZCB releases us psychologically from this grip to start the 'great imagining' – creating a zero carbon future. "It's a foundation stone to jump from, to imagine crossing the yawning chasm, between where we are now and where we need to be", says Teo Greenstreet, Case For Optimism. It "supports our aims and trajectory with huge amounts of data – facts and figures that are trustworthy and relevant", adds Feimatta Conteh from the Arcola, a progressive theatre aiming at being zero carbon, designing hydrogen fuel cell power systems alongside the staging of plays.

"... it's the job of the artist, poet or storyteller to point out the ground under our feet, to offer us images through which to wake up to our present condition, to show us anew the moment we stand in."

Mat Osmond, *Dark Mountain* Issue 3

Initiatives such as Tipping Point, Cape Farewell, Julie's Bicycle, Platform, Creative Carbon Scotland and the Centre for Alternative Technology's own Emergence Summit have set the pace in recent years, galvanising awareness of 'the moment we stand in'. Artists, in collaboration with scientists and energy specialists, have created a movement in the cultural sector that accepts responsibility for embracing the urgency of climate change whilst maintaining the poet's instinct to come at things sideways – as the playwright Chekhov said, "Don't tell me the moon is shining: show me the glint of light on broken glass".

For me, as a theatre-maker and writer, ZCB helps me to cross the line connecting my creativity to social and ecological responsibilities, and I'm excited about this. An original purpose for art to create value and meaning in our daily lives feels renewed and relevant. The 'engaged optimism' of movements such as Transition Towns shows that transformation of society becomes an art in itself,

while Encounters shops on the high street – where 'Nothing is on sale, but lots on offer' – ask, 'What is it like to live now?' Participation across generations and cultures unearths deep emotional connections between people and helps us to express fears for the world, as well as hope and joy for the future. We extend a belief in ourselves as capable of remaking the world the way we would like it to be: creative, connected, happier and more resilient. Learning and 'qualities of neighbourliness' across difference become the foundations for what Barbara Heinzen (2004) recognises as rehearsal for social reinvention. A viable future can be created collectively but it must first be imagined.

ZCB invites – indeed, ignites – discussion about what kind of society we want to live in and the role the arts and culture have to play. A shared practice across science, art, politics, food growing, health and education can push for whole government policy frameworks for 2030 that connect cultural, social, environmental and economic frameworks 'as if the world mattered' (Suzi Gablik, 2002).

Like the craftsman or woman who sat carving the Lionman, hour after hour, we must keep our focus on creating the world we want from our collective imagination.

"Humans are capable of a unique trick, creating realities by first imagining them, by experiencing them in their minds. ... By this process it begins to come true. The act of imagining somehow makes it real. And what is possible in art becomes thinkable in life."

Brian Eno

About the author:

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