

ILEA Book 2

WHAT IF? LETTERS TO THE FUTURE

2024

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Content

What if? – Freedom of thought and the power of renewal begin with this simple question. The letters to the future collected here are not prophecies but reflect a world in upheaval between hope and horror, transformation and speculation, they are also full of enthusiasm for the future. These ideas and thoughts from visionary people who call on us to use our mind and creativity to create a livable and sustainable future for everyone.

Essays

Ravi Agarwal, Annemarie Bucher, Ishita Chakraborty, Damian Christinger, Magali Dougoud, Hayat Erdoğan, Anne-Laure Franchette, Johannes M. Hedinger, Kim de l'Horizon, Josiane Imhasly, Monica Ursina Jäger, Dominik Landwehr, Joanna Leśniewska, Paulina Lopez, Harald Welzer, André Wilkens.

Dossier

Marc Augé, Octavia E. Butler, David Graeber, Donna Haraway, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Roman Krznaric, Ursula K. Le Guin, Lesley Lokko, Achille Mbembe, Milo Rau, Nikolaj Schultz, Vandana Shiva, Edward Snowden, Rebecca Solnit, Greta Thunberg, Anne L. Tsing, Slavoj Žižek and others.

Artworks

Ravi Agarwal und Paulina Lopez, Paloma Ayala, Magali Dougoud, Hemauer/Keller, Monica Ursina Jäger, Ola Maciejewska, Sujit Mallik, Vibeke Mascini, Farah Mulla, Ernesto Neto, QUARTO, Stefanie Salzmann, Renae Shadler, Andrea Todisco, Huhtamaki Wab.

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On the topic

"What if?" is more than just a rhetorical question. The thought experiment implies an alternative reality and encourages us to think about major changes. What if... tomorrow the world is no longer the same? What if... the earth defends itself against humans? What if ... there is a better, fairer life for everyone?

The "letters to the future" collected here are not prophecies, but reflect a world in upheaval between hope and horror, transformation and speculation but they are also full of "Zukunftslust" (enthusiasm for the future). These ideas and thoughts from visionary people call on us to use our minds and creativity to create a livable and sustainable future for everyone. If one understands such (speculative) thinking as a mental space in which concepts for the future are tested in conjunction with a critical reflection on the present, regardless of what is currently feasible, it takes on immediate significance. And perhaps "What if?" can be understood as a method, similar to the concept of utopia.

"What if...?" – Freedom of thought and the power of renewal begin with these simple words. Dealing with hypothetical questions and social changes is inherent in artistic practice, and the continuing development of utopian thought models is an important task of our civilized culture. "What if...?" can inspire us to actively shape the future instead of just reacting to it. The question invites us to think about possible scenarios and futures and find ways to build a viable and sustainable world. Not just for us, but especially for future generations.



BRIEF AN ANTON (2024) Johannes M. Hedinger

Lieber Anton,

gestern Nacht sahen wir zusammen auf dem Balkon der Ferienhauses Deiner polnischen Grosseltern in den Pieninen. In der Ferne im Dunkeln die Tatra. Eine klare Sternennacht, die Penseiden beschernten uns Sternschnuppen im Minutenrhythmus. Du suchtest mit neugierigen Augen den Himmel ab.

Vor rund einem Jahr schrieb ich Dir, bzw. Deinem zukünftigen Ich in 20 Jahren, schon einmal einen Brief. Er handelte unter anderem vom Klimanotstand und davon, wie Du auch im Einzelnen und Kleinen etwas dagegen tun kannst. Ein Jahr später sind wir keinen Schritt weiter – im Gegenteil. Auch daher schreibe ich Dir heute wieder. Vielleicht mache ich das nun jedes Jahr.

Deine Ankunft vor etwas mehr als vier Jahren hat mein Leben gleich auf mehreren Ebenen verändert. Davon dachte ich in der Regel meist nur ein, zwei Jahre voraus. Der äusserste Zeithorizont war vielleicht das eigene Pensionsalter. Doch seit Du hier bist, hat sich mein Zukunftsdenken um mindestens zwei bis drei Generationen verlängert. Und vermutlich bist Du auch einer der Gründe für das Thema der diesjährigen Biennale und der begleitenden Publikation „Was wäre, wenn?“

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Brief an Anton

FROM EARTH TO EARTH Ernesto Neto

Installation, Performance, Video, Participation

In a ritual performance with music, song and dance, the "soul ribbons" from Neto's sculpture "HealingBagAcupuncture-Earth", which was created in 2023 for the Elevation 1049 festival in Gstaad, were returned to Mother Earth. After a procession through the mountain village of Tenna and a forest, the ribbons were wrapped in a tight bundle, placed in a previously dug hole in the ground and covered with earth. A willow osseiling was planted in the west and a wooden stick with white ribbons in the east commemorates the ritual. The work reminds us that everything we produce and consume comes from the earth and returns to it. (JH)

In einer rituellen Performance mit Musik, Gesang und Tanz wurden die „Seelen-Bänder“ von Netos Skulptur „HealingBagAcupuncture-Earth“, die 2023 für das Festival „Elevation 1049“ in Gstaad entstanden war, an Mutter Erde zurückgegeben. Nach einer Prozession durch das Bergdorf Tenna und einen Wald, wurden die Bänder in ein dickes Bündel verpackt, in ein zuvor gegrabenes Erdloch gelegt und mit Erde bedeckt. Im Westen wurde ein Weidenosseiling gepflanzt, im Osten erinnerte ein Holzstab mit weissen Bändern an das Ritual. Die Arbeit erinnert uns daran, dass alles, was wir produzieren und konsumieren, aus der Erde kommt und zu ihr zurückkehrt. (JH)

Ernesto Neto is a visual artist based in Rio de Janeiro.
www.ernestonetosculpture.com

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What if? Letters to the Future



Collaboration: Claudia König, Wellington Soares, Helmut Keller, Palma Ayala, Monica Urvina Jager, Anna Af Sillén de Menquist & Leonardo Zapata with Leo and No. Niki, Malik, Frank Meier, Dani Beckli, Thomas Rickenmann. Support: Luna Foundation, Aelionare, Luna Foundation, Galeria Fortes D'Alba & Gabriel, Abgrenzenwettbewerb Tenna, Gemeinde Saffenthal, Urs Kalli Curator Johannes M. Hedinger

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Structure and content

"What if? Letters to the Future" was created in the follow-up of the fifth edition of the Art Safiental 2024 Biennale. It carries the discourse beyond the temporary event by means of selected essays, short texts and art projects.

The publication is divided into three parts: I) a collection of essays on the topic of possible futures, II) a dossier with around 130 short texts and III) documentation of the art projects of the fifth Art Safiental Biennale. The texts alternate (irregularly) between German and English. The foreword, the introduction to the exhibition and texts related to the art works (Part III) are printed in both languages, while the essays (Part I) and the short texts in the dossier (Part II) are each in the original language or in the available German or English version. At a later date, the essays will gradually be made available in the other language on the ILEA website.

Part I: ESSAYS

brings together a total of twelve texts, nine of which were written for this publication or the Biennale. In her essay, **Hayat Erdoğan** questions the future for a shared aesthetic reality, a society as a work of art. In their joint text, artist **Ravi Agarwal** and glaciologist **Paulina Lopez** reflect on the interplay between the ecological crisis, different knowledge systems and subjective experiences of the world. **Johannes M. Hedinger** writes a letter to his four-and-a-half-year-old son, the content, questions and speculations of which his offspring will only be able to understand and verify in a few years' time. **Magali Dougoud's** text is the libretto of her contribution to the Biennale: an opera about cross-species “Zombie Mermaids” who rebel against established power relations and dominant ways of life. In his contribution, originally written as a column, **Harald Welzer** advises us to look back in order to make statements for tomorrow; his proposal is called reconciliation. The four curators of the Biennale, **Anne-Laure Franchette**, **Johannes M. Hedinger**, **Josiane Imhasly** and **Joanna Leśnierowska**, embarked on a collective writing experiment in which they created a new song of the future. **Kim de l'Horizon**, advocates “Quiet Quitting” in their text against fear of the future, and provides us a witch's spell for this purpose. **Monica Ursina Jäger's** text, co-written with **Damian Christinger** for the video she made for the Biennale, deals with the life cycles of trees and the rhythms of the earth. In her essay, **Annemarie Bucher** reflects on the development of the Safiental and the Alpine region and the possibility of a new ecotopia. **Ishita Chakraborty** directs our attention to the Global South and uses examples from the Amazon and the Sundarbans to report on alternative knowledge systems and an understanding of the future beyond the Anthropocene. **Dominik Landwehr's** contribution provides an insight into the oral history research project “Safientaler Gespräche”, with a selection of voices commenting on change and the **future sustainability** of life in the Safiental. In an epilogue, **André Wilkens** reflects on the end of history and the last human. In times of crisis, culture is the key to change.

Part II: DOSSIER

brings together around 130 text fragments, quotations, speculations, warnings and hopes about possible futures. The earliest surviving voices are over 2,500 years old. However, the collection of texts does not end with the present day: an AI text program was also used to generate voices from the future that look far into the 23rd century. The texts of the thinkers, scientists, artists, activists, politicians, clergy and universalists gathered in the dossier represent a cross-section of the ever-growing ILEA Institute library. The collection of texts in this book covers neither the entire field of research nor all cultural circles and discourses. It is intended as a subjectively colored interim status report on a current debate that is constantly changing.

Part III: ART WORKS

documents the 13 main works of the Art Safiental Biennale 2024, *What if? Songs from Tomorrowlands*. After a brief curatorial introduction, an overview map locates the sites of the works in the Safiental, each of which is documented with a short description of the work, two illustrations and credits.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the generous support of the Lucius and Annemarie Burckhardt Foundation and without contributions from the Mercator Foundation, the Zurich University of the Arts and others from the Pro Helvetia Synergies research project, *River Landscape*. We would also like to thank the 35 supporters of the crowdfunding campaign on *wemakeit*. Our thanks go to the previous sponsorship (Beverin Nature Park, in cooperation with the municipality of Safiental and Safiental Tourism; until the end of 2024) and the new sponsorship (Verein Art Safiental, responsible for the biennial from 2025). We would especially like to thank all the text authors, researchers and artists for sharing their thoughts and for their creative work, Hendrik Krone for his editorial work, Rachel Kühne and Alltag Agentur for typesetting and graphics, Martin Conrads and David Selden for proofreading and Vera Ida Müller from Vexer Verlag for publishing and distribution.



About ILEA and ILEA Press

ILEA (Institute for Land and Environmental Art) is a competence and research center in the field of art & ecology. The institute organizes exhibitions, workshops, residencies and symposia, produces art projects and publications, initiates research projects and is a think and do tank for socio-ecological transformation through art and culture. Institute founder and director is Johannes M. Hedinger. From 2020-2024, ILEA was based in Tenna in Safiental, from 2025 it will operate from Zurich. From 2016 to 2024, ILEA organized the five editions of the outdoor biennial **ART SAFIENTAL** and the international summer school **ALPS ART ACADEMY**. The growing **RESEARCH PROGRAM** includes multi-year transdisciplinary projects, a recurring symposium (**ILEA Talks**), a residency and exhibition program (**ILEA Residency**, **ILEA Gallery**) and a publishing house (**ILEA Press**) in cooperation with Vexer Verlag.

Published so far:

- **What if? Letters to the Future** (2024)
- **Learning from the Earth** (2023)
- Patrick Rohner: **Massenbewegungen / Mass Movements** (2021)
- **Landscape #1** (2020)

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