

From the BVA to the TEI

An exercise in listening to the future

A garden for a fish is a riddle posed by the transcientist Else Sibil Somone. Transciency is a discipline from the future. The future holds a *Transcientistic Experimental Institute* (TEI), located in the Prater.

"If utopia is a place that does not exist, then surely (as Lao Tzu would say) the way to get there is by the way that is not a way. And in the same vein, the nature of the utopia I am trying to describe is such that if it is to come, it must exist already."
— Ursula K. Le Guin

The artistic research project "A garden for a fish" is instigated by the future and inspired by the past. An imaginary time travel in all directions that serves to map the present using Ursula K. Le Guin's notion of a *Utopia-that-has-to-Exist-already-in-Order-to-Become* [UEOB]¹ as navigational tool.

The following text speculates on the *Transcientistic Experimental Institute's* (TEI); on its guiding ideas, objectives, world views and research interests. It is a *futures study* exploration, an exemplary experiment in forecasting.

The project is linked to the *Biologische Versuchsanstalt* (BVA), a biological research institute that was located in Vienna's Prater about 100 years ago. An institution that asked unusual questions and applied unusual methods for its time. The future holds the TEI. This, too, deals with unconventional questions and experimental methods—and is (or will be, depending on your time coordinates) located with almost 100% probability somewhere in the Prater.

I am interested in the lessons that can be learned from the BVA—the paradigms, research interests, and practices that shaped it. I take them as intellectual soil in which to grow transcientistic concepts and attitudes. These concepts serve as orientation points and building materials for the future TEI.

The Biologische Versuchsanstalt (BVA)

'The Biological Research Institute (BVA) in Vienna's Prater was one of the world's first research institutes for experimental biology. Founded privately in 1903 by the biologists Hans Przibram, Wilhelm Figdor and Leopold von Portheim, the BVA was donated to the Academy of Sciences in 1914. After the Anschluss in 1938, its founders and many employees were persecuted and expelled for 'racial' reasons. Some died in Nazi concentration camps. The building was largely destroyed in the final days of the war, and the BVA was disbanded in 1946.'

(Own translation of text on an invitation to a commemorative event by the Austrian Academy of Sciences, 12 June 2015, with lectures, an exhibition and the unveiling of a memorial plaque at the former site of the BVA, Prater Hauptallee Vienna.)

¹Not to be confused with *Understanding of Evolutionary Optimization Behavior* like it is used in mathematical optimisation. See: IEEE Congress on Evolutionary Computation 2019 in New Zealand. <https://cs.ijs.si/ueob/>

This very brief historical synopsis comes from a 2015 commemorative event invitation by the Austrian Academy of Sciences. It provides the main facts; I would like to add a few details:

The founders financed both the building and its reconstruction. Originally constructed for Vienna's 1873 World Fair, the building initially housed an aquarium (and later other animal attractions) before being adapted for use as an experimental institute. The donation to the Academy was accompanied by additional capital of 300,000 crowns (approximately 2.2 million euros today), intended to fund the institute's scientific operations and serve as reserve capital for renovations or new buildings.

The persecution and exclusion for 'racial' reasons tells us how poorly this generosity was rewarded.

To understand the BVA's pioneering role in experimental biology, it helps to recall the paradigm shift in biology around 1900: science was turning away from descriptive and comparative methods and began asking increasingly causal questions, particularly concerning the origins and development of species. The BVA responded to biology's complexity by uniting diverse sub-disciplines under one roof—practising interdisciplinary research before anyone was talking about it.

The Transcientific Experimental Institute (TEI)

The TEI adopts this interdisciplinary path and extends it further—from biology to futurologic history. At the TEI, questions of empathic knowledge, rhythms, and resonances are explored. *Aisthesis* and biosemiotics are guiding research frames. Coincidences are taken as opportunities; attentiveness is trained.

TEI's organisational model and metaphor is the garden. Its research proposes that a gardening mindset—that reads the world as a site of biosemiotic entanglement—can cultivate alternative research practices and new forms of knowing. Knowledge that acknowledges that we humans—despite all our technology—are still a product of nature, and that our well-being inevitably depends on our environment. Exploring, discussing, and experimenting with gardening attitudes, practices and philosophies is an essential part of the TEI culture.

The TEI is engaged in *aestheticological transmissions*—a transcientistic term I would translate as “educational missions.” These missions take the forms of excursions, workshops, film screenings, concerts, readings, performances, cooking events, and speculative spectacles.

Under the umbrella of the TEI, you'll find the **TTTA** (Trans-Time Travelling Agency) and the **OPIFU** (Office for the Permanent Invention of the Future). The TTTA offers performative Prater walks to the past in the present. The OPIFU provides a platform to develop multiple possible futures for the Prater and elsewhere.

A Vision of TEI

I saw two images of TEI buildings at different locations—I saw them like images on postcards of a flea market collection. Of course, no such postcards exist, as the buildings do not yet exist either (at least not in our present understanding of time). I saw them in my mind, but it felt as though I was browsing old cards and was struck by two because of their exotic appearance and the letters TEI.

I cannot describe them in detail, but I remember the impression: something alive. The buildings, though obviously man-made, had merged with their surroundings. They seemed to have grown from the environment. I have no idea when they date from—my estimate is the late 21st century, but I could be completely wrong.

I thought of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: if I don't know the time (the momentum), maybe I can know the position. So—where were these pictures taken? I have a few ideas, but I don't want to share them yet and leave that speculation to your imagination, as I would like to use the last few lines of this text to talk about *futures studies*.

On Futurology

“Futures studies is the systematic study of possible, probable and preferable futures—including the worldviews and myths that underlie each future.”

— *Sohail Inayatullah*²

Inayatullah—an important figure in the field—describes several methods used in futures studies, depending on what kind of future is envisioned and what the study aims to achieve. They range from linear predictions based on a deterministic universe to the imagining of probable, possible, and preferred futures, built on the belief that humans play a constructive, creative role in shaping what's to come.

One method not listed in his account is **listening to the future**. According to the transcientistic practice of brain-wave time travel, it involves tuning your antennae to the frequencies of preferred futures. The better you tune them, the closer you come to utopia—in the now.

²“Futures Studies: theories and methods,” in Fernando Gutierrez Junquera, ed., *There's a Future: Visions for a better world* (Madrid, BBVA, 2013), 36-66. <https://www.metafuture.org/library1/FuturesStudies/Futures-Studies-theories-and-methods-published-version-2013-with-pics.pdf>