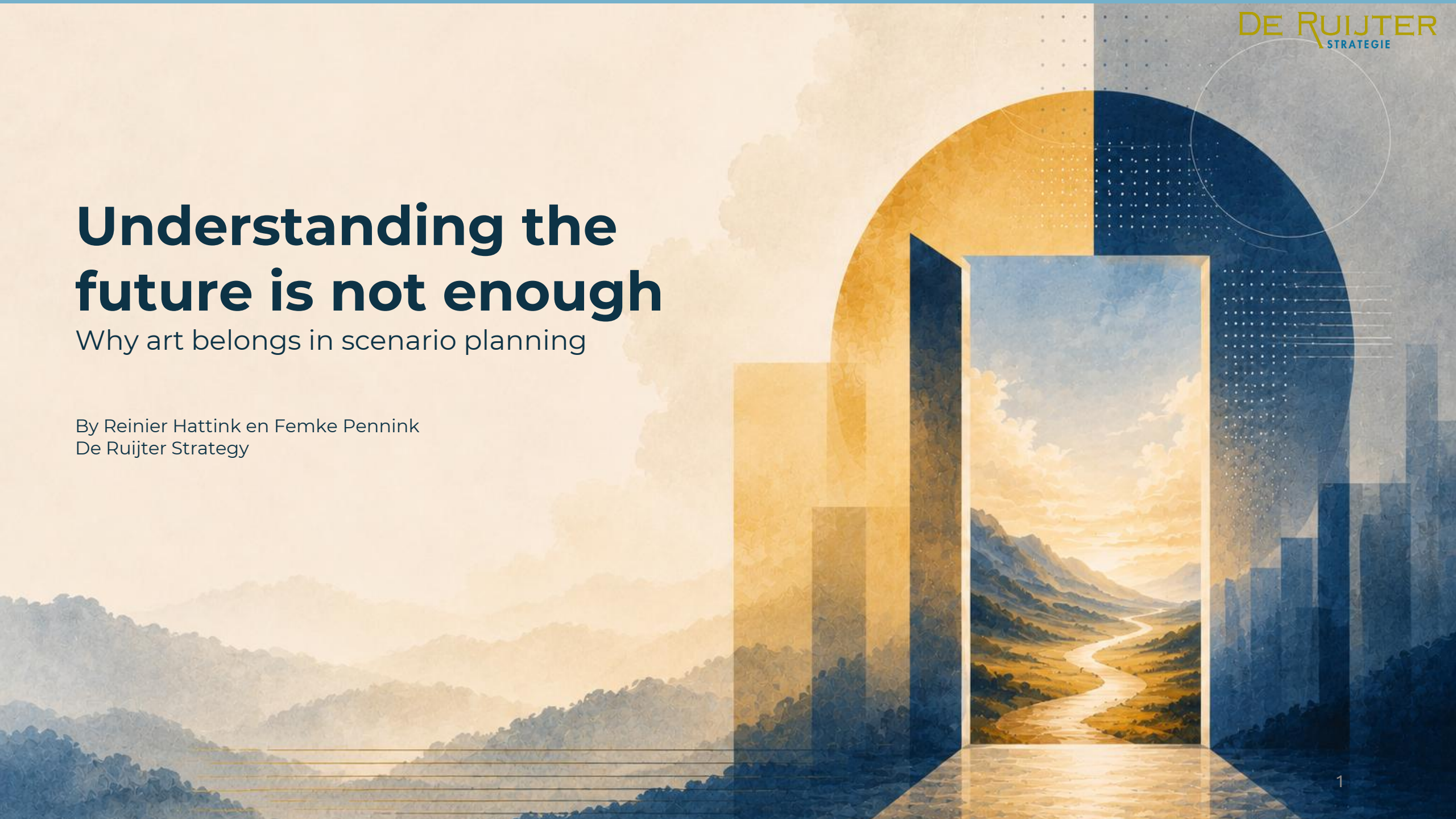


Understanding the future is not enough

Why art belongs in scenario planning

By Reinier Hattink en Femke Pennink
De Ruijter Strategy



Why **art** belongs in scenario planning

Governments, businesses and civil society organisations use scenarios to prepare for an uncertain future. They explore how the world might develop under different circumstances and consider which choices made today would make sense across a range of possible futures. Scenarios can help organisations recognise emerging developments, challenge assumptions and reopen stalled conversations.

Yet in practice, we regularly see something curious happen. People understand the scenarios. They find them plausible, interesting and sometimes even inspiring. But when difficult decisions have to be made, those scenarios do not always influence the way people act. Politicians and public officials fall back on familiar reflexes, while executives continue to defend existing interests. This raises an important question: what is missing from scenario planning?

Our answer is that futures thinking can still be too rational for the people it is intended to help. We have become good at analysing possible futures and increasingly sophisticated at imagining them. But we pay far less attention to how people relate to those futures emotionally. This is precisely where art can play an important role. Not as an illustration added at the end, but as an integral part of the scenario process.



Scenarios are not the end product

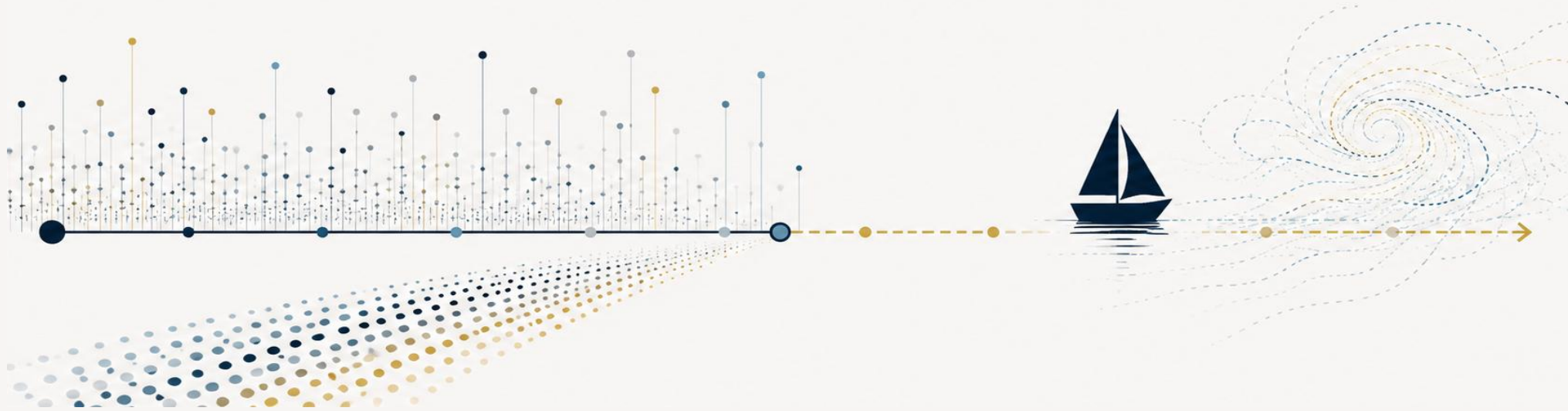
To understand the role art can play, we first need to return to the purpose of scenario planning. A scenario is not a prediction that claims to know what will happen. It describes a possible future that is plausible and relevant enough to challenge our thinking.

The need for such scenarios arises from the nature of the future itself. The future is not a single, fixed reality slowly making its way towards us. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of countless physical, ecological, economic, technological, political and social systems. Human behaviour is also part of this dynamic. People respond to events, reinterpret their environment and subsequently alter their behaviour. In doing so, they also change the system to which they are responding.

Uncertainty, therefore, is not simply a temporary lack of information. It is a structural characteristic of the future. The future is fundamentally unpredictable – not because we lack intelligence or have failed to collect enough data, but because it is continually being shaped and reshaped

through interaction. Scenario planning does not try to eliminate this uncertainty. Instead, it helps people deal with it more intelligently. By exploring several possible courses of development, decision-makers can test their assumptions, identify options and develop strategies that do not depend on a single predicted outcome.

Scenarios are therefore strategic tools, not ends in themselves. Of course, they need to be well constructed: internally consistent, surprising and yet plausible. But even a methodologically excellent scenario fails if it does not contribute to better decision-making. The most important question is therefore not simply whether a scenario is convincing, but whether it does its job. Does it help people have difficult conversations? Does it reveal choices that might otherwise remain invisible? And does it enable organisations to look beyond the next budget cycle, term of office or election?



The future leaves no data behind

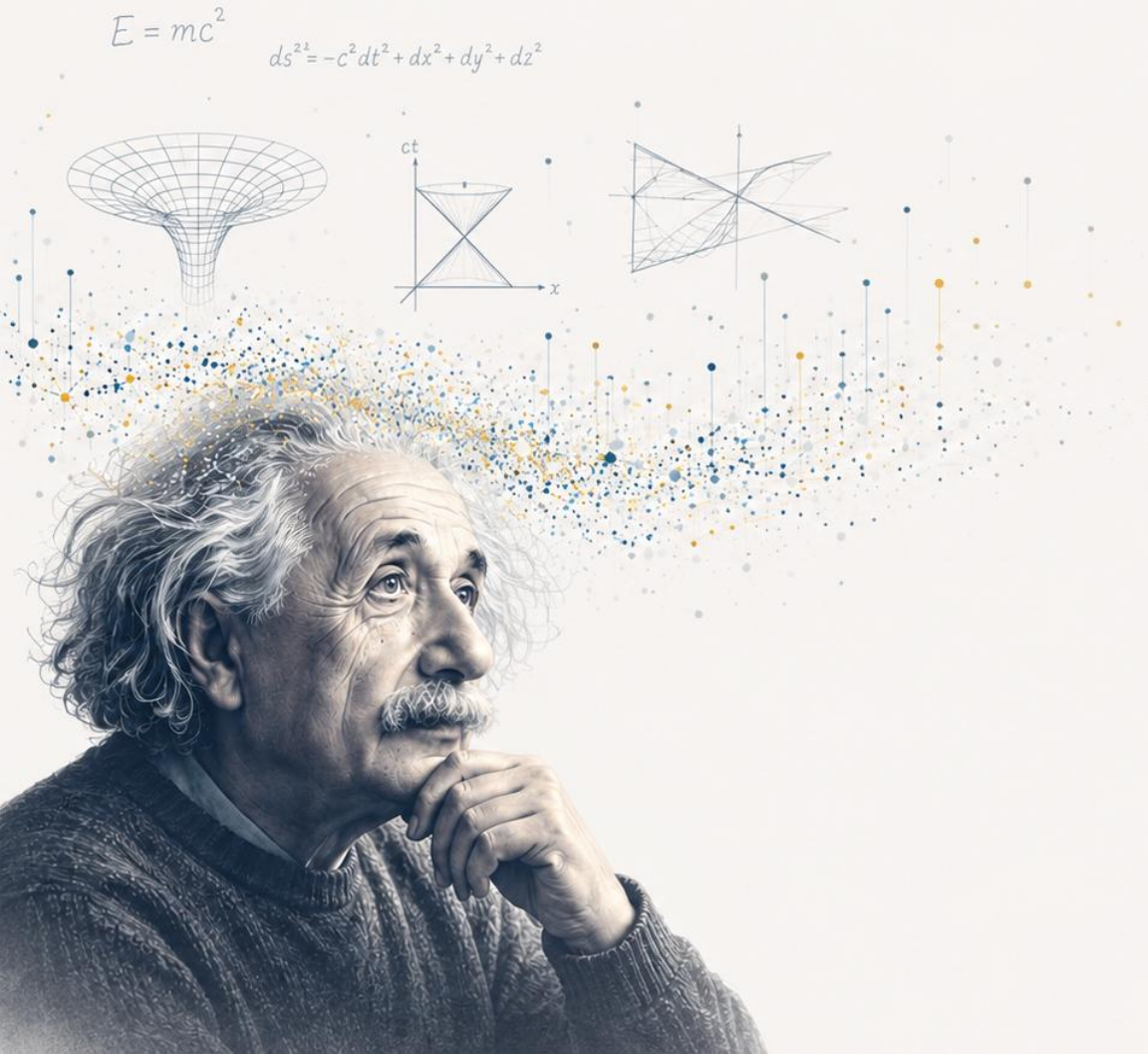
When organisations are confronted with uncertainty, their first response is often to gather more data. This is understandable. Data appears objective, verifiable and defensible. It provides something to hold on to when the stakes are high. But data has a fundamental limitation: it is the result of events that have already happened. It tells us where we have been, not necessarily where we are going.

Imagine a ship whose crew is trying to determine its course by looking at its wake. The water behind the ship contains traces of the route already

travelled. It might even reveal that the ship has passed between sheets of ice. But the wake tells the crew nothing about the iceberg that may lie ahead.

This does not make data any less important. Data can reveal patterns, test assumptions and support ideas. But it cannot directly describe something that does not yet exist.

The power of imagination



That is why imagination plays such an important role in futures thinking. Methods such as scenario planning, visioning and Three Horizons offer structured ways of exploring what might happen. This does not mean that everything we can imagine is equally plausible. What is required is disciplined imagination: the ability to use existing knowledge as a foundation for exploring possibilities for which empirical evidence cannot yet exist.

Albert Einstein did not begin his thinking about relativity with a new dataset. He imagined what it would mean to travel alongside a beam of light. Imagination came first; empirical substantiation followed later. Futures practitioners work in a similar way. They use imagination to describe possible futures that cannot yet be proven – precisely because those futures do not yet exist.

Decisions are made by people

Yet even data and imagination together are not always enough to support good decision-making. Decisions, after all, are not made by data, models or stories. They are made by people.

People are not purely rational decision-making machines. We all have our own fears, expectations and memories. We act out of loyalty, pride, grief or a sense of justice. We are attached to places, professions and ways of life. These emotional connections are not obstacles to good decision-making. They are an essential part of it. Emotions reveal what people value, what they fear losing and what they continue to hope for.

The same thing is true when we think about the future. In the many strategic sessions and meetings we have facilitated, we have seen that people can understand a scenario intellectually while rejecting it emotionally. In such cases, collecting more information does not solve the problem. Nor does creating an even richer story about the future. What is missing is the human experience and emotion of the future.

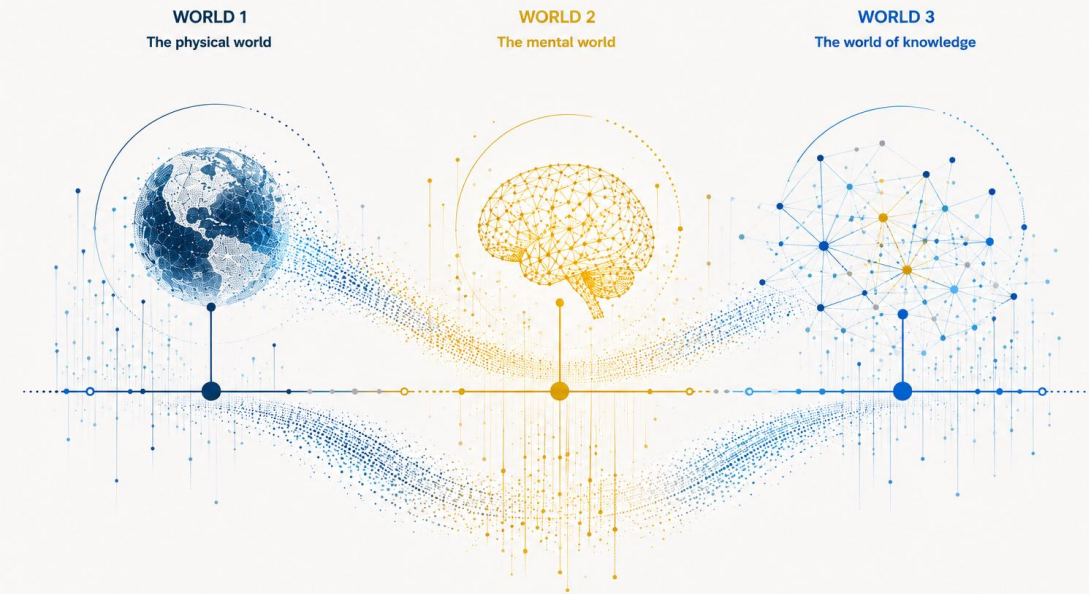


Popper's **Three Worlds** as a framework

Philosopher Karl Popper's theory of the Three Worlds provides a useful framework for understanding what is missing. First, Popper distinguishes the physical world: the tangible world of objects, landscapes and ecosystems. He calls this World 1. Then there is the world of human knowledge and cultural products: theories, books, institutions, stories and ideas. This is World 3. Scenarios belong to this world as well.

Scenario planning usually moves quite comfortably between Worlds 1 and 3. We collect data from physical and quantifiable reality and use it to develop concepts, model, stories and scenarios. Because this already leaves plenty of room for the both knowledge and imagination, the process can appear complete.

However, between the physical reality and the world of ideas, Popper identifies another domain: World 2, the subjective world of human experience. This is the world of emotions, sensations and personal meaning. It is also the world through which every scenario is, consciously or unconsciously, interpreted. This subjective world is constantly present in (political) decision-making. Decisions about climate, agriculture, spatial planning, infrastructure or healthcare are never only about costs, benefits and feasibility. They are also about trust, loss, belonging and identity.



Why **art** belongs in scenario planning



This is where art comes in. We do not mean that scenarios simply need to be designed more attractively, or that adding beautiful illustrations to a report will automatically make it more effective. Art does something fundamentally different: it creates an emotional encounter between a possible future and the people who must find their place within it. This is particularly important in scenario planning. Scenarios regularly confront participants with painful choices, conflicting values and consequences that are distributed unevenly across different groups. Some people may feel recognised in a particular future; others may see their position, profession or community disappear.

Art can help decision-makers empathise with a perspective they might otherwise reject. Empathy is not the same as sympathy. It does not require someone to agree with another person's position. It asks only that they try to understand the experiences, history or fears from which that position arises.

Treating art as an integral part of scenario planning also prevents emotion from emerging only at the end of a decision-making process, in the form of resistance or distrust. Instead of treating the emotional dimension as a disruption that needs to be managed, we can recognise it as relevant knowledge about what is actually at stake in a decision.

The power of art in practice



Our experience working with Hoogheemraadschap Hollands Noorderkwartier, a Dutch regional water authority, illustrates what art can add to scenario planning. Together with the water authority, we worked on a long-term vision for water management at a time when climate change demands fundamentally different choices. Four future scenarios helped decision-makers explore possible developments.

Artists were an important part of this process. Actors brought the scenarios to life from the perspective of people who might actually inhabit those futures. In doing so, they made participants feel how profound a transformation in water management could be. The struggle against the water is deeply woven into Dutch identity. Yet in one of the scenarios, people who had always believed they were contributing to that struggle suddenly found themselves portrayed as part of the problem. The pride they had once felt had been replaced by a sense of guilt. The artists' contribution made tangible what decisions taken today could mean for people's identities and livelihoods more than twenty years from now.

The artists also played another role. They ensured that the future remained continuously present throughout the conversations involved in developing the long-term vision. Through monologues, music and other interventions, they disrupted the natural tendency to focus on the here and now. Again and again, they redirected attention towards the generations for whom today's decisions are ultimately being made. As a result, the future did not simply appear occasionally as a topic of discussion, but became a perspective from which the entire process could be conducted.

Conclusion: art in futures thinking

Futures thinking has developed considerably over the past few decades. Alongside analysis and data, there is now much more room for scenarios and imagination. This development was necessary because a future that does not yet exist cannot simply be extrapolated from data about the past.

But organisations that want to use scenarios to support real decisions may need to go one step further. Alongside analysis and imagination, human emotion also deserves a place in the process. In our experience, incorporating art can play a valuable role. It creates space for empathy and offers a way to keep the future present throughout an entire decision-making process. In doing so, it can shift conversations away from today's immediate interests and towards the people who will have to live with the consequences of the choices we make.

Art, then, is more than just a medium for presenting scenarios. It allows the future to become a lasting perspective in the decision-making process. Scenarios that are merely analysed provide insight. When people can also engage with possible futures, it creates space conversations that extend beyond the political or administrative dynamic of the moment.



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Authors: Reinier Hattink & Femke Pennink

De Ruijter Strategy

(020) 6250214

info@deruijter.net

www.deruijter.net