

Keynote Tommy Wieringa DDW2025

Optimism without hope

I was invited here today because of an essay I published in April for Philosophy Month.

It is called 'Optimism without hope'.

In it, I argue that hope is a good and useful strategy for problems that can be solved.

Many environmental problems are solvable; a war is solvable.

Without wishing to trivialise them, let's call them short-term problems.

You can be hopeful about a positive outcome – environmental degradation, for example, can be combated through water management and tree planting, and a war can be won or lost or ended at the negotiating table.

Hope can be helpful; hope can change the world.

The big long-term issue is, of course, the climate catastrophe.

We are doing what we can to adapt, but we cannot do anything about global warming itself.

Not even Daan Roosegaarde, who installed Smog Free Towers in several cities around the world to purify polluted air of carbon dioxide.

Studio Roosegaarde uses the captured carbon to make rings for your finger.

These kinds of thin ideas, although presented as revolutionary climate solutions, are more intended for publicity: decoration for public spaces, with the gravitas of Styrofoam.

The big, unsolvable issue is that every kiloton of CO₂ we emit today will remain in the atmosphere for hundreds of years before being reabsorbed into the carbon cycle.

In other words, even if we radically stop emitting greenhouse gases today, global warming will continue for hundreds of years.

Where do you find the hope to counterbalance this?

Hope is only suitable for problems with a natural end or for incongruous desires, such as an afterlife, but not for the climate catastrophe.

Of course, you can hope for a technological quick fix (I assume there are many tech optimists among you here today), but that seems to me to be just as unreasonable as believing in an afterlife.

Compared to the staggering volume of fossil fuel combustion, the technology that can store CO₂ is still in its infancy.

And the chance that we will stop burning fossil fuels and emitting carbondioxide is nil.

Meanwhile, we are crossing one critical planetary boundary after another...

What argues strongly against the principle of hope in the face of the climate crisis is that many people lost hope so quickly once they understood what awaits them in this world configuration.

The loss of hope now seems to have become epidemic.

It is a dangerous moment in time when, in the words of Hannah Arendt, the worst people lose their fear and the best people lose their hope.

We find ourselves at such a dangerous moment in time.

There is a war going on against the truth, fuelled by disinformation and algorithms, people are fearful and lonely and more susceptible to totalitarian temptation than ever, and meanwhile big tech, big oil and far-right strongmen are forging dangerous alliances...

The strongman thrives on fossil fuels, using them to finance his apparatus of power.

He is on the rise all over the world and is waging his war against truth primarily in order to exercise the right of the strongest.

The age of truth, writes philosopher Byung Chul-Han, will have been a brief episode.

What role does this leave for the designers' guild?

The most profitable course of action is, of course, to place yourself in the service of power.

For example, you could design comfortable bunkers for deserting tech plutocrats, who are fleeing *en masse* to safety from the chaos in the world that they themselves helped to create.

Or designing smart survival tools.

Devise crowd-control methods to keep the desperate masses under control.

The possibilities are endless when you serve power.

After the designers' guild under neoliberal capitalism disrupted human contact and shaped social loneliness, it is now time to spice up authoritarianism.

Just as the Palaeocene is followed by the Eocene, the era of neoliberal capitalism is followed by the era of algorithm-driven authoritarianism.

A few years ago, I visited the exhibition 'Design of the Third Reich' in Den Bosch.

It was very interesting to see how every conceivable design – from fonts to Volkswagen cars – can be imbued with the prevailing ideology. Sometimes it's even beautiful.

But of course, being the hopeless idealist that you are, you can also put yourself at the service of the good, the true and the beautiful, where the chance of irrelevance is considerably greater (see Daan Roosegaarde).

Making chairs from waste plastic – nothing wrong with that.

Fitting out a shipping container for a mobile rewilding project – a wonderful thing to do.

Offering comfort with wall hangings for waiting rooms – comfort is good.

However, there is a good chance that these will remain strictly symbolic acts.

But anything other than design in the service of equality, inclusion, community and liveability seems irrelevant to me.

Defending a few scraps of a liveable future is not much, but at least it is something.

Perhaps its meaning lies solely in the comfort of action, in blind action based on a programme of optimism without hope.

Hope may not be a good strategy for the future, but despair is even less so.

Perhaps you should just do what you think is necessary, out of blind optimism, without the hope that things will get better.

This requires a strong, flexible mental attitude, because you have to learn to deal with the sadness of losing the future.

I would like to end with the programmatic words of my essay, which strictly speaking fall outside the actual subject of my lecture, but I am counting on the immeasurable space of your understanding.

They are about how, in the current crisis, we must act more like soldiers, in the service of that remnant of a liveable future, whether by planting trees, gluing ourselves to the motorway or following a programme of intensified creative drive. If the world's leaders are at war with truth, we will have to start a hybrid guerrilla campaign against the power systems they deliberately use to produce disinformation and deceit for profit, while causing irreparable damage to the physical world.

Standing against their power politics are the cardinal virtues of truth and courage.

Live not by lies – Solzhenitsyn knew what he was talking about when he said that.

It's not even that difficult to start, you just have to log out, abandoning the damaging tech systems, no longer producing data, becoming a blank space within a cancelled profile.

It might not seem like much, but it's a beginning.

As Étienne de la Boétie, the prematurely deceased bosom friend of Michel de Montaigne, puts it in his essay about tyranny in *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*: 'I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer.'

The chance of effecting change is small, but a policy of optimism without hope can make you resilient and immune to disappointment.

It drives resistance and subversion, openness, spontaneity and the creative urge in difficult times, the characteristics of free people.

And if it all turns out to be in vain, if the era of truth really was a brief episode and *might is right* gains the upper hand here too, then it will still have existed, this imperfect shining slice of time in which everyone was treated equally in the same circumstances, and truth and facts had a general validity that extended from science to culture and politics; a time in which we stood on the shoulders of giants and not in the shadows of dwarfs.

Even if this all falls, it will forever remain a glow on a dark horizon, the beckoning halo of a distant city, the Athens of Pericles.

We have known it, it has existed, this dazzling everything, it has existed.

- Tommy Wieringa, 20 October 2025