

Philosopher and artist writes a letter to humanity



Foto: Walter Kallenbach

Koert van Mensvoort is an artist and a philosopher. He is the founder of the Next Nature Network, a foundation that investigates and visualises how much we are surrounded by nature that it is becoming our 'next nature'. For Earth Day, he wrote a letter to humanity.

A central point in the Letter to Humanity is the changing relationship between mankind, nature and technology. How did you arrive at the ambitious plan to write a letter to humanity?

The idea of the Letter to Humanity arose during a holiday with a few friends when we asked ourselves the following question: "if you only had a few months left to live, what would you do?" One of us would travel, another would spend all remaining time with his family. I intuitively responded that I would write a letter to humanity. I was surprised by my reaction. Not a letter to my dear wife? Not a letter to my loving family? Not a letter to my countrymen? No, a letter to humanity. The notion was immediately followed by the question "who am I to write a letter to humanity?" No one at all! But, I also realised that I am a human being and that as a human being I could write a letter to humanity if I wanted. More people should do that. We human beings spend

most of the time surviving, caring for our loved ones and chasing happiness. How often do we have the space to concern ourselves with humanity as a whole? I feel blessed that I have the space to think about these things, and with that, also feel obliged to do so.

Why are you writing this letter in particular?

Humanity's role on Earth is something which has fascinated me for a long time. A light went on in my head more than 10 years ago. I realised that we human beings are products of nature, but can also change it at the same time. We human beings are naturally unnatural; a contradiction in itself. I often hear others pitifully complaining that mankind is a type of virus that is ruining and polluting the planet. Although our influence certainly isn't always positive, we cannot generalise our presence here. Mankind has an enormous impact on the planet, but that hasn't always been the case. For a long time, we were a marginal, barely noticeable species of animal somewhere in the middle of the food chain with an impact on our environment no more significant than that of gorillas, butterflies or jellyfish. Due to our inventiveness and technology, we started to dominate our environment. With this, we have created a new situation, a next nature, that may be just as wild and unpredictable as ever. It has become my quest to better understand this changing relationship between mankind, nature and technology. When I noticed that more people were interested in this, I founded Next Nature Network. We conduct studies, initiate publications, expositions and events, and manage the popular website NextNature.net. We have amazing ambassadors, including astronaut André Kuipers, National Geographic television presenter

Jason Silva and people's philosopher Bas Haring. In contrast to the traditional nature movements, we do not aspire towards a return to nature. We must move forward. Evolution continues. How can we find a path towards the future that is both satisfying to mankind and also benefits the planet as a whole? This is important, because ultimately, we may not only have to save the panda and the polar bear, but our own species too. I think there's really something on the line here, and that's why it seemed about time to write a letter to humanity.

What do you hope will happen when people read the letter?

I hope that it will inspire people to develop a new perspective on the role of mankind on Earth. A better understanding of mankind's presence in nature will lead to better choices and, ultimately, to a better balance on our planet. My dream is that every human being alive and all people who haven't yet been born, will read the letter. Admittedly, this is extremely ambitious and I realise that it won't happen. There are seven billion people and I cannot reach all of them. On top of that, many of them are probably concerned with far more concrete things than something as abstract as a letter to humanity. But, I also don't want to underestimate my fellow human beings; humanity is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I wrote the letter on a whim. It doesn't fit on one A4 sheet of paper, but I couldn't shorten it, because this is simply what I have to say. It is a love letter to humanity. A message in a bottle; whoever finds it, may keep it.

When will you be satisfied?

Of course, I'd like it if the letter is read, and that if it touches people emotionally they will share it or even translate it into their own language. My letter is not about tribes, races, or countries, but concerns the place of mankind; today and in the future. I dream large. The ultimate satisfaction would be if, in 50 years or so (I will be in my early 90s by that time and

hopefully still relatively healthy), I could discuss the letter with a 12-year-old, after which the teenager would respond with "we solved all this, didn't we?", and would continue by explaining that he also wrote a letter to humanity with several matters that are of concern in his day and age. This would put a very large smile on the face of an old man. I am exceptionally curious what would be in the letter of a 12-year-old in 2067!

There are still so many things that we cannot oversee today, but that will have a huge impact on mankind in the future. We don't know; we only know that we don't know everything yet. Ultimately, it's not only about my letter. I'm only one of the more than seven billion people on the planet. Barely a drop in the ocean. The most beautiful thing would be if my letter stimulated other people to also write a letter to humanity. I think that the time has come for humanity to give more consideration to our impact on the planet and investigate in which direction we want to head. I don't read a lot about this in the newspaper; it's not on the eight o'clock news. Our leaders are primarily concerned with nationalistic matters and economic currents. The conversation regarding the role of mankind on Earth is barely held and it is precisely that conversation which I hope to unleash. If this letter contributes to that, I will be satisfied.

The letter outlines two possible paths to the future; a nightmare and a dream. What are you looking forward to in the future?

I think that humanity is at a crossroad. Do we take the turn towards the nightmare in which we create our own downfall or do we utilise our inventiveness and creativity for mankind of tomorrow? Humanity is still in adolescence; the time has come to become an adult. Our dream starts with the realisation that being means being underway. Humanity is not a finished article. Planet Earth will change and humanity will change. The question is where we want to go. Do we want to fly like a bird? Live on the moon? Equality

between genders and races? Empathy as an extra sense? Houses that grow alongside the family? Longer lives? I hope that we will use our technology to expand humanity's best characteristics and support us in our weaknesses.

Sustainability, biodiversity, overpopulation, climate change, but also the human expansion in space, are all things that feature in this letter. 22 April is International Earth Day. What can we do about this together?

It is great that there is such a thing as the International Day of the Earth; a day on which we reflect and give attention to the fact that we as human beings – despite our considerable mutual differences – share this one Earth. This is our home; it will have to make do. Earth gives us so much. As a human being, you can ask the question: “what do I give back to Earth?” The next step is that we also spend

all other 364 days of the year living in accordance with this.

How can you stimulate people to think more about these themes?

In addition to the letter to humanity, the Next Nature Network has set up many more stimulating projects, such as an ECO coin that rewards positive, sustainable actions, a fictitious sneaker company that has unleashed a discussion regarding biotechnology, a VR installation about the future of our living environment and an investigation into the impact of in vitro meat. Anyone can support these projects by becoming a member. At present, we already have members in twenty countries. It is our ambition to become the number-one international network for everyone who wants to talk about the balance between biology and technology.

www.nextnature.nl

Lectures by Koert van Mensvoort



Worldwide, Koert van Mensvoort has held more than 300 lectures, amongst which various TEDx talks.

Several examples of lectures:

TEDx in Budapest regarding the Next Nature philosophy: Nature is changing with us, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3pUfj639hM>

TEDx in Ghent regarding the Pyramid of Technology: Truly successful technology becomes part of human nature, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXJB4Ync82c>

TEDx in Aruba regarding the ECO Coin: An alternative currency for ecological values, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpEFu6VudLE>
