



25

The Role of Art Activism in the Prefigurative Politics of Food System Transformation

Sarah Milliken

1 Introduction

In 1982 artist Agnes Denes created *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* on a two-acre site on the Battery Park landfill in Lower Manhattan. Together with a group of volunteers she prepared the soil, planted the seeds, fertilised, weeded and irrigated the crop, harvested it four months later, and sent the seeds to art galleries around the world as part of The International Art Show for the End of World Hunger (1987–1990). Visitors to the exhibits could take the seeds away and plant them, thereby linking the public act of cultivation to a global community of land stewards. Contrasting sharply with the surrounding Wall Street financial district and its associations with inequality and exploitation, *Wheatfield* was the embodiment of alternative values, ‘a symbol, a universal concept; it represented food, energy, commerce, world trade, and economics. It referred

S. Milliken (✉)

School of Design and Creative Industries, University of Greenwich, London, UK

e-mail: S.Milliken@greenwich.ac.uk

© The Author(s) 2026

S. Sareen and S. Juhola (eds.), *Societal Transitions to Sustainability*, Palgrave Studies in Environmental Transformation, Transition and Accountability,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-07395-2_25

to mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological concerns. It called attention to our misplaced priorities' (Denes, 1982). *Wheatfield* therefore served as both a critique of urban capitalist priorities and a vision of an alternative future where agriculture, nature, and human values coexist harmoniously within cities. Despite being a temporary project, *Wheatfield* has entered the canon of art history and has inspired numerous artists to use their work to advance a critique of our food system and actively engage in the search for solutions.

Adopting the definition of prefigurative politics as 'embodied strategies to render desirable futures with immediacy' (Sareen and Juhola, this volume), I explore the role of art activism in the prefigurative politics of food system transformation. Art activism refers to creative practice that intentionally addresses political or social issues, aiming to challenge existing power structures and bring about change. The relationship between art and the politics of food is multifaceted and deeply rooted in how both food and art serve as powerful media for social commentary, resistance, and community engagement. While various authors have started to explore the role of art in prefigurative politics, or the role of prefigurative politics in food system transformation, the disciplinary spaces in which they are discussed and theorised are largely separate, thereby creating a boundary that may hinder productive dialogue and mutual learning. This chapter therefore offers an original contribution by combining the two strands of enquiry.

First, I briefly summarise the nature of the problem with our food system and present Meadows' (1999) leverage points framework which provides a structured way to think about where to intervene in a system to achieve transformative change. I then outline how prefigurative politics manifests in food systems and how these initiatives can be mapped onto the leverage points framework. The next section examines how creative practice has unique potential to engage with the most transformative leverage points by focusing on fundamental myths, paradigms, and systems of meaning-making. This is followed by a brief overview of the literature on creative practice and prefigurative politics. In the final section I bring these various elements together to analyse *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* through the lens of the prefigurative politics of food system transformation.

2 Leverage Points in the Food System

It is widely acknowledged that the current food system generates problematic, undesired, and often unplanned consequences—such as environmental degradation, economic exploitation, malnutrition, food insecurity, increased inequalities, and poverty—and that a transformation towards sustainability is needed. This will be a complex process that must involve changes in many different areas—including consumption, production, trade, and governance—at multiple levels (local, sub-regional, national, and international) and for a wide variety of stakeholders (producers, traders, processors, retailers, consumers, and policy makers).

While the term ‘food system transformation’ is widely used, its meaning often becomes vague or co-opted, and it is used to refer to various types of change, ranging from minor adaptations to radical overhauls (Ingram & Thornton, 2022). Answers to questions about how to change (strategies) or what to change (goals and desired outcomes), and by whom (agents of change), are not always made explicit. While there is a growing recognition that addressing food systems demands systems-based approaches which integrate socio-technical transitions or social-ecological transformation theories, not all studies adopt approaches sensitive to systemic features like complexity and feedback loops (Juri et al., 2024).

In her hierarchy of intervention points for leveraging change, Meadows (1999) argued that the transformational capacity of a given intervention would depend on the characteristics of the system properties that a given intervention acts upon, with some interventions likely to cause transformational change while others will only induce minor changes in outcomes. The twelve intervention points are ranked, progressing from shallow interventions at the top of the hierarchy (easy but with limited impact) to deep interventions at the bottom (challenging but potentially transformative). The least impactful interventions are those that address parameters—the relatively mechanistic characteristics typically targeted by policy makers. These are followed by interventions that address feedbacks—the interactions between elements within a system that drive internal dynamics—and design—the social

structures and institutions that manage feedbacks and parameters. The most impactful interventions are those that address intent—the underpinning values, goals, and worldviews of actors that shape the emergent direction to which a system is oriented (Abson et al., 2017).

The leverage points framework is a meta-perspective that integrates two frequently conflicting perspectives—causality at the top of the hierarchy, and teleology at the bottom—and provides a conceptual space where quite fundamentally different modes of thinking can meet. By recognising the joint importance of both teleology and causality as mechanisms of change it provides a practical way of holistic thinking and intervening in systems by paying attention to what is important, not just what is quantifiable (Fischer & Riechers, 2019).

An intervention is rarely a single intervention at a single leverage point, within a single system (Leventon et al., 2021). Shallow and deep interventions may interact through ‘chains of leverage’, with one type of change in a system precipitating another across different depths of leverage. If such chains do extend to deep leverage points, then a given chain of leverage has the potential to bring about transformative change. In contrast, a chain that only involves shallow leverage points is unlikely to effect transformation (Fischer & Riechers, 2019).

Abson et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of three realms of deep leverage for sustainability transformations—reconnecting people to nature, restructuring institutions, and rethinking how knowledge is created and used in pursuit of sustainability—because of the strong interactions within and between them. For example, changing how knowledge is produced might influence mid-level (feedback, design) and deep (intent) leverage points.

Davelaar (2021) argued that defining broad realms of deep leverage does not bring into sharp focus the most influential and deepest leverage points—paradigm and the power to transcend it—which are the final (teleological) root cause of unsustainability. When the goal of transformation is sustainable practice, it is in the understanding of sustainability that a paradigmatic shift is needed. This requires a radical shift in our worldview towards one which reconceives the human–world bond through the systemic lens of dynamic inclusion, aliveness, purpose and

value, and a corresponding change in how this experience is translated into ways of thinking and doing.

Many sustainability interventions target highly tangible but essentially ineffective leverage points, thus there is an urgent need to focus on less obvious but potentially far more powerful ones (Abson et al., 2017). The promotion of ‘technical fixes’ to address what are often complex multi-dimensional problems implies that sustainability problems can be resolved without consideration of the underpinning structures, values and goals. Policy interventions, for example, typically target shallow leverage points. This is apparent in the many policy instruments that focus on simply adjusting parameters, for example by setting targets or providing financial incentives within existing structures. While such interventions are important and can generate beneficial outcomes, on their own they are unlikely to lead to transformational change. For maximum impact, the transformation strategies should combine deep interventions (shifting goals/rules) with shallow ones (technical fixes) to create synergistic change (Abson et al., 2017).

A balanced approach that combines shallow, mid-level, and deep interventions is therefore necessary for meaningful food system transformation. However, scholarly works (see Juri et al., 2024 for a recent review) reveal a predominant focus on mid-to-shallow leverage points, with emerging but limited engagement with deeper systemic interventions. Shallow leverage points include providing financial incentives for organic farming practices, improving food supply chain logistics, and promoting precision agriculture technologies. Mid-level interventions include enforcing carbon pricing in agriculture, creating participatory governance structure in food systems, and strengthening local food networks. While these can create significant systemic shifts, they often stop short of addressing root causes. Deep leverage points such as fostering shared values about food sovereignty and justice, for example by educating communities about the importance of equitable access to nutritious food and empowering them to demand systemic change, which in turn has the potential to shift societal mindsets and paradigms towards equity and sustainability, are rarely addressed. Dominant scientific discourses and policy interventions tend to mutually reinforce one

another, such that shallower interventions are also favoured in policy at the expense of deep leverage points (Dorninger et al., 2020).

3 The Prefigurative Politics of Food System Transformation

In the context of food system transformation, prefigurative politics refers to actions and practices that embody the principles, values, and structures of a desired future food system within present-day activities. Prefigurative politics in food systems encourages the creation of ‘islands’ of alternative practices—such as ethical consumption, local food networks, and community gardens—that model the principles of justice, sustainability, and participation. This approach is visible in community-supported agriculture, food cooperatives, urban agroecology projects, and food policy councils, where participants create new forms of economic and social organisation that challenge the dominant industrial agri-food system. These efforts are not just about practical alternatives but also about contesting existing power relations, ownership structures, and governance models in food systems, aiming for more distributed and participatory forms of control (Forno & Wahlen, 2024, Koensler, 2020, Tornaghi & Dehaene, 2020).

Prefigurative interventions in food system transformation can be directly mapped onto the leverage points framework. By experimenting with new forms of governance (like participatory food councils) and ownership (co-ops, community land trusts), these initiatives intervene at the level of system design by reshaping rules, information flows, and power dynamics, while those which seek to shift the underlying intent of the food system—from profit and efficiency towards justice, sustainability, and democracy—by creating local food networks or food sovereignty projects align with changing the goals (intent) and paradigms (mindsets) that underpin the system.

A central challenge for prefigurative interventions in food system transformation is scaling up—moving from small, often isolated projects to broader institutional change. This requires building coalitions and

articulating ‘chains of equivalence’ across diverse struggles to universalise these alternatives and challenge the status quo. There is a risk that prefigurative efforts remain fragmented or symbolic if they do not engage with larger structures of power and address the contradictions and cleavages within both alternative and mainstream systems. Prefigurative food politics must also contend with resistance from entrenched interests and dominant institutions that benefit from the current system, making political strategy and coalition-building essential for transformation (Leitheiser & Vezzi, 2024).

4 Creative Practice and Sustainability Transformation

Sustainability challenges are simultaneously scientific and cultural in nature. While scientific discourses have dominated the sustainability literature to date, as drivers of culture the arts have a critical role to play in societal transformation (Heras et al., 2021, Trott et al., 2020). The arts can engage people with new perspectives on sustainability issues by offering opportunities for critical reflection and providing spaces for creative imagination and experimentation. Such processes may be important for contributing to the changes needed to realise transformations to sustainability (Bentz et al., 2022).

Creative practice has unique potential to engage with deep leverage points in sustainability transformations by focusing on fundamental myths, paradigms, and systems of meaning-making (Vervoort et al., 2024). The 9 Dimensions tool was created to support reflective and evaluative dialogues about links between creative practice and sustainability transformations, by bringing together disciplinary perspectives on societal change from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and more. The framework consists of three categories of change, each covering three dimensions. Each dimension, briefly summarised below, provides a unique lens for understanding how creative practice contributes to transformations.

4.1 Changing Meanings (Embodying, Learning, Imagining)

Embodying allows people individually and together to understand different realities first-hand by tapping into the full intelligence of the body, the senses, and experience. Learning that leads to changing basic assumptions, worldviews and knowledge about the world is part of one of the deepest leverage points for sustainability transformations. When people see or experience new ways of being or doing in action that they did not consider possible before, this in turn opens new imaginative possibilities (Vervoort et al., 2024).

4.2 Changing Connections (Caring, Organising, Inspiring)

Care can shape individual and collective imaginations and open new possibilities by fostering relational responsibility and facilitating the trust needed for sustainability transformations to occur. Creative practice can generate reflection, dialogue, the exploration of alternatives, and the clarification of values needed as a basis for organisational change that supports sustainability transformations. It also has the potential to reach, inspire, and activate people and organisations beyond those involved directly in its practice. This can happen both through people directly engaging with the creative practice itself, or through secondary representations and communications (Vervoort et al., 2024).

4.3 Changing Power (Co-Creating, Empowering, Subverting)

Co-creation enables the perspectives and concerns of diverse and perhaps underrepresented groups to be included, and pre-existing notions about the world to be challenged, integrated, and altered. Creative practice has the potential to help empower individuals and groups who are in marginalised positions and/or who champion radical and novel perspectives. The subversion, disruption, and unmaking of current unsustainable

societal structures, regimes, and institutions is a crucial component of transformations towards more sustainable futures. Playful subversive creative practice that challenges and inverts present realities and exposes their absurdity can provide the individual and collective emotional energy and hope needed to develop a shared critical consciousness and to engage with actual subversion (Vervoort et al., 2024).

Creative practice with the most transformative potential combines learning and imagining based in deep, situated embodiment with many possibilities for networked growth, adaptation, and mutation of the practice by others. Care is a powerful dimension that theory and practice show as having strong transformative potential, while co-creative approaches almost always seem to offer more benefits than less co-creative ones, allowing participants to develop co-ownership, relationships and skills, and to share ideas (Vervoort et al., 2024).

5 Creative Practice and Prefigurative Politics

Arts-based interventions have played a key role in enriching and mobilising prefigurative movements all over the world. Creative practice has been used in a myriad of subversive and thought-provoking ways to create counter-narratives, galvanise social movements, strengthen group identities, and communicate with a wider audience (Cathcart Frödén, 2023). Indeed, artistic expression can be seen as part of the strategic toolkit used by these movements to facilitate engagement, education, and outreach (Sanz & Rodriguez-Labajos, 2021, Serafini, 2015).

The practices and values of participatory art projects in particular share similar features with prefigurative social movements. Both are loosely bordered contexts made up of shifting communities and networks that pursue goals of social transformation in diverse and localised ways, and both aspire to create countercultural spaces where the collective imagination can be nurtured, where relationships and mutual care can be prioritised, where voices from the margins can become more audible, and where inequalities can be addressed. Participatory arts and prefigurative social movements can thus be seen as adjacent and intersecting epistemic

communities—spaces in which individuals with different backgrounds and forms of expertise can contribute to collective and interactive efforts to deal with shared problems (Cathcart Frödén, 2023).

McNally (2024) argues that participatory art projects can be understood as a practice of prefigurative politics which involves activist artists directing effort into performing now their vision of a ‘better world’ to come, rather than simply protesting against a dominant regime. These projects assemble publics around specific social justice issues, such as redevelopment and the displacement of marginalised communities, or the decolonisation of public space, to critically reimagine and enact desired futures that radically reconfigure existing oppressive social conditions (McNally, 2024).

6 Art Activism and the Prefigurative Politics of Food System Transformation

In this final section I return to my point of departure, Agnes Denes’ *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, and present it using the 9 Dimensions tool for evaluating how creative practice stimulates societal transformations. I then briefly assess the extent to which the artwork represents ‘embodied strategies to render desirable futures with immediacy’.

Volunteers helped to prepare the soil and plant, tend and harvest the wheat in a collective effort (co-creating), giving them a sense of the physical effort involved in food production (embodying), and encouraging care for the land and awareness of ecological processes (caring). The project highlighted issues of land use, food security, and ecological cycles, prompting public reflection (learning). By transforming a neglected urban space into a productive field, people were invited to imagine alternative uses for city land and a more ecologically integrated urban future (imagining). The project involved coordination with city agencies, volunteers, and organisations, demonstrating new models of civic and artistic collaboration (organising). It has inspired countless public art projects and is widely cited as a pioneering example of land art with a sustainability message (inspiring). The project empowered citizens and artists to believe in the possibility of transforming urban spaces

for ecological and social purposes (empowering) by critiquing urban priorities, capitalism, and the disconnect between nature and finance (subverting).

Wheatfield can be interpreted as embodying aspects of prefigurative politics, though not in a direct or overtly organisational sense as a sustained, collective effort to build new social relations. Firstly, there is the symbolic embodiment of alternative values. By growing wheat—a staple food crop—on some of the most valuable real estate in the world, Denes symbolically enacted the possibility of prioritising basic human needs (food, ecology, sustainability) over speculative finance and urban development. This act can be seen as a prefigurative gesture: it models a world where land is used for nourishment and public good rather than profit and speculation. Secondly it exemplifies activism through action. The work was not merely a critique but an active intervention which involved preparing the soil and planting, tending, and harvesting the wheat, demonstrating the viability, and value of such labour and land use, even in the heart of a financial district. This hands-on approach mirrors the ethos of prefigurative politics, where the means (the act of planting and harvesting) are as important as the ends (the message about priorities and values). After harvest, the seeds were replanted globally—an act of redistribution and sharing that prefigures a society focused on collective welfare and ecological responsibility rather than individual accumulation.

7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented a theoretical and methodological framework for examining the role of art activism in the prefigurative politics of food system transformation and, by way of illustration, applied it to an analysis of Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield—A Confrontation*. It is necessary to point out that *Wheatfield* has been criticised on the basis that the monocrop field, which was fertilised, treated with pesticides, and eventually harvested using heavy machinery, inadvertently echoed the commodification of farming practices by corporate industrial-chemical agribusiness to which the work's anti-capitalist spirit

was otherwise opposed (Demos, 2016, Voelcker, 2024). Nevertheless, *Wheatfield* remains a touchstone in discussions of public art and environmental activism, and while the artwork itself is long gone, the photograph of Denes standing in a golden field with Manhattan's towers looming behind has become a defining symbol of art's power to confront and transform public consciousness.

Art activism has a role to play in the prefigurative politics of food system transformation, by creating living examples of sustainable alternatives, fostering experimentation, challenging dominant systems, cultivating hope and agency, and integrating social and ecological concerns. With its potential to alter worldviews, creative practice can engage with deep leverage points in sustainability transformations and potentially link to structural and institutional change through chains of leverage.

Competing Interests The author has no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this chapter.

References

- Abson, D. J., Fischer, J., Leventon, J., Newig, J., Schomerus, T., Vilsmaier, U., von Wehrden, H., Abernethy, P., Ives, C. D., Jager, N. W., & Lang, D. J. (2017). Leverage points for sustainability transformation. *Ambio*, 46(1), 30–39. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-016-0800-y>
- Bentz, J., do Carmo, L., Schafenacker, N., Schirok, J., & Dal Corso, S. (2022). Creative, embodied practices, and the potentialities for sustainability transformations. *Sustainability Science*, 17(2), 687–699. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-021-01000-2>
- Cathcart Frödén, L. (2023). “Be like water”: Participatory arts, prefigurative social movements and democratic renewal. In A. Bua & S. Bussu (Eds.), *Reclaiming participatory governance: Social movements and the reinvention of democratic innovation* (pp. 104–119). Routledge.
- Davelaar, D. (2021). Transformation for sustainability: A deep leverage points approach. *Sustainability Science*, 16(3), 727–747. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00872-0>

- Demos, T. J. (2016). *Decolonizing nature: Contemporary art and the politics of ecology*. Sternberg Press.
- Denes, A. (1982). *Wheatfield—A confrontation* (1982). Commissioned by the public art fund. Republished in E. Enderby (Ed.) (2019). *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and intermediates* (pp. 256–257). The Shed.
- Dorninger, C., Abson, D. J., Apetrei, C. A., Derwort, P., Ives, C. D., Klaniecki, K., Lam, D. P. M., Langsenlehner, M., Riechers, M., Spittler, N., & von Wehrden, H. (2020). Leverage points for sustainability transformation: A review on interventions in food and energy systems. *Ecological Economics*, 171, Article 106570. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106570>
- Fischer, J., & Riechers, M. (2019). A leverage points perspective on sustainability. *People and Nature*, 1(1), 115–120. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan.3.13>
- Forno, F., & Wahlen, S. (2024). Prefiguration in everyday practices: When the mundane becomes political. In L. Monticelli (Ed.), *The future is now: An introduction to prefigurative politics* (pp. 119–129). Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.51952/978152915687.ch008>
- Heras, M., Galafassi, D., Oteros-Rozas, E., Ravera, F., Berraquero-Díaz, L., & Ruiz-Mallén, I. (2021). Realising potentials for arts-based sustainability science. *Sustainability Science*, 16(6), 1875–1889. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-021-01002-0>
- Ingram, J., & Thornton, P. (2022). What does transforming food systems actually mean? *Nature Food*, 3, 881–882. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-022-00620-w>
- Juri, S., Terry, N., & Pereira, L. M. (2024). Demystifying food systems transformation: A review of the state of the field. *Ecology and Society*, 29(2), Article 5. doi:<https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-14525-290205>.
- Koensler, A. (2020). Prefigurative politics in practice: Concrete utopias in Italy's food sovereignty activism. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 25(1), 133–150. <https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671-25-1-133>
- Leitheiser, S., & Vezzoni, R. (2024). Joining the ideational and the material: Transforming food systems toward radical food democracy. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 8, Article 1307759. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2024.1307759>
- Leventon, J., Abson, D. J., & Lang, D. J. (2021). Leverage points for sustainability transformations: Nine guiding questions for sustainability science and practice. *Sustainability Science*, 16(3), 721–726. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-021-00961-8>

- McNally, D. (2024). Participatory art and geography: Politics, publics, and space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 48(5), 537–551. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325231219698>
- Meadows, D. (1999). *Leverage points. Places to intervene in a system*. Sustainability Institute. https://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Leverage_Points.pdf
- Sanz, T., & Rodriguez-Labajos, B. (2021). Does artistic activism change anything? Strategic and transformative effects of arts in anti-coal struggles in Oakland, CA. *Geoforum*, 122, 41–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.03.010>
- Serafini, P. (2015). Prefiguring performance: Participation and transgression in environmentalist activism. *Third Text*, 29(3), 195–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2015.1082789>
- Tornaghi, C., & Dehaene, M. (2020). The prefigurative power of urban political agroecology: Rethinking the urbanisms of agroecological transitions for food system transformation. *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 44(5), 594–610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2019.1680593>
- Trott, C. D., Even, T. L., & Frame, S. M. (2020). Merging the arts and sciences for collaborative sustainability action: A methodological framework. *Sustainability Science*, 15(4), 1067–1085. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00798-7>
- Vervoort, J. M., Smeenk, T., Zamuruieva, I., Reichelt, L. L., van Veldhoven, M., Rutting, L., Light, A., Houston, L., Wolstenholme, R., Dolejšová, M., Jain, A., Ardern, J., Catlow, R., Vaajakallio, K., Falay von Flittner, Z., Putrle-Srdić, J., Lohmann, J. C., Moosdorff, C., Mattelmäki, T., Ampatzidou, C., Choi, J. H., Botero, A., Thompson, K. A., Torrens, J., Lane, R., & Mangnus, A. C. (2024). 9 dimensions for evaluating how art and creative practice stimulate societal transformations. *Ecology and Society*, 29(1), Article 29. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-14739-290129>
- Voelcker, B. (2024). Cultivating hinterland: What lies behind Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield*? In P. Gupta, S. Nuttall, E. Peeren & H. Stuit (Eds.), *Planetary hinterlands: Extraction, abandonment and care* (pp. 51–63). Palgrave Macmillan.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

