

Between utopia and dystopia lies the land of knowledge or how to stimulate social discourse based on facts rather than fear.

Basic research is difficult to explain. Everything we work on now may have almost any consequence in the future, whether desired or not. Let's take CRISPR/Cas9 as an example: We are in the process of refining the technique and finding areas of application, from curing disease to resurrecting extinct species, saving the banana to human enhancement. None of these applications are guaranteed to happen, but most of them probably will. We as a society should be responsible for the HOW. But how do we, scientists, begin the conversation? How do we discuss our desired future with CRISPR/Cas9 without creating fear or selling unjustified hope? How do we create a realistic picture of what genetic engineering can or cannot achieve without returning to the classic one-way communication mode? Our answer is: through cooperation between art and science.

As part of the European project ORION, which aim is to promote Open Science, we conducted an artist residency on gene editing at the Max-Delbrück-Center for Molecular Medicine (MDC) in cooperation with the STATE studio. 40 artists from 12 countries applied to our open call. The task was to create an art-piece based on a true understanding of gene editing which stimulates curiosity and discussions about the method.

The selected artist, Emilia Tikka, spent three months in our research laboratories and refined her concept, which is speculative in design, but actually founded in real science.

The resulting art-piece, "ÆON: trajectories of longevity and CRISPR", was and still is highly praised by art, science and media circles. It was exhibited and used as stimulus material for a public dialogue on gene editing in Germany, Czechia, UK and Sweden and continues to provoke reflection on what society we want to grow old in (or not).