



# Excellence Is Daring | Thomas Schönauer, The Favela Foundation

April 23rd, 2024

***Thomas Schönauer, the Engineering Artist and Founder of The Favela Foundation, explores the intersection of art and leadership, his journey through art, the importance of daring, and the precariousness of fear in this Leading Through Disruption interview with The ExCo Group EMEA Managing Director, Dr. Anastassia Lauterbach.***

**Lauterbach:** Could you please briefly describe how you got to the place you are in today?

**Schönauer:** I studied philosophy and literature first and was very happy in my field, willing to pursue a professorship. Then, I met Friedrich Werthmann, a fascinating artist who required assistance preparing big museum shows. I joined his team, and that was it! I craved haptic experiences and the ability to learn about materials and statics. Christo and Jeanne-Claude stayed a lot in Werthmann's house. Being around them made me realize the importance of energy flow in making art. I became friends with incredible photographers like Bernd and Hilla Becher. Andreas Gursky and I shared our first studios. The Bechers encouraged me to go to an art school. Studying art wasn't the most helpful investment of my time. In opposition, traveling to India and South America sharpened my understanding of what was important in landscapes and architecture. As a student in the famous Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf and Manitoba Institute of Design (Canada), I started participating in competitions, finally winning some. I kept learning and working.

Talent isn't everything for an artist. It is about discipline and 15 to 17 hours of daily work. I did precisely this, becoming increasingly successful.

Then I met my wife, who was very important for my life and work. She really helped me create a family and develop my artistry and business. We lived in Brazil for about 10 years. As an example, I could travel, developing several landscapes in the Middle East. You can only do it with an understanding partner!

German collectors started approaching me, and the BDA (Bund Deutscher Architekten) made me their honorary member in 2012. My friend Frank Dopheide, Chairman of Grey, Germany, invented the claim "The Engineering Artist" to describe what I do.

About 15 years ago, I met Andreas Kipar, one of Europe's most famous landscape architects. Together, we did incredibly moving projects, such as those in Wittenberg, on behalf of the 500-year Lutheran area. We are collaborating very intensively in Saudi Arabia right now. When asked about my project approach today, it is all about urban and landscape planning, not just about developing sculptures. This plan aims to improve people's living conditions. Social impact is paramount in my life and work. I created a foundation in Rio de Janeiro called Favela Educacion. It helps children from poor upbringings foster school and after-school educational activities.

**Lauterbach:** How do you define art?

**Schönauer:** Art is the expression of non-linear thinking going beyond traditional functional thinking. Art aims to activate your broad horizon and has nothing to do with functional reasoning or intention. Art is about daring to jump into cold water, unlash your inner freedom to open up and experiment. The more you free yourself while swimming in this cold water, the more accessible you become to find new ideas and ways to do things. Art is about materialized thoughts. My studies in philosophy helped me tremendously shape my views on art as a thinking pursuit, leading to a broad social impact and caring for people who have no chance to improve their living conditions.

**Lauterbach:** Your sculptures can be found in very distinct landscapes. What do you think about a dialogue between nature and architecture, landscapes and sculptures?

**Schönauer:** This is a very intensive relationship. I'm doing acupuncture on the landscape, emphasizing energy centers like chakra points. Energy flow is critical; therefore, I wouldn't think about putting sculptures in any random place or just because someone asks me to. When I apply my art acupuncture to free energy, people will feel it.

None of my large-scale pieces got vandalized; I believe this is because viewers have respect and a sense of positivity while looking at them. I'm doing a massive project in the center of Saxony. The municipality is afraid of attacks. I am totally relaxed because people feel positive energy without understanding.

**Lauterbach:** How do you get your inspiration?

**Schönauer:** My inspiration comes from talking to fantastic people like yourself.

**Lauterbach:** This interview appears in my Leadership Newsletter. I dedicate considerable time to developing it because, in times of poly-crisis, only the human factor and courageous and outspoken

leadership can save the planet. Do you believe leadership has something to do with art?

**Schönauer:** Art influences thinking; it is even a form of thinking, and thinking shapes attitude, which relates very much to society. Decades ago, leadership was perceived as something linear, and look where it got us. People like Putin claim to be leaders and believe they can enforce a fellowship. This attitude kills any kind of creativity or any kind of self-improving mechanism for society.

**Lauterbach:** Your collectors are entrepreneurs, hospitals, and communities. When you talk to your clients, what recurring themes do you hear from them that might not have been there 10 or 15 years ago?

**Schönauer:** Bashar al-Assad and Putin started the war in Syria. As a consequence, Western Europe was flooded with refugees. This changed how the previous world worked. It was the end of looking for answers with linear thinking in the background. Since then, many good leaders have developed a culture of questioning before giving answers and solutions. Listening before speaking puts you on a healthy path. It allows for the promotion of initiatives within the teams. Forget the style of Winterkorn-like bosses of Volkswagen or their soulmates at Daimler. There might be some of them around, but they won't experience any long-term stability as a result of their style. This is because everything is in flux. Change is the new normal. Non-linear problem-solving and looking behind the corners come in vogue, even if the old habits die hard.

**Lauterbach:** As a leader, how do you liberate a human into thinking creatively and trying new things?

**Schönauer:** It's a good question because it is all about eliminating fears. Fear is the biggest impediment to developing companies and society. Look at someone like Putin, Trump, or Xi Jinping. They're all fear guys. However, reducing individual and societal fears allows creativity to flow.

**Lauterbach:** I am worried sick about countries such as Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Austria slipping into mass retirement this decade without having a clear vision of the future. We aren't just running out of children; we are running out of adults to keep GDP at the level of 2019, probably the last year before big storms. What is your opinion on your home country, Germany? Can it turn around?

**Schönauer:** Germany is involved in high-speed running against the wall and is about attitude, not the financial foundation. To keep the existing standard of living, people must work. Maybe a real crash is needed to make people reconsider. Once Germany gets to an absolute bottom, things might start getting improved. Apparently, doing well is a recipe for complacency, only that we can't afford any of it to evolve.

**Lauterbach:** Automation might be a partial answer to top up a demographically challenged workforce. We might have yet to figure out what an excellent combination of humans and machines is in a team. I love quoting Pablo Picasso, who apparently said: "Computers are very stupid. They just give answers." We require humans to ask good questions. What is the role of art in helping leaders think more broadly about the future, be it addressing environmental challenges or implementing necessary automation and AI in businesses to balance future GDP?

**Schönauer:** We must educate leaders while constantly learning from them and adjusting our thinking. Self-initiative and responsibility are critical. Everybody blames politicians, but they are just mirrors of society's center. We vote people without a vision into office. I hope for exceptions and am looking for them everywhere.

**Lauterbach:** How do you think about collaboration between humans and machines? Do you think it will come gradually and naturally?

**Schönauer:** I have no idea. Some artists are working with AI, but how Intelligent or Artificial is this thing? It's more sophisticated programming, at the end of the day. I frequent shows of those working with data technologies; some people are brilliant. I visited Pinacoteca in San Paolo a couple of years ago to see a brilliant show featuring some Chinese artists. They created fantasy words, which I loved. But what they used wasn't AI, at least not in my eyes.

**Lauterbach:** How do you define excellence in art?

**Schönauer:** The art market has an entirely different definition of excellence than I do. Excellence is daring. As an example, I have always worked with steel. Now, I want to make my Cultivator pieces in glass. I understood it would be a complex undertaking. I went to different glass productions in the world, including Murano. Everyone told me that executing my vision in glass wouldn't be possible. Apparently, they were simply afraid. And then I met a glass company near Vienna. They weren't concerned about going beyond their habitual borders to do what I needed. This is excellence for me. I am not worried about what the so-called establishment is thinking.

**Lauterbach:** This is a beautiful story, but wasn't the history of artistic innovation full of examples like this? When impressionists started, they were thrown out of the Academy. Caravaggio used beggars and prostitutes as models for his monumental religious paintings, and they breathed life in times when something sacred had to be separated from something real.

**Schönauer:** Trying and daring are what propel us forward. Do it, iterate, adjust, and carry on!