

Introduction to the focus topic

On the importance of the cultural sector for a societal transformation

By Christopher Garthe

The cultural sector is in a state of flux: globalisation and conflicts about the restitution of cultural objects, digitalisation and the reaction to crises, the attacks on artworks by climate activists and sustainability requirements. This dynamic has produced a multitude of networks, projects and activities. It seems, however, as if the implementation of sustainability in the cultural sector is somewhat lacking a joint discourse or a common frame of reference [1]. It therefore is appropriate to pause for a moment and reflect on the importance of culture for the transformation process towards sustainability.

Culture as a practice of transformation

An understanding of culture as practice also includes that behavioural patterns and actions of daily life are understood as practising culture. Culture, creative industries and art thus have a fundamental function for the cohesion of society and its advancement. Against the background of this understanding of culture, it becomes clear that sustainable culture is the fundamental prerequisite for a successful transformation towards more sustainability.

The cultural sector thus has an important role to play, as it can actively contribute to thinking up and implementing new sustainable practices of daily life. If the cultural sector has this central role, however, the question arises as to what the specific potentials of culture are to support sustainability: How can cultural practitioners and cultural institutions be most effective for a Great Transformation?

Culture between advocacy and autonomy

Numerous sustainability initiatives in the cultural sector emphasise the negative environmental effects, e.g. the energy consumption of museum depots, and thus focus in their activities on ecological efficiency of operating cultural institutions.

However, following the line of reasoning from above, the most important aspect in supporting a transformation towards sustainability is an outward orientation, i.e. focusing on societal impacts and not optimising internal processes. Eventually, the key to the effectiveness of the cultural sector lies in advocacy and activism for sustainability. Such a politicisation of the cultural sector poses numerous challenges: This starts with obvious consequences for often publicly funded institutions and does not end with the question of the artistic autonomy: the value of creative practice and cultural institutions lies, among others, in providing an open space of discourse where pluralism and purposelessness are possible and cherished.

The cultural sector will become a key driver of sustainability when it grasps its relevance for transformation and embraces the dilemmas associated with quasi-political engagement, creatively developing a culture of transformation. The articles of the following special issue illustrate various approaches of addressing this challenge.

Annotation

- [1] Concepts, activity areas and concrete implementation paths for sustainability in cultural institutions are outlined in: Garthe, C. (2022): Das nachhaltige Museum. Vom nachhaltigen Betrieb zur gesellschaftlichen Transformation. transcript. An English version will be published shortly by Routledge: <https://routledge.pub/The-Sustainable-Museum>

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