

Postface:

Seven points for an agenda of research and action on cultures and arts for sustainability

Sacha Kagan and Hans Dieleman¹

In Lüneburg (Germany) in March-April 2007, a group of social scientists, artists and activists from different horizons and different continents, gathered and talked about sustainability during the 2007 ESA Arts RN conference “New Frontiers in Arts Sociology: Creativity, Support and Sustainability”. The contributions in this volume further elaborated on this emergent conversation. We propose the following 'agenda' as an invitation to expand the conversation and initiate new research and action for arts and sustainability. Its normative and prescriptive format shall be considered as a proposal in flux rather than as a fixed manifesto.

1. Work in inter-and preferably transdisciplinary teams with artists, scientists and civil society

The combination of social scientists, artists and activists gives an added value, compared to the usual conferences where only the scientists convene. The same issue applies to the art worlds when their members end up exchanging with peers in closed circles. The interaction allows opening up the perceptions and conceptualizations of reality and it helps prevent and cure their closure. Transdisciplinarity in general can heal the wounds of specializations and put back together the pieces of a fragmented reality. We thus call forward more work in teams of artists, scientists, activists, engineers, managers and other members of civil society, business and public institutions.

Never take your team's interdisciplinary diversity for granted

In these teams, the pluralism occasioned by disciplinary diversity is the yeast that will open up new understandings and opportunities. Thus this diversity should be cherished and refreshed. Institutionalization and fossilization of successful teams into self-sufficient units is a risk to be monitored and checked. 'Art and sustainability' and 'cultures of sustainability' should not become yet another specialized discipline building its institutions as new academic, artistic or political fortresses.

2. Cherish and engage into several forms of ecopoietic reflexivity

Dieleman (in this volume) discussed the importance of building capabilities for reflexivity in the contemporary context, and he outlined a number of possible forms of reflexivity. The importance of reflexivity also appeared throughout the other contributions in this volume. Artists, philosophers, scientists and practitioners each have specific possibilities to contribute to spreading values associated

¹ This text was written by Sacha Kagan, based on and building upon a previous text by Hans Dieleman available under the title “The Lueneburg Agenda of Art and Sociology for Sustainability” (published on www.artopie.info in April 2007). Dieleman's initial text gave rise to an online conversation in the Cultura21 international network, available online at: http://www.cultura21.net/dokuwiki/doku.php/orange:conversation:lueneburg_agenda ...

to reflexivity and to developing skills of reflexivity. Sustainability as a change process, calls forward multiple reflexivities and not only the more 'rational' types of reflexivity. In Oleg Koefoed's words, "the point is not one of institutions, but of the events of reflective activity making their appearance in society."

The forms of reflexivity that sustainability requires are not egocentric, sociocentric or ethnocentric: They are ecopoietic reflexivities, engaged in a constant learning process with their environments. These reflexivities feed on inter- and transdisciplinary interactions. And reflexivities feed back the opened-up perceptions and conceptualizations of reality that transdisciplinary work is seeking.

3. Cherish and engage into interculturality

The relevance of intercultural interaction and intercultural competence for sustainability has been demonstrated, time and again at conferences and interculturality is proclaimed as a priority by international organizations such as the UNESCO.

Bergh (in this volume) analyzed some of the conditions under which artistic practices may foster effective intercultural interaction, allowing conflict transformation.

We view cultural diversity as a pendant to biodiversity, and we encourage research and action into interculturality, as an integral part of research and action on arts and cultures for sustainability.

4. Diagnose, understand and heal from unsustainability

The questions of sustainability stimulate news ideas and new practices. But they also raise an awareness of the diseased condition of globalization-as-usual. One difficult question in the cultural agenda for sustainability is: "What do we need to destroy for sustainability?" Another difficult set of questions deals with gaining the awareness of our own limits as human beings living on a finite world. As copilots of spaceship earth, we shall acknowledge that our creative capabilities have limits. The cultures of 'unlimited growth' and 'unlimited technological progress' belong to a syndrome of unsustainability, together with the culture of consumption, and the search for a cure is the most radical challenge facing the cultural strategy of sustainability.

Transdisciplinary teams of arts & sciences for sustainability should inquire into unsustainability, self-healing and humility, gaining a self-awareness keeping in balance the hubris of creativity.

5. Intervene and undertake

Our agenda of research and action for sustainability aims at practice. We aim to work as action researchers (action artists, action scientists, action philosophers, etc.) and as intervening researchers. We aim not to retreat for a long period of time into mere observation and criticism of reality or into pure theory. As interveners, we strive to elaborate interventionist tactics and strategies, undertaking what Kagan (in this volume) qualified as "entrepreneurship in conventions".

A number of cases of 'action research' in scientific and educational communities and a number of cases of 'social sculpture', 'intervention art' and other practices in art worlds, have shown interesting potentials in this perspective and need to be further explored.

We shall be reflexive about interventions and we shall intervene upon our reflexivity.

6. Address the industry, critically, but also constructively

Sacco et al. (in this volume) addressed some of the issues of cultural strategies for sustainable economic development. The relationships between culture, development and sustainability shall also be addressed in the work agenda of research and action on arts and cultures for sustainability.

Mora as well as Verdi (in this volume) analyzed the contemporary introduction of 'fair trade' in the creative industry of fashion. The issues related to cultural industries should indeed be given careful attention and be acted upon, both with the perspective of syndromes of unsustainability, and with the perspective of a reorientation of cultural industries towards sustainability. If consumption and aesthetics are more and more important in shaping identities in contemporary life, how far is the new consumerism around the ethics and aesthetics of fair trade, more than just cosmetics? How far is it introducing the public interest in the private domain, and what may this imply?

7. Work on the notions of 'Sustainability Art' and of 'Cultures of Sustainability'

The construction of a notion of 'sustainability art', grounded on a theoretical inquiry and offering an arena for exchanges between artists, activists and researchers from different horizons, should be engaged into. This work will first of all encourage and support those artists, activists and researchers already working on themes and issues of sustainability, but who may feel relatively 'lonely' in their research process, as we witnessed time and again in the past years. Furthermore, it will allow to explore the possible common grounds and synergies between the already existing movements of eco-art, intervention art, institutional critique, tactical media (and culture jamming), community art, art in public space, intercultural arts and others (e.g. performance art, heirs of Russian constructivism, heirs of Brecht in theatre, of Boal's forum theatre, etc.) and even the more superficially engaged movements of 'relational aesthetics' and 'contextual art'...

The notion of 'sustainability art' also points at specific ways of working, along the points listed above (i.e. inter- and transdisciplinary, reflexive, intercultural, critical and interventionist) and, as argued in the introduction to this volume, it especially encourages systems thinking and practices engaging into the interconnections of ecological, socio-economic and cultural issues.

The notion of "cultures of sustainability" deals with the ensemble of issues, themes and formats explored throughout this volume. Can we identify some trans-culturally applicable, common elements or shared characteristics in various cultures of sustainability across the planet? Notions such as openness, exchange, learning, complexity, ecopoiesis and systems thinking have popped up across this volume, and deserve further elaboration in the context of this notion of "cultures of sustainability". Assumed imperfection and humility also come into play here, as the search process of sustainability is not to be mistaken for an illusory belief in a fixed-state utopia.

This tentative agenda for research and action takes part in an ongoing conversation which is being engaged in the "Cultura21 International Network" that started up at the ESA Arts RN conference in Lüneburg, in April 2007. Readers interested in this area of inquiry are invited to visit the network's

website at www.cultura21.net as well as its wiki at www.cultura21.net/dokuwiki/ and are welcome to enter in contact with us.