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Prefiguring Sustainability: Response-Ability & Spaces of Possibility

Sacha Kagan

We must stop thinking and working in silos – and in terms of so-called “pillars” of sustainability (whether the environmental, economic, social or cultural “pillar”), reproducing the failed mental models that brought us where we are. In the following lines, I suggest an engagement for arts organisations that is not merely about sustainability awareness-raising (with a narrow focus on the environmental as a separate concern), nor just about environmental management at the arts-organisations, however urgent and useful such approaches are. Sustainability is about re-inventing worlds; it is a cultural project. Cultural (and arts) organisations are bearers of "spaces of possibilities" towards sustainable futures. This is not just about professional artists (who of course can be very inspiring initiators), or about artists in social practice and communities (also playing essential roles), but it is also about sharing response-ability for more diffused artful doing and learning by local communities in spaces of challenging experience, imagination and experimentation.

Arts Organisations and sustainability as an integrated multi-dimensional search process

Arts organisations (like any human organisations) work in complex and rapidly changing environments – or rather than “environments”, we should rather say: in unfolding “worlds” co-evolving with the organisation. These worlds are multi-dimensional: physical, ecological, social, economic, political, historical and cultural. Worlds are made of dynamic encounters of things, people, other living beings, places and times... Many of these are related to each other in specific, multiple ways – even though it is a lazy and dangerous simplification to just claim that 'everything is related to everything else'.

Sustainability is a normative search process which aims to address these worlds as a whole – not seeing them as a collection of separate domains (with the very unfortunate image of “pillars” of sustainability)¹, but seeing the personal, the social, economic, political, cultural and ecological realities as different levels, dimensions of worlds (or inter-related ecologies as Felix Guattari famously suggested)². Sustainability is not a fixed normative picture, like a fixed model or template. Because reality is complex, changing and contextual, sustainability

¹ Joost Dessein, Katriina Soini, Graham Fairclough, and Lummina Horlings (Eds.), 'Culture in, for and as Sustainable Development. Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 Investigating Cultural Sustainability' { <http://www.culturalsustainability.eu/conclusions.pdf> }, University of Jyväskylä, 2015.

² Felix Guattari. 'Les trois écologies', Galilée, 1989.

too is a constantly changing horizon, a search process that constantly needs to be revised and critically reviewed. Sustainability as a search process seeks no universal, but transversal properties which allow translocal exchanges and translations, thanks to inter- and transcultural learning.

This is not to say that the dimensions are only instrumental to each other. The 4 or 5 dimensions of sustainability each hold intrinsic value and point to specific goals: The **ecological** dimension is foundational for everything else, and points us to the existence-value (and not only use-value) of many forms of life than constitute ecosystems around us and often together with us, whether in cities, in rural areas or in more-or-less wild areas. The **social** dimension points to the imperative of justice, for all groups in a society, which means developing a dynamic awareness to the situations of any marginalized groups and to the dynamics of injustice. The **cultural** dimension points to the value of culture, i.e. the vitality of cultural and artistic expressions in their diversity, allowing a rich cultural life, guarding against cultural homogenisation, and linking a living cultural heritage to cultural change. The **economic** dimension seeks economic viability, not only of the arts organisation itself, but also of other organisations and agents with which the organisation is related. The economic dimension of sustainability points to the question of desirable and sufficient wealth and well-being, which often can be achieved through diverse forms of mixed economies ([1] market, [2] public ; [3] gift ; and [4] an economy of the commons (through shared community stewardship of available common resources)). The personal dimension points to individual self-development and fulfillment.

Arts organisations therefore need to gain an integrated understanding of these contexts for their work, and then they need to especially develop:

- sound practices of environmental management;
- practices that open up to all layers of society, including marginalised minorities and seeking social justice;
- enlivenment of the cultural dimension (see the following paragraph);
- personal fulfillment of employees, volunteers, partners and audiences;
- and practices that are economically viable for oneself and for others (also questioning the typical economic self-exploitation of the creative sector).

As cultural organisations, arts organisations deal, more explicitly than other organisations, with the structures of meanings that we find and that we shape in the world around us: the worldviews that we hold, the values that we cherish and that we practice, and things that are speaking back to us. Arts organisations contribute to the changes in the symbolic universe that we build and inhabit, and which is full of sensory realities, sights and sounds, smells and tastes, sensations and movements. Engaging with culture, as an arts organisation, means playing an important role in society, contributing to shape the systems of meanings in that society. This does have long-term impacts. Arts organisations thus have a special responsibility towards the cultural dimension of sustainability – in the sense of “**cultural sustainability**”.

Cultures are also a fundamental key in the search process of sustainability, when looking at all dimensions of sustainability together, in an integrated way – in the sense of “**cultures of sustainability**”. There will not be a shift of civilisation towards sustainability without a fundamental shift in contemporary culture, towards an aesthetically grounded understanding and respect for life in all its human and other-than-human complexity.

This means, for the arts organisation, to enrich the symbolic universe which is attached to the local realities – a kind of “enlightened localism”(as discussed by Manickam Nadarajah)³... and to enrich the symbolic universe which is attached to global realities, at the level of the whole planet – a kind of planetary consciousness of humanity as a species (as discussed by Edgar Morin)⁴. It also implies not only the development of certain ethical values (beyond a simplistic green moralism), but also the enrichment and diversification of our skills, competences and ways of knowing reality.

Constituencies and response-ability

Sustainability is a normative search process, questioning society, not just looking at the world around and describing it with a detached gaze. It requires that the arts organisations develop a “response-ability”, an ability to respond to issues of unsustainability. This means first of all, an ability to respond to the multiple constituencies inhabiting the immediate environment as well as the rest of the world.

To be able to respond to constituencies and the issues they face, arts organisations first have to recognise all their constituencies and to acknowledge them. We can visualize such constituencies along three axes of space, time and otherness:

- One axis goes from the local level to the planetary level...
- A second axis goes from the long dead to the not-yet-born...
- A third axis goes from the human to the many others (that is, non-humans).

Some arts organisations may still fail to engage all of the local human constituencies: for example, among the inhabitants of a city, many non-visitors may be considered a “lost cause” by certain arts organisations. Sustainability requires to seriously engage with the diversity of local communities rather than stick to the niche audiences who do walk into the theatre. For example, the multicultural appeal of arts organisations is often still lacking (in some cases even despite genuinely emerging efforts).

The response-abilities of arts organisations are not, however, limited to engaging with immediate situations. They are relating to historical heritage as well as to future generations. Furthermore, sustainability also calls attention to our community with non-humans. For example, the local ecosystem of the river that flows through a city, demands to be attended to, not only in very concrete terms (with art managers implementing good practice in environmental management), but also in symbolic terms (e.g. the symbolic relationships of the city to its river and to the river's ecosystem).

The constituencies also include humans and non-humans that are far away from the local environment of an arts organization. Whether for geopolitical reasons – if we think of the Syrian refugees, who in Europe were long felt as 'far away' by many... until the reality-check came closer to home, revealing the un-reflected selfishness of many Europeans; or if we think of LGBTQI people who are persecuted in Uganda, Russia and too many other countries -,or for global ecological reasons – when we refer to climate change and the many communities

³ Manickam Nadarajah, Ann Tomoko Yamamoto (Eds.), ‘Urban crisis: Culture and the sustainability of cities’, Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2007.

⁴ Edgar Morin, ‘L’an I de l’ère écologique’, Paris: Tallandier, 2007. See also: Edgar Morin, ‘La méthode’, Paris: Seuil, 2008.

affected worldwide -, any art organisation needs to address the issues related to our global interconnections, and planetary responsibilities as one fast-growing species on this planet.

If arts organisations aim to seriously relate to these diverse constituencies (as some are already doing), and to have cultural impacts, they need to further develop their approaches and formats to enhance their response-ability to this world. This includes, for an arts administrator/manager, to think beyond existing “performance indicators” and develop new ones. This requires creativity and a qualitative turn, looking beyond the existing, mostly quantitative, indicators about revenues, attendance numbers, etc. **Arts organisations need to develop qualitative performance indicators that address the multiple dimensions of sustainability**, and that can give a meaningful feedback about the effectiveness and the limits of the work done so far. One attempt to develop such a tool emerged in Canada: Douglas Worts and his colleagues developed a few years ago a set of qualitative performance indicators for self-assessment by museums, called the “Critical Assessment Framework”⁵, which focuses especially on the levels of individuals (visitors and non-visitors), communities (locally) and the museum (the staff and volunteers at the own organisation). As Douglas Worts himself argued meanwhile, such an evaluation framework would need further expansion, to also include relations with other organisations, as well as the ecology and society of whole regions and the entire planet.

Grounding spaces of possibility in artistic inquiry

Thanks to artistic openness to the new and to continuous learning, arts organisations have a great potential to become, not only learning organisations (i.e. organisations that are continuously learning and evolving, developing themselves), but also open learning spaces for others.

This potential needs to be tapped into. Sustainable development requires transversal, creative ideas and approaches to new problems facing society. This is where artists come to the forefront. A growing number of artists are dealing with issues of social, economic, political, intercultural and/or ecological natures (as I discussed in the book *Art and Sustainability*)⁶, which all can shed new lights on questions of sustainable development. The role of the arts organisation, in this process, is to accompany, support and foster such artistic inquiries. It is to provide the space of free play that the artists need in order to be able to share their inquiries with others. But it is also to challenge and stimulate artists to further develop and realize their perspectives in relation to the locality where the art organisation is placed.

As many arts organizations are well-aware of, artists can bring perspectives that help develop critical reflexivity in society (when they are not content with playing within the sandbox of the art worlds):

⁵ Douglas Worts, *Measuring Museum Meaning: A Critical Assessment Framework*, *The Journal of Museum Education*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2006, pp. 41-49. {<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40283905>}

⁶ Sacha Kagan, ‘Art and Sustainability: Connecting patterns for a culture of complexity’, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2011.

- They can make us become aware of routines, social conventions, habits and other aspects of our lives, of which we are barely aware (or fully unaware). They can defreeze them and invite us to try out alternatives.
- They can shape new aesthetic experiences that open up our perception to the intricate complexity of our environment, while making it accessible. They can shape symbols and reshape the symbolic values of any aspect of everyday life. This symbolic work is very important for cultural change.
- They can help us engage in new situations with an experimental attitude that is open to sensorial and intuitive knowledge, as well as to lateral thinking (thinking in metaphors instead of thinking in a narrowly deductive way), and thinking by doing instead of first thinking and then doing.⁷ All these qualities of “artful doing” are not reserved to artists alone. They can become contagious.

Through sharing these different reflexive perspectives, the artists may be able to provoke detachment from lazy thinking, enchantment to envision alternative realities, and empowerment to experiment with change. These qualities of artistic inquiry, and the creative processes they awaken, should be at the core of the arts organisation as an open learning space.

To be able to unfold these potentials for change, artists need open frames that allow for unplanned experiments and stimulate critical learning. The art manager’s role is thus to open up these frames, allowing and fostering these artistic reflexivities and letting them flow through the arts organisation. The arts professionals can also connect together the different challenging perspectives offered by different artists.

However, the constitution of *spaces of possibility* for sustainable development requires that arts organisations move beyond their own habitual spaces (both physically, socially and metaphorically). To reach out to people who are not part of cultural elites or of activist networks, these spaces have to be located in institutionally still undetermined spaces, where creative experiments and the everyday life of local inhabitants may come together, functioning as emergent open commons. This calls forward artistic and cultural interventions across the urban fabric, beyond the spatial-temporal and conventional frameworks habitually associated to existing cultural organisations and art worlds.

In *Spaces of possibility*, the qualities of artistic inquiry that I shortly listed above are embedded in local (often urban) initiatives, embedded in neighborhoods and aiming to transform everyday life while addressing urban development and politics, rather than performed as single art projects. They are strategically deployed for the realisation of an archipelago of heterotopian spaces – where we can concretely experiment potential futures without waiting for others to do it for us. One example of such an archipelago is in the city of Hamburg (Germany), the “Right to the City” network [<http://www.rechtaufstadt.net/>] (including the Gängeviertel [<http://das-gaengeviertel.info/>], Keimzelle [<http://keimzelle.rindermarkthalle.de/>], KEBAP [<http://kulturenergiebunker.blogspot.de/>], Planbude [<http://planbude.de/>] and other spaces and initiatives).

Spaces of possibility are actively networked with each other and with wider movements working towards emancipatory and ecological goals (such as discussed for example in the

⁷ Hans Dieleman, Transdisciplinary Artful Doing in Spaces of Experimentation and Imagination, Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering and Science, Vol. 3, 2012, pp. 44-57.

Convivialist Manifesto)⁸. These spaces offer civil society the opportunity to activate change-agency and empowerment by operationalising “prefigurative politics”: the immediate practical experimentation with desired future forms of social life, without waiting for (necessary) transformed larger political and economic structures to allow the wider dissemination of such social innovations. Spaces of possibilities are “spaces of imagination and experimentation”, as coined by Hans Dieleman.



The ‘Tag des guten Lebens’ in Cologne, is not only a yearly car-free-Sunday festival with 100 000 visitors, but a space of possibility where thousands of residents in many streets develop own creative re-appropriations of urban space (picture: Marén Wirths on Flickr).

Art organisations can contribute to grounding spaces of possibility in artistic inquiry, by opening up spaces of challenging experience, imagination and experimentation: sustainability is a radical search process; it requires highly challenging (rather than comfortable) aesthetic experiences, while at the same time such experiences should remain accessible to different participants. The same artistic proposal will be more or less challenging, depending on the background of each participant. How to avoid merely providing comfortable aesthetic satisfaction that maintains people in a state of uncritical anaesthesia (or offers pseudo-challenges to blasé high-culture elites)? Spaces of possibility are no places for anaesthesia and political self-satisfaction.

Spaces of possibility unfold in thinking by doing: This is as if the artist, or other initiator, is inviting people to take a ride on a bike, although they have not learned yet to ride a bike. The art organisation needs to develop safe places where participants can feel enough trust to 'take a ride' in a situation that is new and uncertain, and allow themselves to experience surprise, puzzlement and confusion, and still be open to learn something new out of it.

What I also mean concretely by experimentation is that art organisations can also offer some hands-on activities that invite people to experiment with doing things differently. It can be a workshop, a market, a big living room or playroom set up in the middle of the street, or many other things... It should invite people to bring together their heads, their hearts and their hands. Invite people to a place where they can test out things, like acrobats walking on a rope with a safety net below them.

⁸ Manifeste Convivialiste: déclaration d’interdépendance, Lormont: Le bord de l’eau, 2013. {English translation online at: <http://www.gcr21.org/publications/global-dialogues/2198-0403-gd-3/>}

Imagination is important because spaces of possibility are about exploring multiple alternative realities and alternative futures. The goal is not to close down people's imaginations so that they “get it”, so that they get the one correct image or interpretation. Arts organisations are no churches for a gospel of sustainability. The goal is to invite people to engage with situations and with their imaginations, without settling down too soon.

This is about developing safe and trust-inspiring places that invite their visitors to a participation with consequences, not just some token or superficial participation. These places need to foster a social creativity – a creativity that is no longer just the privilege of individual artists on stage; a creativity that flows as a good conversation between friends. Participants need to be stimulated to think and act differently, even if it feels silly. Creating that type of creative climate is also a real challenge for the arts organization.

Finally, shaping spaces of possibility, as arts organisations, is like weaving a spider web, not alone but together with many other spiders from outside the cultural sector- joining existing urban and regional inter-sectoral networks (such as “Transition” [<https://www.transitionnetwork.org/>] or “Right to the City” networks in different cities) and helping build new ones. Such networks involve a great diversity of aspects and dimensions of economy, society, ecology, culture and local everyday life. Sustainability implies moving away from thinking and acting within specific professional fields. The work of such networks is to engage each other into shared public discourses and to build a democratic space together, to continue experimenting and connecting different experiences. There can and should be tensions within such networks. It is actually deleterious to expect or enforce permanent consensus. A balance between collaboration and antagonism is much more sane, as long as the conversations and web-spinning continue (in an “agonistic” democratic space as argued by Chantal Mouffe)⁹.

Engaging with the search process of sustainability, arts organisations are challenged to relate both to 'cultural sustainability' and to 'cultures of sustainability'. Their potential contribution to the multiple dimensions of sustainable development implies more than mere environmental awareness raising and the necessary greening of creative processes. **Arts organisations have a role to play in the wider diffusion of artful, aesthetically challenging and playfully experimental practices and spaces in local communities** (based in artistic inquiry, but reaching beyond single arts projects), contributing to the development of spaces of possibility, as prefigurative politics for sustainability transformation.¹⁰

⁹ Chantal Mouffe, ‘Agonistics. Thinking the world politically’, London: Verso, 2013.

¹⁰ The notion of “sustainability transformation”, which has gained some popularity in the field of Sustainability Science, points to radical innovation towards sustainability, i.e. a more disruptive change than what was discussed in earlier sustainability discourses.