

# SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH ART

## The role of art in and towards sustainable changes

24-25 September 2020, University of Geneva (Switzerland)

*International conference organized by the Research Committee of Sociology of Arts and Culture (CR-SAC, Swiss Sociological Association) & the Universities of Geneva, Lausanne and Lucerne*

### ***Call for Papers***



Banksy, "I don't believe in global warming", graffiti: [www.banksy.co.uk/out.asp](http://www.banksy.co.uk/out.asp)

For more than a century, sociology has studied art and culture as being among the main pillars of society and human activity, intertwined with social norms, values, traditions, ways of being, and seeing. In 2015, the United Nations Member States adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) towards attaining "a better and more sustainable future for all". Some of the SDGs have long been the direct research subjects of the social sciences: poverty and vulnerability (SDG 1), health and wellbeing (SDG 3), labour and working conditions (SDG 8) as well as gender and social inequalities (SDG 5, 10). Since the 1970s, studies have also delved into the sociological aspects of what was left for a long time to the natural sciences: issues at the crossroads of society and biodiversity, marine and wildlife preservation, energy resources, and climate change – what constitute a major part of the SDG agenda. For example, SGD 12 – responsible production and consumption – is now the focus of Marlyne Sahakian's research group in the Sociology Department at the University of Geneva.

While the sociology of arts and culture has long dealt with classical sociological questions of artistic production, distribution and reception, the concern for ecological issues has only recently been taken up. One example is Kyle Devine's *Decomposed. The Political Ecology of Music* (2019) studying the exploitation by the record industry of natural and human resources. On the one hand, the artistic field is an economy and an industry like any other, where the use of natural and human resources leads to questions of inequality, access and power relations. On the other hand, it represents a particular case, as intertwined with the issues of sustainability are those of artistic meaning, reception and cultural practices, and social factors different than in other fields.

This calls for broader sociological analyses of the complex relationships between arts/culture and sustainable development in all its forms. Only a handful of works in the current literature have studied what it costs to produce, preserve and exhibit art. Allen (2012) and Smith (2015), for example, examine the ecological resources needed to produce violins and shellac records, respectively. Rubio (2020) emphasizes the infrastructure necessary for modern museums to operate and their ecological cost. In a different perspective, Ribac (2018) as well as Latour and Leclercq (2016) explore how the arts can contribute to our understanding of climate change and the Anthropocene. The sociology of arts and culture therefore provides a special take on all areas of sustainability while contributing to bridging the gap between dualisms such as 'nature/culture', 'environment/society', and 'art/technology'. To date and in Switzerland, the links between the arts and the SDGs are underexplored in the scientific literature, with the exception of some work on how 'professional' music and film installations are increasingly normalized in the private sphere of the home (see f.e. Sahakian, 2019).

This workshop on Sustainability Through Art is calling for *papers and other forms of contributions* discussing the role of art in relation to sustainability during a one-and-a-half-day colloquium which will be held at the University of Geneva in September, the week after the 8<sup>th</sup> World Sustainability Forum. The main purpose of the event is to render visible what is being done in the field of "arts and sustainability", engage in debates and discussions between different actors working in the field (from non-profit associations in the art and cultural world, to academics), and explore future research and research-action directions. Two main themes have been identified for the workshop; we very much welcome other suggestions:

### **1. What is the environmental and social impact of art?**

Despite the few examples mentioned above, the impact of artistic production, distribution and reception on ecology and environmental, but also on the world of work, gender, and other social dimensions of sustainability, urgently needs further and thorough examination. Can art be sustainable, both ecologically and socially through time, and how? What can we make of the sustainability of art that is made to last long – sculpture, painting, print, recorded production – as well as of the required preservations techniques and places? And, on the other hand, what is the place of ephemeral art when considering sustainability (in all its aspects): street art, graffiti, art installations, live music and theatre? Until recently, online streaming of music and films, for example, was believed to be ecologically friendly compared to producing and storing recorded material, but figures are now emerging showing the significant impact of such numerical data storage on the environment (Ensmenger 2018). Alongside questions of production and consumption, there is the issue of mobility and the impact of art's increasing cosmopolitan and globalized way of functioning of artists as well as of audiences; further, the increased marketization of art in a neoliberal perspective merits reflection in relation to sustainability. This has led to collective efforts to further understand the impact of culture on climate change.

### **2. How can art support transformations towards more sustainable societies?**

A change in individual and collective practices is needed to achieve the SDGs. What role can or do art and artists play in these transformations? Can artists contribute to shaping alternative paths? Artistic and cultural practices are deeply linked with social norms and values, and with social classes and individual acts, as many sociologists have argued. Studies linked to the political paradigm of "cultural democratization" have, notably in France, put forward what could be seen today as the "social sustainability" of arts and culture, though without explicit mention of it (Fleury, 2006). The dimension of ecological sustainability, however, has hardly been brought out. Have militant or socially engaged arts – with artworks created, collected and presented by such associations as Utopiana, Art Works for Change or Art for the World – accomplished their goal of raising awareness and possibly changing individual and collective actions towards more sustainable pathways? These questions seem especially relevant as the United Nations itself is promoting the SDGs through culture, such as art exhibitions and children's literature (the SDG

book club), while social scientists such as Bruno Latour are, in the same light, curating art exhibitions like Reset Modernity and Critical Zones: Observatories for Earthly Politics. In Geneva, Utopiana curated a one-year program around the theme of “1,000 Ecologies”, to reflect on how ecologies of the mind can be further developed, in relation to notions of power, desire and creativity, among other factors. If culture is used as a means of achieving the SDGs, what role do art education and access to art play in implementing sustainability? How do culture, education and international cooperation come together, as in the example of the future Cité de la musique in Geneva, in achieving these and other socially responsible goals?

We are delighted to confirm the following two keynote speaker:

- [Karin M. Ekström](#) is Professor of Marketing at the University of Borås, specialized in consumption studies and sustainability, and is the editor of a recent book titled *Museum Marketization: Cultural Institutions in the Neoliberal Era*.
- [François Ribac](#) is a lecturer at the University of Bourgogne, and a musical composer, with a research interest in music and art in the age of the Anthropocene.

The program of the event will include keynotes, academic papers with assigned discussants, as well as a roundtable with actors from academic and civil society – art schools, associations and cultural institutions. We also propose a dedicated session to further explore themes for research and research-action.

We welcome submissions in different formats, towards a varied program:

- Paper presentations, with assigned discussants
- Roundtable participation on the ‘transformative’ role of art towards sustainability
- Scientific World Café: proposing several research themes to be further explored and developed as a group effort

→ Submissions must be sent **before 15 April 2020** to [nune.nikoghosyan@unige.ch](mailto:nune.nikoghosyan@unige.ch) using the attached form.

Acceptance notifications will be sent out by end of May 2020.

The event is supported by the SAGW-ASSH, through the “Sustainable Development Goals” Seed Money Funding 2020. The event proceedings will be part of the SCORAI Europe workshop series, on sustainable consumption research and action.

#### Scientific and organizing committee:

Olivier MOESCHLER, University of Lausanne; Nuné NIKOGHOSYAN, University of Geneva; Loïc RIOM, Mines ParisTech and University of Geneva; Marlyne SAHAKIAN, University of Geneva; Guy SCHWEGLER, University of Lucerne

Schweizerische Gesellschaft für  
Société suisse de **sociologie**  
Swiss Sociological Association

SCORAI  
Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative  
EUROPE



UNIVERSITÉ  
DE GENÈVE



Unil  
UNIL | Université de Lausanne

## References

- Allen, Aaron (2012). "Fatto di Fiemme: Stradivari's Violins and the Musical Trees of the Paneveggio". In L. Auricchio *et al.* (eds.). *Invaluable trees: Cultures of Nature, 1660-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 301-316.
- Devine, Kyle (2019). *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Ensmenger, Nathan (2018). The Environmental History of Computing, *Technology and Culture*, 59(4), S7-S33.
- Fleury, Laurent (2006). *Sociologie de la culture et des pratiques culturelles*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Latour, Bruno, & Leclercq, Christophe (eds.) (2016). *Reset Modernity!* Karlsruhe and Cambridge, MA: ZKM, Center for Art and Media and MIT Press.
- Ribac, François (2018). Narratives of the Anthropocene: How can the (performing) arts contribute towards the socio-ecological transition? *Scene*. 2018, 6 (1), 51-62.
- Rubio, Fernando Domínguez (2020). *Still Life Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sahakian, Marlyne (2019 in press). "'More, bigger, better' household appliances: Contesting normativity in practices through emotions". *Journal of Consumer Culture*. doi:10.1177/1469540519889983.
- Smith, Jacob 2015. *Eco-Sonic Media*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

# SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH ART

## The role of art in and towards sustainable changes

### Participation form

Name, Affiliation:

Email:

I am interested in participating in the following capacity (please underline the relevant options):

Paper presentation with a proposed abstract of 250 words

Discussant of a paper

Participant in a roundtable discussion (please provide 250 words on your contribution)

Proposal for a Scientific World Café topic (please provide a 250-word entry on your research topic or idea)

Interested in attending the event, without formal role in the program

Abstract or short overview of contribution (250 words):