

Societal transformation and the cultural sector

Culture and Sustainability: Where Next?

When we pose the question: “Who” has the power to help the world to act more sustainably, the obvious answer characteristically includes entities like governments, international organisations, NGOs, lobbyists, and the world of economics and commerce. But perhaps there is an additional answer that such a list misses: The field of culture and cultural practitioners.

By Marshall Marcus

On 2 December 2020, representatives of 44 leading European cultural organisations gathered online for two intense days of discussion in advance of writing a brainstorming report about culture and sustainability: *Culture and the Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and Opportunities*. [1]

Consider for a moment the apparent impossibility of this task: Dozens of individuals from hugely varied areas within the vast world of culture [2], many of whom had never met each other before, putting together a coherent report on a complex subject in 48 hours. If one asks how such a challenge was overcome (for it was), a variety of factors are immediately apparent. Well thought out preparation reading [3], a highly efficient process, and the voluntary contribution of significant time following the brainstorming report by some dedicated writers and editors from within the 44. But there was undoubtedly an additional overwhelmingly powerful factor. The growing awareness within many parts of the cultural field, that we have to take far more account of the need to act sustainably, and to promote and showcase this need through our work. Slowly but surely, the cultural industries are realising: The crisis has already arrived.

Integrating culture into sustainability governance

The brainstorming report was produced within an interesting EU process known as the *Voices of Culture (VoC) Structured Dialogues*: Areas of policy considered important for further development by the European Commission are discussed by a group of experts in the cultural field chosen through an open call. A report is written and discussed with members of DG EAC (the Commission’s Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture).

In the case of the Culture and Sustainability report there was also a presentation to the *Open Method of Coordination (OMC)* on culture and sustainability that has itself recently published its own report [4]. The OMC is another important EU process: a form of “soft” law in which intergovernmental policy-making occurs that does not result in binding EU legislative measures and does not require EU countries to introduce or amend their laws but eventually – it is hoped – gives rise to new EU and member state law. And all of this is also fed into the Commission’s Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026, that sits alongside the strategic framework for Culture 2019–2024. The EU, as we see, is a fascinating but not uncomplex animal.

Other presentations of the VoC report followed, as it was picked up by cultural organisations as far afield as Australia, and particularly with groups lobbying for culture as a new goal in the post-2030 UN agenda. [5]

The VoC Culture and Sustainability report [6] focused on four SDGs that were felt to have particular resonance and importance for the world of culture: SDG4 Quality Education, SDG8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG11 Sustainable Cities and Communities and SDG13 Climate Action. Ten specific recommendations were made. Very briefly: better data collection and information systems developed together by EU, state and cultural actors; more targeting of law, policies and funding schemes to encourage and require sustainable practices within the cultural industries; recognising culture as a sector as well as vector by adding it as a new SDG 18 and as a new fourth pillar of sustainable development (alongside the economic, environmental, and social pillars); and using culture to advance the fight against inequalities and ensure equal access to culture for all.

Enshrined in these recommendations are two specific but very different avenues of work, the first of which relates to what cultural practitioners need in order to be able to effectively fight for sustainability, and the second which relates to a particular ability that culture has to act as a successful persuader to society of the need to act sustainably. Together these two areas constitute much of the current conversation in cultural spaces about how culture can contribute to sustainability.

How cultural practitioners can act sustainably

Of course, there is also the question of how cultural operators ensure that their work is in itself sustainable – advancing towards net zero for their organisations, pushing the values of

the SDGs inside cultural organisations and with their staff, advancing awareness of the need to be and to act sustainably; but none of these matters are different from what every industry faces. Of more interest, are the two avenues referred to above.

The first avenue of specific relevance to culture focuses on changes to the funding, policy, data, information sharing and legal landscape required to help keep our cultural institutions and operators viable. As with many other industries – but particularly so in the field of culture which so often relies on discretionary spending by audiences/purchasers – the effects of the pandemic have been devastating. In many cases income fell off a cliff in March 2020, and audiences are still showing some reluctance to return, even now that Covid is becoming less present in society. If a cultural organisation or operator lacks a sustainable economic base, then they are in no position to help advance the agenda of sustainability in their work.

If the first avenue can be called the “challenge” of the VoC brainstorming report, then the second is undoubtedly where the opportunities lie. The fact is that culture has a potentially massive power to persuade society to act in a more sustainable way. The VoC report is crammed with casebook examples and good practice examples of cultural activity that persuade us to do just this. The introduction to the chapter on SDG 11 hints at such power:

„History shows, and scientific research confirms, that culture is one of the greatest – probably the greatest – forms of ‘social glue’ that we possess. From haunting paintings of a tribe’s hands splashed across cave walls from tens of thousands of years ago that have been found in more than one continent, to universal and well-known memes of story-telling around night time camp fires from time immemorial, to important festivals and festival sites from ancient history to the present day, communal cultural activity has always existed, and is clearly and self-evidently shown to be hardwired into human behaviour whenever people gather to live together. [And] recent decades have witnessed an astounding renaissance in new forms of city and community activity through cultural practice. As a response to the alienation and mental health problems that can easily result from our new digital age and its increasing differentials between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’, coming together in cultural activity, especially when it involves group participation and the empowering of citizens by their own agency, has proved to be one of the most potent social medicines of our time.

The Coronavirus pandemic has only intensified this need for communal cultural practice. When Italians appeared on their balconies to sing and make music during the 2020 lockdown, they were showing that cultural activity and creative expression are not a luxury, but a necessity, and a vital means during a crisis to make connections, keep alive our spirits and exercise our humanity. The same can be seen whenever we come together to commemorate or to celebrate. When the world’s leaders gathered together at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris on 11 November 2018 in recognition of the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War, they felt a need also to bring together artists from around the

world to perform, and by performing, to give meaning in telling the story of a key moment in history. The city and the community are thus created, not simply with, but through culture.“

How Culture can foster sustainable living

The message is clear: If the world of culture can orientate itself to tell the message of the SDGs in all of its work, then it can become the world’s greatest marketing tool and persuader for why and how we need to live more sustainably. The arts, after all, was one of the original spheres of Greek rhetoric, the ancient school of persuasion. This is why many cultural networks and practitioners are calling for a new cultural SDG, and why at Mondiacult 2022, the recent UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development, a new zero draft of an SDG culture goal was presented. The feeling is, if culture can be articulated as a post-2030 agenda sustainable development goal and thus a specified area of global responsibility, then we have already significantly improved our chances of making a more sustainable world. By definition.

Annotations

- [1] “Sustainability” and “sustainable” are used throughout this article as shorthand for the aims of the Agenda 2030 programme set out in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.
- [2] This variety can be seen from perusing the list of participating organisations. 47 were chosen although the final report resulted from only 44 of these – <https://voicesofculture.eu/2020/10/16/participants-culture-and-the-sustainable-development-goals-challenges-and-opportunities/>
- [3] In particular, a paper by Gijs de Vries www.facebook.com/voicesofculture/posts/meet-our-expert-gijs-de-vriesgijs-de-vries-is-the-author-of-the-topical-paper-fo/1592849827561941/
- [4] See: European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Towards gender equality in the cultural and creative sectors: report of the OMC (open method of coordination) working group of Member States’ experts, Menzel, A. (editor), Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/122208>
- [5] See: <https://culture2030goal.net/>
- [6] <https://voicesofculture.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/VoC-Brainstorming-Report-Culture-and-SDGs.pdf>

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