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Sophie Vögele

Report on the International Symposium «Critical Sustainability?»



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A need for institutional democracy and political commitment to achieve a *Critical Sustainability Literacy*

Report on the International Symposium “Critical Sustainability?” Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK, Toni Areal. Friday, November 29th 2023.

The goal of the international symposium “Critical Sustainability?” was to open up the public discourse on sustainability to thoughts about inequality, power relation, coloniality, normativity and responsibility. Thereby, we wanted to enquire more deeply how the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals SDGs, which define participation, cultural and social decision-making opportunities and access to education as important dimensions, could be put into practice. Through keynotes and open discussions from different perspectives, we brought forward a (new) exchange about the role of art and design for sustainability. This allowed to identify the potential of art and design differently, as well as to discern voids and failures of art and design. The guests Tuulikki Laes (University of the Arts Helsinki), Julia Steinberger (University of Lausanne) David Maggs (Metcalf Foundation Toronto) and Kijan Espahangizi (University of Zürich) for instance addressed initiatives of participation in the fields of art and culture and talked about their significance for the understanding of sustainability. They inquired about how art works instead of what art does. They delved into inquiries about possibilities to combine ecological themes with art that no longer are a matter of choice but everyone's professional and ethical responsibility. They also introduced a historical perspective to some of the raised issues that made us think differently about modernist criticism, and political and activist endeavours needed so much to address sustainability.

In the afternoon, different workshops put in practice interdisciplinary collaborations to throw light on the multiple dimensions of sustainability. One workshop considered an approach to Service Learning that requires a willingness to ask new, radical questions within a rational, hierarchical, positivist science context. It negotiated how biodiversity can be integrated into our everyday lives. Another workshop raised questions around representations and projections, and asked how this affects our negotiations of a postmigrant society. Furthermore, we asked and experienced, how a public space looks if shared and accessible to everyone and thereby were concerned with the power but also responsibility we have as individuals and as a community. Finally, it also was about understanding and experiencing the possibilities and scope for action that we all retain in our respective institutional positions. How can we meet the demand to take on institutional responsibility toward sustainability? What can established discourses learn from activist practices and strategies about sustainability and cultural participation? What is the responsibility of education and educational institutions?

During the final wrap up, the conference observers Cherry-Ann Morgan (ZHdK) and Yvonne Schmidt (University of the Arts Bern HKB), made it quite clear that by way of engaging in all these ways, the symposium brought a number of challenges and paradoxes to our attention that we will have to pursue further. Besides, they highlighted that a more extended consideration of intricacies of colonial entanglements with the climate crises as well as of a disability studies perspective will be very helpful to continue thinking through the topics raised and addressed.

In the aftermath of the symposium “Critical Sustainability?”, with time taken to reflect on

the outcomes, I would like to highlight three key findings:

Key finding 1

Practicing Cultural Participation in our diverse realms calls for institutional democracy and political commitment within Higher Education. This is key for addressing sustainability.

Justice and inequality seem to be difficult to address within current discussions around sustainability. However, sustainability and social inequality are intricately linked. The complexity of the unfolding world attributable to its growing diversity, the manner in which differences of many varieties increasingly co-exist, the challenge of climate crisis, altered living conditions and scenarios of the future asks for the ability to engage with the world. How can we gain experience and overcome the feeling of powerlessness to act against dominant and long established structures? How can we avoid disengagement? How can we acquire a literacy that enables us to understand our embeddedness in social, cultural, natural, environmental and geographical contexts? Our institutions and we as institutional actors have a responsibility to foster such a *Critical Sustainability Literacy* and inquire how the arts possibly can contribute. Furthermore, our concern has to be about how the education system can become an effective driving force for a more sustainable future by pursuing the implementation of *Critical Sustainability Literacy*.

Key finding 2

Given the challenges of diversity and sustainability, activism must be seen as an academic activity.

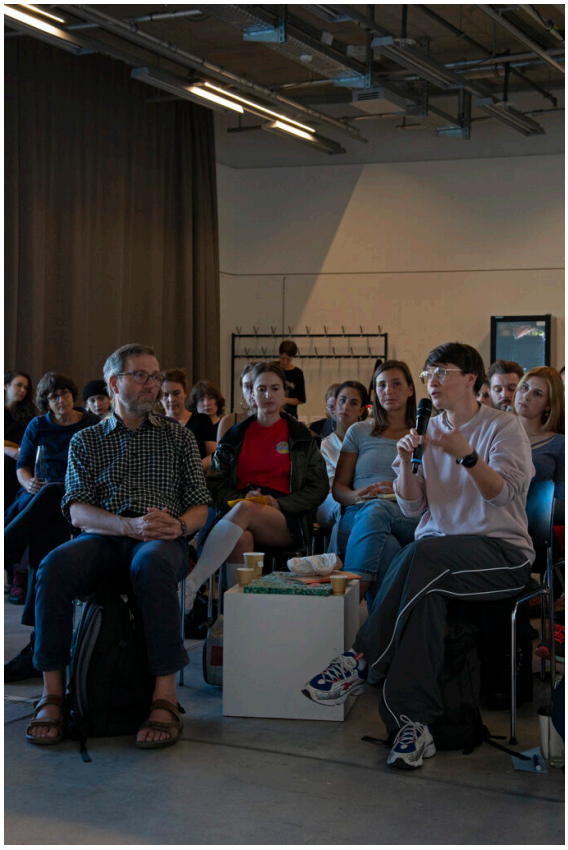
We are faced with enormous challenges due to climate crisis and social inequalities. As academics and educators, we have to help people deal with these increasing problems. Thus, activism as an academic activity has to be understood as an interdisciplinary practice that produces a “tipping point”. It is about considering pertinent questions that inevitably confront us with a series of paradoxes. This is necessary in way of a disruption that irritates and ultimately strengthens prevailing political and social frameworks. It exposes weaknesses, shakes up existing orders and, with its actions and ideas, is interested in improving them, thereby affecting the inside working of an institution without belonging to it entirely.

Key finding 3

We need a new approach to transdisciplinary work through arts practices to address transformative change.

Why don’t we act in spite of knowing how we could address multiple environmental crises? How, by applying a cultural perspective, can we criticize the history of ideas that brought us to this moment and think transformative change differently? In the context of higher education, the question that drives us is about how we can promote collective transformative change as a form of being. How does this alter our understanding of education and how can it be structurally implemented? Tuulikki Laes states that in and through artistic performance, an ecopolitical imagination emerges and through art-

science collaborations, a shared ecological ontology can be focussed across disciplines. David Maggs argues that through the practice of art and engagement with art, we are able to develop another way of being that addresses the knowledge-action gap. It is about having faith in the arts to be able to change ways of being.



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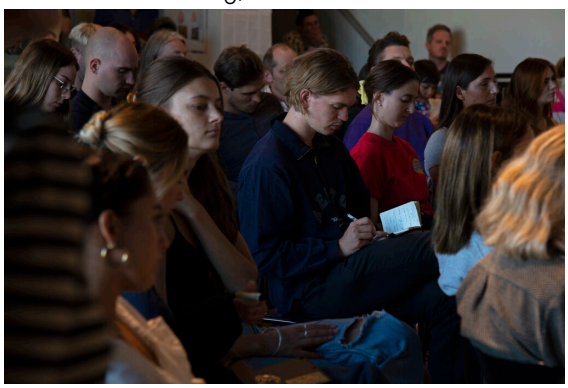
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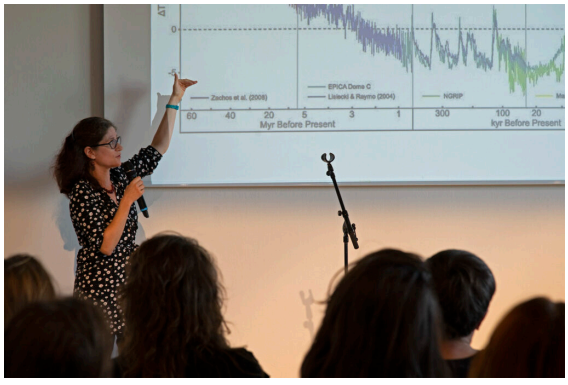
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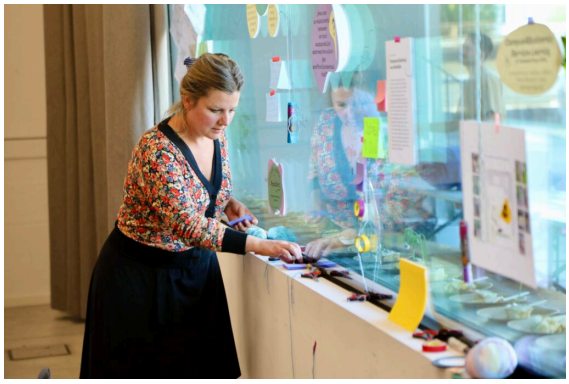
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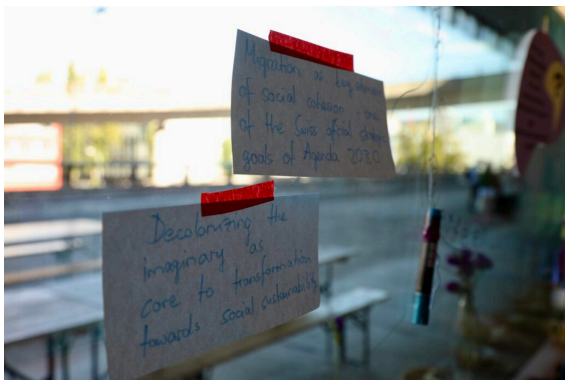
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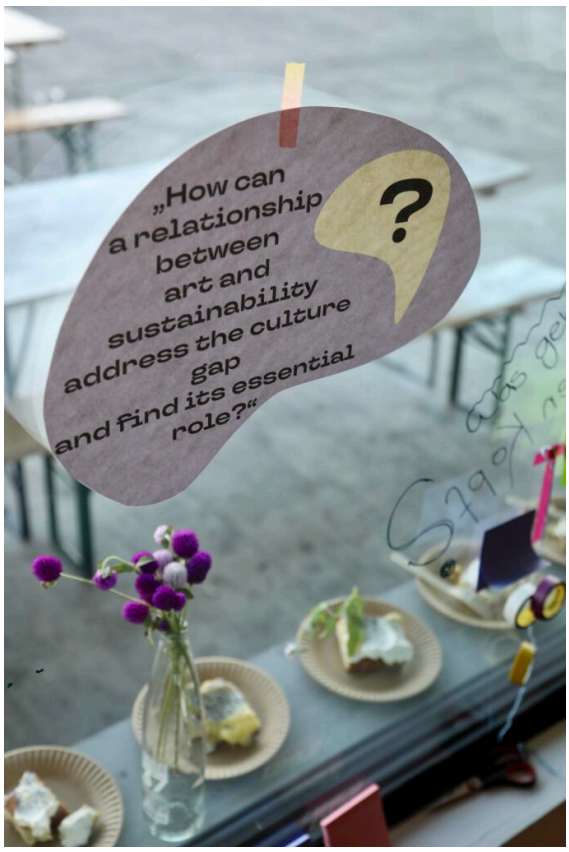
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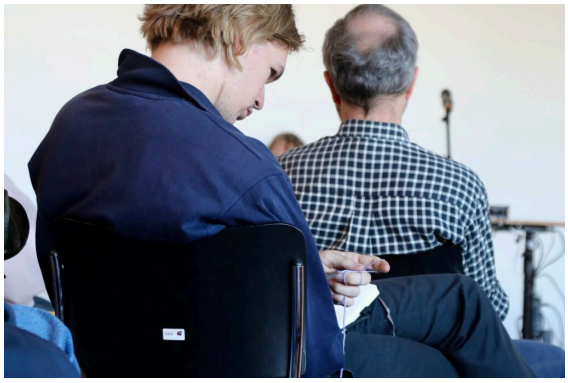
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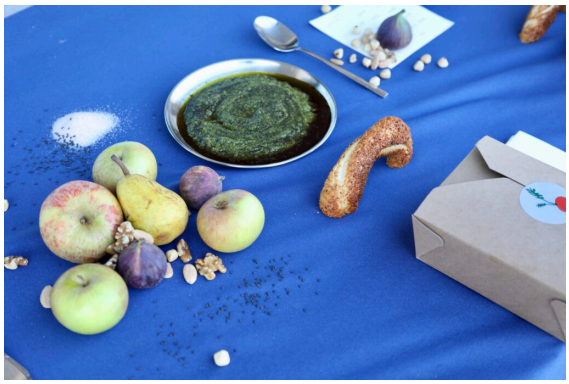
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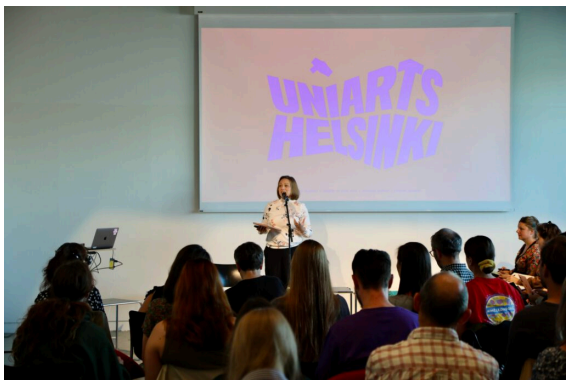
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Sophie Vögele hat Gender Studies und Ethnologie in Basel, Genf und Heidelberg studiert und anschliessend Soziologie an der York University Toronto. Dort war sie mehrere Jahre am Department of Sociology in der Forschung und Lehre affiliiert. Seit 2014 ist sie wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin in der Forschung Art Education und Lehrbeauftragte. In ihrer Forschung interessiert sie sich für die Vielschichtigkeit von Prozessen der Veranderung (Othering) an Bildungsinstitutionen und im Bereich der Kunst, dessen Kritik, und institutionalisierten Mechanismen von Inklusion und Exklusion aus feministisch-post_kolonialer Perspektive. Sie kann vielseitige Forschung vorweisen; namentlich zu Prozessen der Dezentralisierung und Frauenrechten in Rajasthan, im Bereich der Ungleichheitsforschung an schweizerischen Kunsthochschulen (siehe dazu auch den Blog von Art.School.Differences) und zuletzt zu Repräsentation, Interkulturalität, kultureller Teilhabe und deren Zusammenhang mit Nachhaltigkeit. Zurzeit leitet sie das interdisziplinäre Projekt «Recht auf Wir» (ZHdK Leading House).

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