

“REINVENT YOURSELF!”

Alignment and Resistance in the Arts and Culture Amidst Societal Claims for Change

4th & 5th November 2022, University of Lucerne (Switzerland)

International conference organized by the
Research Committee of Sociology of Arts and Culture
(RC-SAC – Foko-KUKUSO, Swiss Sociological Association)



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In the COVID-19 pandemic, many transformations affected various societal areas. Becoming a “total social fact” (Marcel MAUSS), the virus acted as a revealer of society’s (dys)functioning. The arts and culture were often in the forefront of the pandemic and of its disruptions. Lockdowns and other sanitary measures caused closure or severe capacity limitations of cultural venues, strongly altering the production, distribution, and reception of works and events. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly, artists and cultural actors were then urged to “reinvent” themselves. State authorities, the media, and the public pushed them for “new ways” of doing, consuming, evaluating, or managing culture and the arts. In addition, this was not the first time that the worlds of arts and culture were confronted to societal claims for change. Historical, political, ideological, religious, economic, or even military changes have often been at the origin of new demands directed towards artistic and cultural producers, with different effects on the actual transformations in the creative fields. This allows to formulate a more general interest for which the COVID-19 pandemic may represent but one empirical example. What different claims for “reinvention” are addressed to the worlds of arts and culture, and how do they react to these demands? This two-day international conference aims to better understand the capacity and will of alignment or resistance to the various demands for transformation that the worlds of art and culture face from time to time.

A possible starting point would be to critically question the current extrinsic calls for reinvention in the creative fields. Since their emancipation from various social, political, and sometimes economic constraints, the arts have been conceptualized as a relatively autonomous field (BOURDIEU 1996) or even as “social antithesis of society” (ADORNO 1984) that has novelty, singularity, and even transgression at its very core (HEINICH 2005). The need for inspiration and reinvention is at the heart of a (self-)discourse about artistic creativity, and in the past these ideas on innovation in the arts were seen, in turn, as powerful agents for change in classic economic sectors (BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO 2005). Howard BECKER (1982), for example, has analyzed how “mavericks” participate in continuously shifting the conventions of the art world. Arts and culture can then be seen as the locus *par excellence* of “reinvention”, letting any claim for change addressed to them seem quite paradoxical. Even more, the intrinsic strive for autonomy of the cultural fields would precisely imply for them to reject such claims. Resistance would therefore be the reaction to expect.

At the same time, studies have shown how the arts and culture as a professional milieu and as symbolic economy often reproduce – be it involuntarily – the dominations and structures present in the wider economy and in society. Several authors have investigated the often complex entanglements between cultural spheres, artistic avant-garde, the market and society (CRANE 1989; WHITE & WHITE 1993). Recalling Norbert ELIAS’ seminal “sociology of a genius” on Mozart (2010) which showed the links between the composer’s emancipation and the upcoming musical market, Tia DENORA (1995) has beautifully examined the figure of Beethoven from the point of view not only of aesthetic innovation, but also of the transformation of musical performance venues in Vienna. In a similar manner, Svetlana ALPERS (1988) analyzed how Rembrandt’s artwork is linked to the emergence of a market for painting and the organization of painting around his *atelier*. Like any other professional setting, the worlds of art and culture follow conventions and networks of collaboration between a wide range of professionals according to standardised procedures, making it possible for the artwork to be created, produced, distributed, and consumed in a market (BECKER 1982). Alignment with societal demands for change could therefore be just as logical in this perspective.

Regarding the content of the demands spurring from the Covid-19 pandemic, digitalization has often been formulated as an obligatory passage point for artistic and cultural reinvention. In Switzerland and linked to COVID-19, federal subsidies for “transformation projects” aimed to encourage cultural enterprises towards “structural reorientation”, mainly by going online. In many countries, from Twitch to YouTube through various experiments of virtual concerts, live streaming platforms have taken a new place and given rise to multiple experiments in music recording and broadcasting of concerts (RIOM and SPANU forthcoming). Cinemas went online and started to show their films on newly founded video on-demand platforms. Similarly, many museums set up digital programs allowing to discover their collections at a distance. This request for digitalization of the arts and culture raises many questions. Art has been viewed as a vector for societal integration and valued for its experiential aspect (DEWEY 1950) as well as its social function (BOURRIAUD 2002). The demand for digitalization seems to collide with the *hic et nunc* essence and the integrative function assigned to arts and culture. It can therefore be a particularly fertile ground for studying the calls for reinvention – in relation to the pandemic or to other settings – and the reaction of alignment or resistance in the arts and culture.

Last but not least, considering the arts and culture as a sort of “special case” of reinvention may be addressed as well. On the one hand, in modern societies, the creative sector is often perceived as particularly valuable and even powerful. Noteworthy figures are attained by public aids and astronomical sums can be reached by some works of art on the market, which can then

become important sources of prestige and symbolic power (BOURDIEU 1984). On the other hand, uncertainty of employment and fragility of work organization characterises large portions of the arts and culture (MENGER 2009; GANDINI 2019), the pandemic having only highlighted and sharpened these frailties. Such a discussion on the special and ambivalent status of arts and culture took place within society itself during the COVID-19 pandemic, as questions regarding the relevance of different societal areas emerged. Some actors then portrayed cultural production as an “essential sector”. This perspective often went hand in hand with minimizing the requests for change. The other side of the debate denied the arts and culture any special status, implicitly or explicitly presenting changes as inevitable. Analysing the calls for reinvention then offers an entry point to also reflect upon the specific position of the arts and culture and on this sector’s possible idiosyncrasy and critical stance in contemporary society.

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In what regard do societal claims for “reinvention” participate in the (re)definition of the functioning as well as the value of art, in what ways and with what effectiveness? Under what conditions are artists and cultural actors effectively able to conduct new experiments in terms of work conditions? Do the artists follow, negotiate, or even resist these injunctions and, if so, how and with what outcomes? How are these transformations experienced from the point of view of the various stakeholders (audiences, artists, cultural institutions)? How do they affect aesthetic experience? What new expertise, professions, and tools do they require? How are governments involved in these processes of transformation or resistance? And do these reinventions last?

We invite papers presenting empirical research dealing with all areas of arts and culture, be it visual and fine arts, music, theatre, dance, literature, cinema and media, or other forms of creative expression. Proposals may analyze these questions by focusing on artistic and cultural production, distribution, reception/audiences, or all of these elements, and their relation to various kinds of societal urges for “reinvention” addressed to them as well as their reaction in terms of alignment and/or resistance, in all historical and national settings.

*Papers will be selected on the basis of an **abstract of approximately 500 words** describing the purpose of the paper, the theoretical and methodological approach, the empirical materials used and the main results. The program of the event will include keynotes, academic papers with assigned discussants, as well as a roundtable with actors from the academic and civil society. We also are interested in receiving suggestions for workshop formats or debates (instead of a single contribution).*

The working language of this conference will be English. French and German submissions and presentations are possible, but should be accompanied by an English abstract and English presentation slides.

The conference shall be held in Lucerne. The possibility of online presentations and/or online attendance at the conference will be clarified later.

Submissions (500 words, English, French, or German) must be sent until **29th May 2022** to

guy.schwegler@unilu.ch and culture@sgs-sss.ch.

Acceptance notifications will be sent out by end of June 2022.

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