

ART WITH IMPACT - LEVERAGING CULTURE FOR GREEN TRANSFORMATION

How systems thinking can help art shape real change

How does real change happen in society? Not just symbolic gestures or temporary projects, but actual shifts in how we live, think, and relate to the world around us? This question has long concerned both system theorists and cultural practitioners. One of the most influential voices in this space is Donella Meadows, whose 1997 framework for systems change remains remarkably relevant - perhaps even more so today.

Meadows described the world as a network of interconnected systems: a family, a city, a forest, a nation. And within each system, she argued, there are leverage points - places where a small shift can produce large effects. Some of these points are relatively easy to access, but their impact is limited. Others are harder to reach, but when they move, everything moves.

This insight has powerful implications not just for policy and economics, but also for art. In fact, it suggests that culture might be one of the most effective arenas for achieving the deep transformations required by the green transition.

WHERE CHANGE REALLY HAPPENS

According to Meadows, tweaking the parameters of a system - such as regulations, outputs, or incentives — often results in only marginal improvements. Recycling perfectly in one household, for example, has negligible macro-level effects. But if a large corporation like Stora Enso changes its logging practices, the impact grows. And if a society begins to truly question the growth paradigm itself, then the transformation can be profound.

What drives this kind of systemic shift? Not just new information or better processes, but a change in underlying values, habits, and worldviews. And this is exactly the domain of culture. Through art, literature, performance, and other creative forms, we explore moral questions, existential dilemmas, and shared narratives. Culture shapes how we see the world - and what we believe is possible.

FROM SURFACE TO DEPTH IN ART AND CULTURE

Many artistic initiatives focused on sustainability aim to “raise awareness.” It’s a worthwhile goal, but Meadows would likely remind us that awareness alone operates at a shallow level in the system. For change to take root, art must engage not only minds but the foundational beliefs and goals of the systems we inhabit.

Take, for example, an artwork that presents carbon data through graphs and statistics - it may inform, but is unlikely to change how people perceive their place in the ecological web. Contrast this with a project that invites marginalized voices into public space, reshaping the cultural narrative around climate justice and you have new food for thoughts. Or with an intervention that prompts a municipality to revise its procurement rules to reflect environmental or social values - thus shifting the rules of the system itself.

At its deepest, art can challenge the dominant paradigms: the taken-for-granted assumptions about growth, progress, human superiority over nature, and what constitutes a good life. When art helps people feel - not just understand - that they are part of a living planet, not separate from it, that’s when it becomes truly transformative.

ALLOW NEW INNER LANDSCAPES

Imagine a project that doesn’t just describe how North European overconsumption creates waste mountains elsewhere, but immerses the audience in an emotional experience that makes this absurdity visceral. Such projects don’t preach or persuade - they provoke reflection and reorientation. They unsettle, stir empathy, and allow new inner landscapes to emerge. This is where paradigm change begins.

APPLYING SYSTEMS THINKING TO ARTISTIC PRACTICE

For artists, curators, funders, and policymakers engaged in the cultural aspects of green transition, Meadows' framework offers a valuable lens. Rather than asking simply *what is the project about*, we might ask *where in the system does this project intervene?* Is it reshaping flows of information, rewriting the rules, proposing new goals - or shifting the very mindset from which the system arises?

Many of the most effective cultural projects operate on multiple levels at once. A work might use recycled materials (a symbolic gesture at the surface), offer participatory workshops that spark learning and dialogue (a deeper influence), and simultaneously create an emotional encounter that subtly but powerfully alters how people view the world (the deepest level of all).

CULTURE AS A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Discussions around the green transition often focus on technical solutions or political strategies. But without cultural transformation - without shifts in meaning, value, and identity - such efforts risk addressing symptoms while the deeper logic remains unchanged.

Art does not have all the answers. But it can ask questions no one else dares to ask. It can reveal contradictions, open space for new visions, and create experiences that dissolve the boundaries between self, society, and environment. Most importantly, it can help us imagine - and feel - what a sustainable future might look like, not just in terms of metrics, but in terms of life.

RESOURCES

If you want to dig deeper into Donella Meadows models, there is a lot to read but why not start where she first published her work:

<https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>

And lots of great example of how this can be addressed can be checked out at Julie's Bicycle:

<https://juliesbicycle.com/>

Or at Loud Numbers, who did one of the pilots in the CCI4Change project in Skåne, Sweden:

<https://www.loudnumbers.net/>