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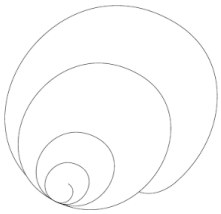

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Art and Degrowth: Finding clusters in an emerging research nexus

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Abstract
The role of art in the degrowth movement, and vice versa, is a largely unexplored but promising research theme which can help us to understand the aesthetic dimension of radical social-ecological transformations. This article is the first review of the current state of this discourse. After introducing the context and relevance of analysing the relationship between art and degrowth, a database of 44 articles was compiled from published peer and non-peer-reviewed literature in scientific journals, book chapters, and art magazines. The results categorize the literature into three different clusters: *Art for Degrowth* (how can art amplify and communicate the degrowth vision), *Degrowth for Art* (analyses of potential transformations in the (institutionalised) art world in line with degrowth), and *Art as Degrowth* (the non-productivist and slowness of art making as a prefiguration of degrowth practices in everyday life). The clusters were then examined from a sociology of the arts perspective using Howard Becker's (1982) theory of art worlds, looking specifically at the perspectives, conceptualisations, and contradictions of art and degrowth publications in each respective cluster. Juxtaposing the three clusters revealed strong disciplinary differences between how degrowth scholars, art writers, and art theorists defined "art" and "degrowth", and how they assess their relationship. The implications of this observation are reflected upon and framed as power struggles in the discussion of the paper. Lastly, the article outlines a desideratum of future research which could facilitate a more fruitful connection between the art world and the degrowth community.

1. Introduction

While the question of degrowth is widely discussed in academic, policy, and activist circles, it is worryingly absent from aesthetic thought. This could be considered surprising as a wide range of cultural discourses relate to the issues and critiques raised by the degrowth movements, such as the economisation of creative and cultural organising (O´Connor, 2024) or art´s emerging relevance for ecological and social emergencies (Galafassi et al., 2018; Heras

et al., 2021; Kagan, 2011; Oakley & Banks, 2020). However, while climate-art projects have indeed shown an increased prevalence in recent years (Galafassi et al., 2018), it is unclear whether the envisioning and re-building of a fundamentally different economic system is ever at the core of such projects.

This article, whilst acknowledging the importance of ambivalences, subjectivities and complexities found in art, attempts to introduce a bit of structure with regards to the unexplored relationship between art and degrowth. It also takes an appreciative position towards art´s special and paradoxical stance in society and views its ability to embrace complexity and conflict as a productive force. The aim of this article is to introduce a nuanced understanding of how the arts and degrowth are perceived in their respective discursive spheres. In order to do so, I will review published literature at the intersection of degrowth and art, exploring emerging patterns in a young—but by no means negligible—research field. Hopefully, this will not only be a fruitful contribution to the academic degrowth community, but also to the art world(s). This endeavour is supported by the four trends observed in the wider socio-ecological transformation and arts discourse, which I will outline below.

2. Theorising the Synergies between Art and Degrowth

Firstly, it could be helpful for degrowth actors to diversify their creation of knowledges, as well as to inter-mingle with audiences from different academic and non-academic disciplines. The scientific basis of the degrowth community is, among many scholars, considered a point of strength which grounds degrowth with evidence and calculus. Within this scientific community, rational and coherent arguments can indeed be considered a strong characteristic of degrowth thought. Yet, these arguments are, first and foremost, resonating with a formally educated audience, making degrowth, until now, a well-known concept among integral academics. However, academic research, as largely practiced in educational institutions, is reproducing power hierarchies and political ideas of a specific rational way of knowing (Fazey et al., 2020); if degrowth scholars want to overcome these structures to broaden their allies, they need to explore, engage with, and practice other forms of knowledge generation, such as artistic research or post-normal science (Funtowicz & Ravetz,

1993; Greaves, Pansera & Lloveras, 2024; Kagan, 2015). From a strategic point of view, then, the diversification of actors and knowledges might enable the degrowth community to better face the new wave of social-ecological movement politics: emancipating the community from the gates of institutionalism and creating stronger alliances with non-academic audiences.[1]

Artists could serve as key agents for such a diversification from a social and epistemological point of view. They can share meaning without data, give form to an idea, and convey emotions within a split second. At the same time, artists tend to be very reflexive in their own practices, as affect is guiding their work—although not controlling it (Leavy, 2009). Artists can therefore operate in this blind spot between intuition, curiosity, and critical thinking; and their work could complement the rather rational, scientific degrowth community in its ways of knowing. It goes without saying that affect and emotions play a significant role in how we lead our lives, thereby placing artists as significant actors in building (counter-) hegemony (Mouffe, 2016; Slaby & von Scheve, 2019).

Secondly, a literature review of the intersection between art and degrowth is timely given the recent activities in the degrowth community. Since at least 2014, an artistic section is included in the degrowth conference program, making these two worlds increasingly more connected (Jordan, 2016). For example, the Degrowth Conference in Zagreb 2023 invited the Indonesian collective *ruangrupa* to a panel discussion and concluded the conference with an exhibition at the Croatian Association of Visual Arts. However, these events and other writings have not been reviewed or reflected upon comprehensively (Greaves, 2024; Willming, 2021). This literature review aims to not simply fill this gap, but also to intervene in these practices academically by critically evaluating how these recent efforts from within the degrowth movement could be pursued further. Therefore, it is fair to frame this article and the Degrowth Journal Arts Special Issue, which includes multiple artistic voices, as interventions which make visible the material that does not reach the academic core of the degrowth community.

[1] Frankly, degrowth scholarship has always paid careful attention to activist voices from both the Global North and the Global South. Additionally, artistic research and works are increasingly embedded in Degrowth conferences (Greaves, 2024) but remain absent otherwise.

Thirdly, trends in the art world indicate a growing interest in deep sustainability (Ferraro & Reid, 2013; Heras et al., 2021; Kagan, 2011) but also, more in line with degrowth vocabulary, in revolutionary (Raunig, 2007), eco-feminist (Serafini, 2019), and commoning practices (Hofmann et al., 2022; Willming, 2022). Many artists reflect and act against an economic system which is based on enclosure, appropriation, and exploitation. For example, during the occupation of the Zuccotti Park after the 2008 financial crash, creatives and activists—many of whom considered themselves to be *art*ivists—took the initiative to squat and cultivate a piece of land next to Wall Street to join forces with other anti-capitalist groups (Jordan, 2016). As Yates McKee (2017) describes it in his book *Strike Art*, this bio-assemblage of creatives and activists "grounded in direct action decisively changed horizons in which art is produced, received, and judged in a manner comparable with earlier moments of rupture" (p. 237). Those artistic approaches to commoning, activism, and revolution resonate with the messages behind the degrowth agenda, and ultimately act upon them. This review thus aims to closely examine and sharpen the particular forms of artistic creation which may advance the transformation to a just and sustainable society as envisioned by degrowth scholarship.

Lastly, as further shown in the analysis, degrowth scholarship may be expedient to advance criticism towards the art economy and guide social, ecological, and economic changes in the art world. Art is currently in a highly ambiguous, transitionary phase with elements of crisis and elements of hope. The art market has become a hyper-capitalist playground for billionaires who seek tax benefits and reliable investments (Fraser, 2011; Mei & Moses, 2002, 2005); while at the same time, inequality between artists remains high and, to some extent, arbitrary (Abbing, 2002) due to a winner-takes-it-all dynamic with a few successful artists and many precarious ones (McRobbie, 2015). Additionally, due to extractive production methods, sponsorship deals with Big Oil, and a global and mobile distribution network, the environmental impact of the art economy is becoming a significant problem (Miller, 2017). Arts and culture are not the benign, low-carbon activities that they were once conceived to be (Oakley & Banks, 2020). The critical scholarship of the degrowth movement could possibly guide an escape from the oligarchic circumstances of the art economy towards economic democratisation, more social equality, and sustainable production. Some of the conditions to establish a mutual support for both the art world and the degrowth movement are therefore outlined in the discussion section of this paper.

The review further continues by firstly introducing the methodological approach, including a few reflections on the selection process of articles. Next, the results section identifies the thematic clusters that emerged from the available literature, with each subsection further expanding on the relationship and the juxtaposition between degrowth and art. Additionally, the extent to which contradictions and conflicts exist within and between the clusters is evaluated. A cluster, as will be shown below, will be defined according to how the relationship between degrowth and art is interpreted. Thus, a cluster does not represent a univocal perspective but rather a meta-category within the discourse that holds diverse perspectives. Lastly, the reflection section serves to create a space where these tensions are evaluated and analysed from a sociology-of-the-arts perspective, drawing on Howard Becker´s book *Art Worlds* (1982) as a tool to understand the distinct interpretations of degrowth and art. The conclusion will eventually share the insights gained through this literature review and suggest strategic steps for the degrowth community to have meaningful engagement with the arts and vice versa.

3. Methodological Approach and Considerations

In the process of examining published literature, different approaches to the nexus of degrowth and art have been identified. These approaches vary in their thematic and rhetorical focus. Furthermore, the number of publications on this topic is limited, such that the review should be interpreted as an initial structuring effort on the matter and not as systemic mapping. Thus, the aim of this review is to establish the connection between the degrowth movement and the artistic sector, as well as to highlight the benefits and risks that the arts might face when seriously engaging with degrowth as a guideline to their artistic practices.

As the intersection of art and degrowth is a widely unexplored discourse, the review includes both peer-reviewed journal articles as well as blog posts, reports, and similar outlets. The *degrowth.info* and *Scopus* platforms were utilised to find sources for peer-reviewed academic articles and book chapters, with the search for keywords and tags being “Art and Degrowth” (18 articles found). The key references from these articles were included in the review in a

second round when they significantly addressed both degrowth and art (12 articles added).[2] To complement the academic literature with texts from the art world (i.e. curators, artists, art theorists), art magazine articles, exhibition catalogues, and gallery blogs (appearing through the internet search: "Art and Degrowth") were added to the database of articles (7 articles added). Finally, interactions with my PhD supervisor, Sacha Kagan, and the broader network rendered further entries (7 articles added). In total, the Degrowth and Art database consists of 44 articles.

Yet, when delving into the discourse of art and degrowth, written publications only show a fraction of perspectives. In order to generate a fuller overview, seven exhibitions themed after degrowth were added to the database. Their curatorial statements, reviews, and catalogues were included in the analysis. To keep a coherent methodological design, art works were not included in the analysis due to their qualitative, wide interpretative spectrum and often non-verbal dimension. Additionally, it would have exceeded the scope and aim of this review article. Further assumptions and limitations are presented in two parts below:

a) Firstly, the review only includes articles and exhibitions that are found online and which are well archived. For literature, this might mean that art publications found in, e.g. DIY-Zines (a growing practice for artist writers), are not integrated. Similarly, I only included exhibitions with a strong web presence. Analogue grassroots exhibitions, although they may fit and represent a degrowth practice, can only be found marginally in my database due to a lack of information found online. This leads to an additional question: what kind of exhibitions are archived in the web? I assume that the review is slightly biased towards larger institutions, especially with regards to the data from art writing and exhibition catalogues.

Additionally, this might cause the voices of artists to be underrepresented in this review. It might be fair to say that exhibition catalogues and other publications included in this review are aiming to adequately represent artistic positions. However, this would mediate their

[2] Here, two key references (Banks, 2023; Meissner, 2021) focused more on the relationship between degrowth and visual or popular culture than art specifically. Yet, I locate art in this review within the realm of culture and thus included these texts in the review. Below, I will also explain the specific role of these texts in the degrowth-art nexus.

voices through individuals whose profession included the act of writing. Henceforth, many artists might follow artistic practices of or about degrowth but would not be included in this review if they are not documented in written format anywhere.

b) Secondly, related to the previous point, the review is restricted to keywords and titles that include degrowth and art. This might be problematic for two reasons. One is the playfulness in the art world regarding exhibition or even essay titles. Often, titles are unrelated to the main message or topic of the exhibition. Instead, the titles may be abstract and allegorical. This bears the risk that an exhibition might be addressing the topic of degrowth under a completely different name.[3] In order to circumvent this issue, I consulted personal contacts to enquire about exhibitions and art writing about degrowth (another source for potential selection biases).

The second problem which accompanies the use of the terms degrowth and art is that degrowth is an umbrella term for a much larger movement and network. The degrowth movement spans from concepts like commoning, decolonization, and deceleration to care, conviviality, or dematerialization. As D´Alisa et al. (2014, p. xxi) put it: “Degrowth is a frame that where different lines of thought, imaginaries, and, of course, actions come together.” Their book alone (published 10 years ago) includes 50 concepts that are attached to the degrowth movement. Some scholars also employ the terminology of post-growth, which covers many aspects of degrowth but places more importance on the politico-economic phase after emancipating from the growth paradigm, making it an even broader concept than degrowth (Reichel, 2016). It is beyond the scope of this research to do a literature review with each of these concepts. On the other hand, degrowth unites many concepts and by limiting the search to the term “degrowth,” I may get additional insights into which facets of the movement are most often found in relation to art.

Bearing in mind the pitfalls and limits of these assumptions, the next section will contour the

[3] For example, the exhibition Raupernimmersatism (Savvy, 2020) in Savvy Contemporary Berlin, curated by Bonaventure Ndikung, uses the German tale of a hungry caterpillar (Raupe Nimmersatt) as an allegory to critically address growing consumer demands and cultures of affluence. The exhibition was included in the database because a digital web resource for the exhibition mentioned the degrowth movement.

clusters found in publications on art and degrowth. It should be noted that these clusters are the result of the author's scrutiny and were partially arranged with subjective interpretation through an iterative process in which the clusters formed through the engagement with the literature.[4] The following paragraphs will justify why and how the clusters emerged from the literature.

4. Results of the Literature Review: Three Clusters in the Art-Degrowth Nexus

Cluster 1: Art for Degrowth: A Matter of Messaging

This group of texts focuses on how art can transmit political messages to people and why art is relevant for communicating the degrowth vision. At 43.2%, this cluster represents the biggest proportion in this review. Artistic media drawn from this group of articles include critiques—such as poems about interspecies conviviality (Cuvillier, 2014), pollution, or sleep (Dinsmore-Tuli, 2020)—but also analyses of Artivism (Boyd, 2012; Jordan, 2016) and Culture Jamming, the practice of changing corporate logos for leftist purposes (Alexander, 2020; Jordan, 2016). The overall aim of this group is to use art as a medium, or a tool, to advance the degrowth agenda, often by deploying explicit political messages through visual, performative, or graphical communication. Yet, the means and mechanisms behind art to do so vary among the publications within this group. This will be explained below.

Alexander (2017), for example, posits that every political movement needs images and interactions, which help to translate the demands of the movement into culture. Due to this challenge, Alexander sides with the philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse, whose work is relevant for two key aspects: the *how* and the *what* behind the potential of subversive artistic practices. Starting with the *how,* Alexander is concerned about the ways that art can touch people differently than science and politics. As Marcuse (1978) pointed out, art can communicate truths "not communicable in any other language" (p. 10). This is exactly where the subversive potential of art may lie in Alexander´s (2017) perspective. Having a closer look at his examination of Marcuse, he concludes that:

[4] Figure 3 depicts the proportions of the clusters. The full database of articles is available here.

> *non-rational contexts where the artist arguably becomes a necessary agent of change, [are] having the potential to provoke social change via different mechanisms of persuasion, making emotional, psychological or even spiritual impacts on an audience at those times when science, logic, and argument have failed. (Alexander, 2017, p. 16)*

Alexander´s further thesis is that especially degrowth needs to seek artistic creations because of its highly scientific, systemic critique of growth—which is often an abstract critique unless you are familiar with the laws of thermodynamics or ecological limits. Art can therefore, according to Alexander and Marcuse, give "form to content" (Alexander, 2017, p. 16).

With regards to the *what* of artistic subversive practices, Marcuse (1978) also believed that artists have a special capacity of contesting and expanding what society perceives as normal. He argued that by unfreezing rigid, frozen reality, art can re-shape society´s imagination. To quote Alexander (2017), "I would argue that one of the most important roles of the artist in society is not merely to make beautiful objects, images, stories, or songs, but to expand conditions of possibility by breaking through the petrified social reality and unshackling the human imagination" (p.18). This paves the way for an extension of political strategies to the aesthetic realm. Alexander (2017, p. 4) calls this tactic "aesthetic interventions," as it can invoke a "felt need" within society for a change. To sum it up, for Alexander art may not change the world, but it may change the consciousness and goals of people who, if their motivation and desires are ignited, can change the world.

Another key figure of influence to this cluster is Chantal Mouffe. Her reading of Antonio Gramsci, who is a crucial reference for degrowth scholars (Robra, 2021), looks at art as a counter-hegemonic strategy. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is the power bloc of neoliberal ideology consisting of cultural values and conventions, sometimes referred to as people´s "common sense" or "ruling ideas" (Mouffe, 2013). In her book *Agonistics*, Mouffe (2013) theorizes how art spaces can be seen as battlegrounds in which struggles could create counter-hegemony. This makes her, among other things, an advocate for the political power in artistic messaging (Mouffe, 2016). Meissner (2021), for example, takes Mouffe as a starting point to argue for the importance of popular culture to mainstream degrowth. She points out how many TV series, such as *The Kardashians,* are formed around consumerist and growth-

based ideologies. She believes that cultural and artistic works determine what is interpreted as normal or virtuous. In line with Stuart Hall´s (1987/2017) *politics as production,* this implies that cultural practices can also be re-appropriated towards the goals of the degrowth movement. Therefore, Meissner (2021) advocates for a *degrowth populism* through the support of culture and art in the form of rituals, films, or lifestyle movements. The main aim of her paper is to formalise the strategic role of how art and culture could support the degrowth agenda.

Next to these more theoretical engagements, a subgroup within this cluster believes that artistic actions with an activist twist are necessary to support the degrowth agenda. These publications refer to artists mostly as political communicators or artistic activists. For example, culture jamming groups like the Brandalism Collective or Yes Men are mentioned in multiple publications within this cluster (Alexander, 2020; Jordan, 2016; Jordan & Fremeaux, 2021). *Culture Jamming* can be described as a subversive action which exposes the hidden truth of corporate violence by modifying the graphical marketing of brands to activist messages. Although not many artists write about their practices, those that do have the clear mission of not being represented falsely or being instrumentalised by academic scholars. In their work, Jordan (2016) warns the degrowth movement about confusing artistic activism as making art *about* an issue. Rather, Jordan argues that artistic activism is a direct action—combining the necessary with the beautiful. For example, in their project *Clown Army* (Klepto & Major Up Evil, 2005), the participants kissed riot shields and created a spectacle of satiric public performances and pranks to distract the police at multiple social protest camps or activist gatherings. Another example is the chain of tractors, which Jordan and Fremeaux (2021) co-created with local farmers near their ZAD (zone to defend) in Notre-dame-des-Landes, in order to create a creative alliance between activists and locals (see Figure 1). Similarly, the Liberate Tate Collective (Liberate Tate, n.d.), that Jordan was also part of, can be interpreted as a campaign of artistic actions and collective performances, which prompted the Tate art museum to withdraw from its sponsorship deal with the oil corporation BP. The goal of the campaign was to stop, what the collective frames as, “artwashing”: the involvement of corporations in the world of art to improve their public image and influence cultural institutions (Jordan, 2016). While I would argue that this stance aligns with the other scholars found in this cluster, Jordan’s position contains an important message: making art

about an issue is not *Arts for Degrowth.* If artistic projects designed to advance the degrowth agenda wish to remain radical, then, according to Jordan, taking action is an integral part of the artistic process.

Figure 1. Tractors at ZAD, Notre-Dames-des-Landes
(Found in: Paris Match Online Gallery, La Rédaction, 2016).

In fact, each publication in this cluster aims to support, strategically advise, or at least address the degrowth movement through their analysis of activist and political art. The authors in this cluster are somewhat invested in and knowledgeable about the struggles of the degrowth movement. Therefore, the majority of publications in this cluster are written by scholars from social sciences with a focus on social movements. Since their main concern is socio-ecological justice, these authors analyse art according to whether and how it can advance those struggles. Except for Jordan and Fremeaux (2021), who operate in a space between activism and art, few publications by artists are included in this cluster. On the one hand, it is likely that artists are not writing about their struggles; they are instead performing them through their work. On the other hand, the general absence of artists in this group might therefore not come as a surprise. As argued by Oliver Marchart (2019), the prestigious art world (distanced from most activist circles) is characterised by avoiding explicit political messages. It claims to be political by not being political.

However, I would argue that the a-political contemporary art world and this group of (mainly) social scientists, who look at art for explicit eco-political communication, are not too distant from one another. In fact, they both believe that art can touch people in very unpredictable ways, arguing for example that the senses matter for inner and societal transformations. The cluster of publications I have presented here believes that witty, yet radical political messages, delivered in multiple sensory forms, can touch and convince us in a different fashion than a scientific argument or political poster could. Most authors in this cluster assert that the degrowth agenda should make use of images and the politics of affect. Henceforth, I have called this cluster *Art for Degrowth*.

Linked to the previous point, the next cluster of publications on art and degrowth is characterised less as a group of academic activists, but more as writings from inside of the (institutionalised) art world. These authors are concerned about reforming and revolutionising the art world as it currently exists.

Cluster 2: Degrowth for Art: The Transformation of the Art World

The second group addresses to what degree and how the contemporary art world could embrace degrowth as its moral compass for the future. Instead of looking at art as a medium to convince and make individuals aware of inequity or ecological collapse, this grouping of scholarship focuses on making changes to the politics of the institutionalised art world and suggests sustainable artistic production. With 36.4%, this cluster represents the second biggest group of publications in the Art and Degrowth database. The articles in this cluster are usually published in art magazines and are written by curators or art historians who are positioned within the art world. The publications also show diverse perspectives on how the art world could apply principles of degrowth. Some authors suggest minor, reformist changes (Krau, 2022; Siegal, 2017), while others call for the structural transformation of the contemporary “art machine” (Avila, 2016; Zimmermann, 2022). More radically, some authors advocate for its abolition as it currently exists (Barbanti, 2016), while others argue that growth-critical art worlds are constantly being created (Galluzzo, 2023; Solomos, 2023). The following paragraphs are ordered from less radical to more radical voices.

This cluster of scholarship emerges from the insight that the contemporary art world and

market, in its current apex, has become a playground for investors and traders, and that this tendency is exploiting artists and creatives. Words by Nina Siegal (2017), New York Times columnist, can serve well as an introduction to this cluster:

> *The last quarter of a century has been a period of pronounced growth in the cultural sector, with the rumble of jackhammers creating the soundtrack to 21st-century museum life. New buildings, multimillion-dollar expansions, new wings and collection growth have all helped drive visitor numbers to unprecedented heights.*

Siegal reviews the Verbier Art Summit, an event where 100 art professionals meet in a luxurious ski resort in Switzerland to discuss contemporary tendencies in the art market. The 2017 edition of Verbier was themed *Size Matters* and it called for a consideration of what "qualities" the art world gains from growing economically. The article integrates an interview with Beatrix Ruf, the head of the Verbier Art Summit and former director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, who proclaims to have curated one of the largest growth-critical art events so far (Ruf & Slyce, 2019; Siegal, 2017).

In the interview, Ruf cautiously reviews audience growth and the architectural renewal of her museum ("something we always want") while becoming increasingly aware that this might render a visitor's experience of the museum less meaningful. According to Ruf, size matters as it may hamper the quality of the museum experience (Siegal, 2017). From this, we can deduce that Ruf is less concerned about ecological collapse and the re-distribution of resources—concerns central to the degrowth community—than the interference of growth with the experiences of museum visitors. Her vision of degrowth focuses upon preserving quality of experience, which is achieved at a certain scale and compromised by too much magnitude or growth.

Other articles in the *Degrowth for Art* cluster share the vision that art institutions need to reduce their ecological footprint via small, effective steps: reduce the use of plastics, re-use materials, or organise more exhibitions for indigenous voices (Krau, 2022). Others call for a radical end of art as it exists. Barbanti (2016), for example, writes how art has lost touch with the world and makes the case that elitist contemporary art should not be called the "art

world" anymore because it is completely alienated from the natural world around us. He argues that two significant transformations in art history represent an assimilation towards degrowth: a critical perspective on technology, as highlighted in the works (and worlds) of Vilém Flusser, and the emergence of eco-acoustics as a way to connect with the world again.

This is where critical voices enter the debate. For example, Leigh Biddlecomb (2021) warns that a reduction in production might hurt artists and creatives. Biddlecomb contextualises this apprehension by raising the importance of re-distribution and re-localization in the contemporary art market. The art world, from his perspective, should not just stagnate economically, but shift from its capitalist dynamics into a socially just sector of society which engages meaningfully in the local contexts it is embedded within. Mark Banks follows a similar line of criticism by aligning degrowth theory to the importance of developing a just, sustainable popular culture rather than shrinking it through austerity (Banks, 2020, 2023; Banks & Serafini, 2020).

Finally, a couple of authors engage with degrowth scholarship and theorise on how artists are already transforming the art world by aligning their artistic production and vision to principles of degrowth.[5] For instance, there is Anthony Galluzzo´s (2023) book *Against the Vortex,* in which Galluzzo argues that a group of progress-sceptical, feminist, and decelerationist artists emerged in the 1970s. Through a close analysis of the cult-classic film *Zardoz*, Galluzzo coins the group name *Critical Aquarians* for artists who allegedly share degrowth characteristics in their work, such as "individual exploration and communal spirit, folk traditionalism and avant-garde experimentation, and finally, reason and imagination in the vein of the first-generation Romantics as their most radical" (Galluzzo, 2023, p. 14). Galluzzo´s group includes artists familiar to degrowth thinkers, like Ursula K. Le Guin, Norman O. Brown, or John Boorman. Theorists such as Michel Foucault, Andre Gorz, or Maria Mies are considered to be *Critical Aquarians* by the author too.

[5] The distinction between practices of artistic activism and the artistic practices outlined here lie in their directionality. Artistic Activism creates witty, aestheticised political campaigns in line with the degrowth agenda, while the artistic practices mentioned here adopt degrowth principles more in the way they create or produce their art. Additionally, Artistic Activism often has a capitalist target enemy (e.g. police, oil corporations), which this cluster does not necessarily have.

Similarly, the musicologist Makis Solomos (2023) looked into individual musicians who should be considered degrowth artists. He claims that these artists share a minimalist and "non-manipulative" (Solomos, 2023, p. 43) use of technology, for example by building instruments from waste or raw materials. For Solomos, many artists have already turned their back on the institutionalised art world and started to construct modes of working and organising which he links to the principles of degrowth. One central figure is the composer, theoretician, and sound artist Agostino di Scipio; known for his use of technology in an ecological way by making his audience aware that sound is a bio-political weapon for gaining power. Through his works, perhaps best represented in the track *Paris, La Robitique des Lumières,*[6] Di Scipio (2003) provides the relational nature of a sound milieu (see Figure 2): a reminder that we can be made aware of where and how sounds appear and disappear through irreducible listening, which is simultaneously a critique on the overstimulating world of contemporary capitalism.

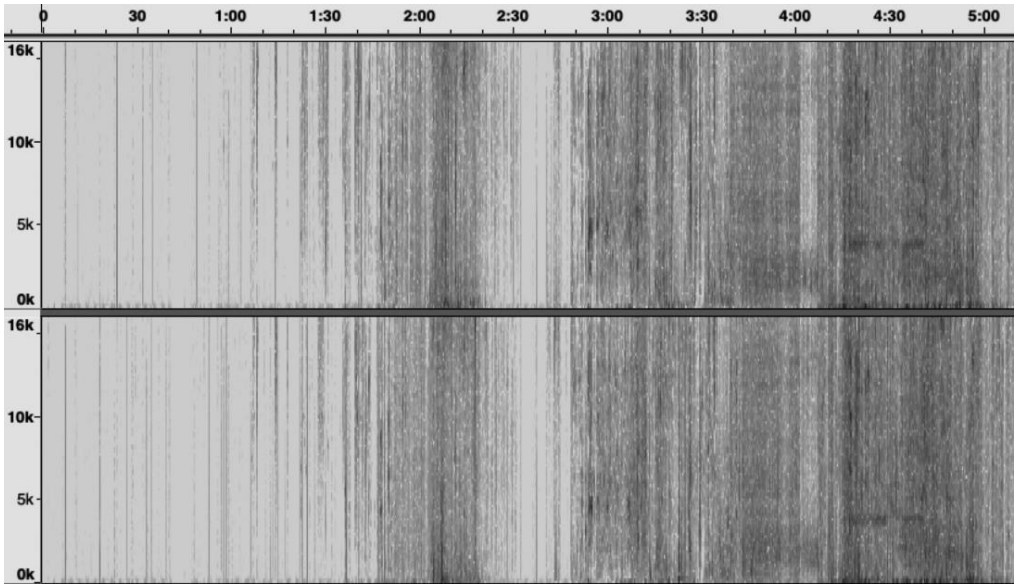

Figure 2. Agostino Di Scipio: Paris, La Robtique des Lumières. Opening Spectogram
(Found in: Solomos, 2023).

Solomos (2023) also classifies the Italian art group *Arte Povera* as degrowth artists. They are an art group from the 1960's who have used everyday and, thus, "poor" materials in their production of art, and additionally blended political organising with ecological practices. Following the examples of degrowth practices as explained by Barbanti et al. (2012), Solomos

[6] The track is unavailable online, but Di Scipio's Stanze Private can serve as a similar representation of his overall oeuvre (Mancuso, 2009).

draws parallels to *Arte Povera*—specifically to their "rarefication and simplification of images, delicacy in their work, using nature as material, recycling; opposition to mechanisms of the art system; sharing instead of an individual approach" (p. 123).

Here, we can neatly observe how Solomos, just alike Galluzzo, views degrowth artists as individuals who take the time to reflect and eventually reject automated mechanisms and practices as structured by the capitalist, extraction-based system. Consequently, these artists reconsider the use of technology, the choice of materials, and what to communicate with their final work. While Galluzzo (2023) places more importance on the vision and ideology of *Critical Aquarians* (for example, in their stance on Decelerationism and opposition to Prometheanism), Solomos (2023) considers degrowth to be a part of the artist´s methodology (setup; dynamics with technology). Both authors share an interest in recognising pioneering artists, who already push in the direction of degrowth by adapting their own artistic practice to a world with ecological limits. However, such artists never describe themselves as "degrowth artists." Thus, this positions Galluzzo and Solomos not merely as researchers seeking to reform institutional practices, but also as scholars interested in constellating a group of artists who could be classified as "degrowth artists."

As outlined above, we can sum up this cluster of publications as advocating for changes to an art world which predominantly operates according to capitalist logics. While some authors believe in incremental reforms towards ecological behaviour, others like to re-define the art world and imagine interdisciplinary constellations that could re-create artistic practices in line with degrowth—thereby showing a desire to advance counter-hegemonic cultural and artistic arrangements within the arts.

No publication systematically defines what a degrowth future might look like for the institutionalised art world and how growth logics deeply influence the contemporary art machine, even if growth critiques of the art market and its injustices are generally well known by artists and society alike (Banks, 2020; Fraser, 2011). Some scholars form strong arguments concerning why and how artists can be considered degrowth-affiliated, but one can observe nuanced differences between their understanding of how the concept of degrowth should translate to artistic practices within and outside cultural institutions. This seems fitting given

that degrowth emphasizes a plurality of possible futures and world views (Kothari et al., 2019), and the publications in this cluster come from a variety of professional and disciplinary backgrounds. Here, I would label an important area for future research: the systematic creation of a degrowth theory for the art world and its economies.

Cluster 3: Art as Degrowth: Degrowth as Art

The two previous clusters were concerned about social-ecological changes in either the societal or the artistic field: the first group, *Art for Degrowth*, desires to bring more creativity into the political campaigns of the degrowth movement; while the second group, *Degrowth for Art*, critiques capitalist logics within the institutionalised art world and identifies artists in line with degrowth principles. On the other hand, this third cluster forms around scholars who conceptualise *the artistic process as a degrowth practice*. While the previous two clusters have addressed artists, activists, and respective institutions, this cluster expands the nexus of art and degrowth by stating that artistic ways of working—conducted as vocation, hobby, or schooling—should be considered as degrowth practices. Through this cluster, the review thus leaves the realm of self-identified artists and moves towards common everyday life. With 11.4% of publications, this is the third biggest cluster of articles in the review.

One key figure in this group is Kate Soper. Soper's (2020) concept of *Alternative Hedonism* criticises the material-intensive and psychologically draining consumer activities of commuting, fast food, and shopping which were once thought to provide society with pleasures. Soper believes that due to ecological damages, economic costs, and social emptiness, hedonism is too entangled with capitalism and that, therefore, new hedonistic activities must be established. Here, Soper problematises in particular the acceleration of life which is visible in the fast-natured change of fashion in affluent societies or the fast food "take-away" culture. She argues that this acceleration undermines our sense of pleasure and prosperity. Acceleration, while leading to unfulfilled lives, is, according to Soper, confused with efficiency, improvement, and progress (Highmore et al., 2023; Soper, 2020).

This is why Soper turns to the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and art. She argues that "artistic creation and enjoyment, sex, play, conversation" are less instrumentalised than other activities and belong therefore to Kant´s "purposeless purposes" (Soper, 2020, p. 82).

To deepen her argument, Soper turns her attention towards the concept of *craftivism*: a political wing in the crafts movement which advocates that crafts belong to a new post-consumerist political imaginary based on self-sufficiency and deceleration. Together with Schor (2010), Soper defends *craftivists* as avant-garde actors who will eventually develop novel post-growth[7] forms of working by fusing technology with slowness and self-sufficiency (Soper, 2020).

As Soper (2020) describes:

> *I have in mind especially craft ways of working, which by reason of their emphasis on skill, attention to detail, and personal involvement and control, run counter to prevailing views on the mental–manual division of labour with its imperatives to adhere to the work-and-spend economy. In a slower paced society, in which people had more time to provide for themselves, artisan production could expand and many more could benefit from the skills, the mental concentration and the satisfaction it can provide. (p. 75)*

Here, it becomes ever more clear that Soper´s approach to art-making and degrowth is a proposition which does not just include artists, but instead encourages everyone to adopt this contemplative, ludic way of being.

This view is historically rooted in the arts and crafts movement, and as such William Morris repeatedly appears in this cluster of degrowth scholarship (Soper, 2020; Willming, 2021). As an artist, poet, and socialist revolutionary, Morris made crafting a political act which stands in clear contrast with mass and industrial production. This, to use Davis (2016) words, "non-productivist" form of socialism can function as a pioneer for an everyday degrowth practice, which sources its inspiration in the process of making art. As Soper (2020) additionally points out, the potential pleasures of slow-working and crafting, as Morris aspired, are well compatible and often combined with the organisation of communally owned enterprises and

[7] The term post-growth (instead of degrowth) is adopted from Kate Soper (2020).

cooperatives, which we can observe in the crafts sector.[8] The craftivism scene thus combines red and green politics, a project representing the core of the degrowth movement.

Soper (2020) also acknowledges the limitations of the craftivism-as-a-degrowth-practice hypothesis. She argues that whilst crafts bear the potential for a radically new way of working, it is crucial that they do not follow any reactionary, "back-to-the-roots" approach reminiscent of the 19th century. Pioneers like William Morris might be succinctly relevant for today´s artistic and cultural perspectives on degrowth (Willming, 2021), but Soper (2020) acknowledges that Morris lived in a different historical context. Here, she also sides with Theodor Adorno´s (1979, p. 36) critical perspective on crafts nostalgia which he referred to as "the retrospective infatuation of the aura of the socially doomed craftsman." Adorno, alongside Walter Benjamin, advanced instead the concept of "anti-techism" as a form of art, which breaks away from functional instrumentality given that its process and products are decoupled from fast-paced commodification and the capitalist-industrial complex. Through this lens, Soper (2020) argues for a decelerated, anti-instrumentalist, post-consumerist—but by no means anti-modern—artisanal way of doing and working.

On this matter, Soper (2020) stands in slight contrast to Solomos (2023)—from the "Degrowth for the Arts" cluster—who sees art as "regain(ing) the socially important position it held in ancient and traditional societies" (p. 215). While I assume that Solomos does not call for a return to Volk traditionalism á la Heidegger, he does argue that looking back specifically at ancient Greek societies can re-establish a craft-based arts that creates a community and flourishment for the common people.

There is also another sub-category of articles that has emerged in this cluster. While Soper (2020) stands for the hypothesis that artistic practices prefigure a way of a degrowth life, other authors believe that a degrowth world would provide more space for creating meaningful, sentimental, and locally bound art. This position is well exemplified by Jason

[8] It is acknowledged that such an advocacy for post-capitalist forms of cultural practices overlaps with the articles mentioned in the cluster "Degrowth for Art" (Galluzzo, 2023; Solomos, 2023). Morris and Craftivism are mentioned here because they represent Soper´s (2020) desire to transform slow-paced art-making into a practice of everyday life, which can be conducted by artists, activists, and citizens alike.

Hickel (2019), who sees art as a part of a degrowth-aligned skill set cultivated in free time:

> *[w]ith more free time people would be able to have fun, enjoy conviviality with loved ones, cooperate with neighbours, care for friends and relatives, cook healthy food, exercise and enjoy nature, thus rendering unnecessary the patterns of consumption that are driven by time scarcity. And opportunities to learn and develop new skills such as music, maintenance, growing food and crafting furniture would contribute to local self-sufficiency. (p. 66)*

The advocacy of more free time is an anchor point in degrowth politics. Degrowth scholars propose that free time could be filled with art and play, thereby implying that art and commercialization can and should be separately organised spheres. Kallis (2018, p. 121), additionally, believes that art is an "unproductive expenditure" and would like to create collective festivals and locally-bound, de-commercialised amateur Olympic Games in the leisure time won through the degrowth struggle. These cultural activities would, according to Kallis (2018), replace the carbon-intensive activities found in the cultural economy and, simultaneously, become an enrichment for local communities.

However, the hypothesis that a degrowth society is a fertile ground for the arts is also contested within this cluster. Core degrowth scholars (i.e. Hickel and Kallis) defend that creative expressions can flourish in a degrown society. On the other hand, cultural theorists believe that this is a limited and an outdated view on culture which lacks sensitivity to the many alternative—but manufactured—forms of artistic and cultural production. For these scholars, culture may be more than an "unproductive expenditure" conducted in one´s leisure time. Instead, culture is comprised of many identities, live worlds, and internationally connected organisations (Banks, 2023; O´Connor, 2024). With regards to cultural and artistic production, Banks (2023) argues that the degrowth movement faces the challenge to "generate a progressive degrowth project that can not only more equitably share and sustain scarce resources, but also retain some sense of organised cultural production as a source of different aesthetic, symbolic and communicative needs and desires" (p. 23). His concluding argument is that the artistic and cultural organisation is too diverse and complex to inject rigid degrowth principles like simplicity, smallness, or unproductivity into it. While Banks approves

of the unproductive realm of culture, he warns to forfeit and label manufacturing of art and culture in an organised—even commodified—form as inherently bad. As he further elaborates, “In the degrown future, it is not only localised and restricted forms of popular culture that will be required, but shared, mediated and globally extensive forms of popular culture, too” (Banks, 2023, p. 20).

To conclude, authors in this cluster gather around the following two questions: to what extent can making art be considered a pre-figuration of a degrowth practice? How would a degrown world enable creative flourishing? Similar to the other two clusters, scholars in this cluster neither agree on how artistic practices could embody the potentials of degrowth, nor on how art would be created in a degrowth society. In the end, such an agreement might not be necessary, as the articles in this cluster have started a wide-ranging discussion around the slow processes of crafts and how the process of art-making can help people flourish in their everyday life, nonetheless.

Additionally, this cluster commonly debates the importance of de-commodifying cultural production. This discussion often comes back to the conundrum that has shaped the degrowth discussion in recent years: is degrowth calling for a radical downscaling of *any* economy? Or is degrowth only implying a downscaling of *some* economies? What elements of which sectors need to stop growing and start re-distributing if a qualitative transformation towards post-capitalism is the goal? To create a more systematic review on the arts and degrowth literature, the next section must avoid these questions (for now). Instead, I will analyse how the diverse approaches to the degrowth and art nexus complement, contradict, and could learn from one another.

5. Reflections on the Clusters: Art Worlds and the Degrowth Agenda

This review grouped the relevant literature to inform the current relationship between degrowth and art scholarship. Through this approach, I presented the main discourses of each cluster and outlined how these contribute to uncovering that relationship. By placing the clusters next to each other and highlighting some conflicts, it was made clear that there is no univocal point of view within the nexus of art and degrowth—neither from the point of view

of degrowth academics, nor artists and art writers. However, three clusters have emerged through an iterative review process with different volumes of articles (see Figure 3 for an overview). They are named *Art for Degrowth; Degrowth for Art;* and *Art as Degrowth.*

The *Art for Degrowth* cluster mainly consists of activist and scholar-activist voices affiliated with the degrowth movement. These articles focus on how art could be utilized to advance the degrowth agenda. Practices such as culture jamming and artivism were discussed, as well as the theoretical basis behind these approaches, e.g. Alexander´s (2020) review of Herbert Marcuse´s theory for the arts.

The second cluster, *Degrowth for Art*, gathers voices that generally approach the question of subverting the politics of the art world and its institutions. For some art writers, curators, and art historians, the concept of degrowth is of interest and they have applied it to their institutions in various ways (Biddlecomb, 2021; Ruf & Slyce, 2019). Some articles think of degrowth as a renunciation of disposable cups, whereas others want literal de-growing of the alienated art world so that new structures can emerge in the collapse of the capitalist art market (Barbanti, 2016). Additionally, other scholars believe that a formation of degrowth-affiliated artists critical of institutions has emerged in the 20th century and can be found in movements like *Arte Povera* (Solomos, 2023) or *Critical Aquarianism* (Galluzzo, 2023).

Lastly, the third cluster, named *Art as Degrowth,* does not give the relationship between art and degrowth a direction like the two previous clusters (the application of one's concept to the realm of the other), but states that making art is a pre-figured way of degrowth due to its non-instrumentalised purposelessness (Soper, 2020). Additionally, some scholars in this cluster state that in a degrowth society there will be much more time for art making (Hickel, 2019; Kallis, 2018). Yet, this cluster also contains controversies given that cultural theorists believe those equations lack an understanding of the complexity of the creative industries and criticize that such a view on art inadequately labels art as a benign hobby (Banks, 2023).

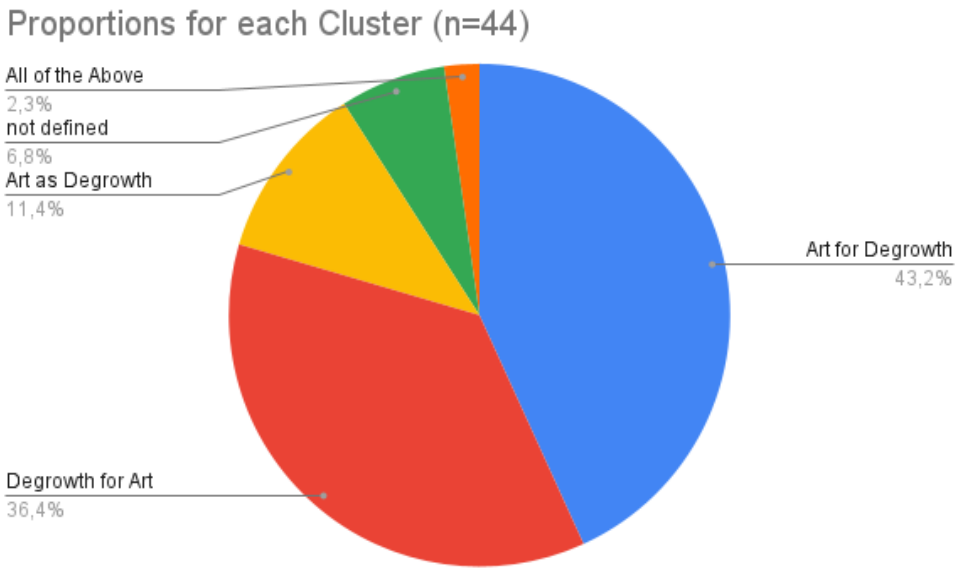

Figure 3. Overview of the Results: Three Main Clusters in the Degrowth and Art Nexus (Source: author).

How can we understand these clusters in relation to each other? Here we can gain insights into the sociologies of the arts by consulting Howard Becker´s (1982) book *Art Worlds.* Becker has conducted an extensive body of ethnographic work to understand the organisation, preparation, and presentation of art. Partially due to the wide scope of his book, one of the many important conclusions is that there is not a singular art world but a multitude of networks and cooperatives who together form a plurality of art worlds.

In my article, I did not group the literature in clusters because it exists independently in different worlds. In fact, quite the opposite can be observed here. These scholars transcend categorisation; authors in the group *Degrowth for Art* can be found playing with the idea of *Art as Degrowth*. For example, craftivism is both a degrowth artistic practice as well as a reformation of the institutionalised art world. Thus, the groups show slight overlap without losing their distinctive characteristics.

Despite their disciplinary differences, all these authors belong to art worlds with a varying degree of attachments inside it (Becker, 1982). For the group *Degrowth for Art*, it can be observed that most authors in this cluster have a background in curation, art management, or art criticism. They have developed a specific role in the organisation of art and therefore

adopted a perspective on art from within institutions. In her interview, Beatrix Ruf, the head of the Verbier Art Summit, stated that she would not want more visitors because this would hamper the quality of the museum experiences (Siegal, 2017). However, she seems satisfied with the way the museum currently operates. By refusing growth (specifically in the number of visitors), she refuses change and holds a rather conservative position. Becker (1982) would call this "the limits of conventions." In this case, the physical environment, and thus the convention of the museum, cannot host more visitors than they hosted in the year Ruf was interviewed. It is in the interest of the museum director to know the limits of growth because then she can retain the growth that was achieved previously.[9] Ruf is an author extensively tied to these conventions due to her centrality within the art world and, in order to keep this position, she frames degrowth as a strategy to keep the status quo.

Conventions have a ruling power over the boundaries of the art worlds, and they determine what is being exhibited and how. They have a physical as well as an aesthetic, social, and cultural dimension (Becker, 1982). For example, in the cluster of *Art for Degrowth,* the artivist chain of tractors created by Jordan and Fremeaux (2021) is not radical on the condition that one might dislike them or not find them aesthetic enough, but because their practice expands the conventions of the Western, institutionalised art world due to its social function as an activist tool. As Jordan and Fremeaux write, modern art established itself in the white walls of museums and conventions have been built around this belief. They argue, based on both theoretical and activist insights, that life and art need to get closer to each other again. The "uselessness" of art, according to Jordan and Fremeaux, is a crucial reason why art institutions became elitist and exploitative. Their concept of degrowth, as clustered in *Art for Degrowth*, lies beyond the institutionalised art world whilst referencing and critiquing its curatorial de-politicisation.

Hence tensions between the clusters exist both in their definitions of art as well as degrowth. One could observe that the articles start from different points within the art worlds. Some are

[9] In fact, Beatrix Ruf had a track record of leading art museums to substantial growth before she organised the Verbier Art Summit 2017. For example, she was the director of Kunsthalle Zürich between 2001 and 2014 while it refurbished and developed a huge old brewery building [Löwenbräu-Areal] to enlarge its exhibition spaces. She was allegedly doubling the activities of the museum´s artistic program and almost doubled its revenue within 13 years (Firsching, 2014).

glued up in institutional settings, and many others in academia. Some believe in the non-instrumentalised useless of art (Soper, 2020), while others think of this non-functionality as elitist and de-politicised (Jordan & Fremeaux, 2021). As filmmaker and media scholar Michael Chanan (2022, p. xviii) succinctly put it, "living in the belly of the beast, this is what I know best, and gives me my frame of reference."

How could degrowth scholars learn from the conceptualisation of these three clusters with regards to transformations of the capitalist logic of art worlds? The quantity of articles coming from both academia and the art world addressing the nexus of art and degrowth indicate a growing interest to explore and discover a fruitful relationship between these two worlds. Specifically, the recency of most articles published[10] signals that both art professionals as well as degrowth scholars desire to approach this topic and investigate how artists could find a possibly pioneering role in advancing just and convivial futures in ways aligned with the degrowth agenda. Hence, degrowth is not just discussed in the "degrowth movement," it has reached the art world too. One may say, *something is growing here.* However, as Banks (2023) has highlighted, degrowth scholars need to develop their understanding of culture first before developing transformative trajectories for the art world. This is a desideratum that future scholarship should address.

Furthermore, if the degrowth movement has a genuine interest to find artistic allies and transform the status quo of contemporary art, then we must also understand that the art world is full of power dynamics. Becker´s (1982) theory of art worlds as networks helps to explain how some *gatekeepers* (i.e. powerful agents with a desire to keep the status quo) in the art world would not be in favour of radical changes in organisational or aesthetic thought. For example, by introducing a thought experiment, Becker notes how artists with a lot of economic success in the art market might be against its transformation: "[As a famous and successful artist] I [would] resist the new both because I find it aesthetically repellent and thus morally outrageous and because I stand to lose if it replaces the old" (1982, p. 306). There is a long road ahead for truly transformative changes within contemporary art. Here,

[10] Half of the articles were published during or after the pandemic.

degrowth must pay attention to how “degrowth” is conceptualised and by whom? What kinds of interpretations of degrowth are in the interest of the people in power? How can their influence on structural critique for more equality and sustainability be reduced? Therefore, this discussion is not merely about reusing materials or banning plastics, it is fundamentally a class struggle.

Lastly, it should be noted that almost none of the articles consulted in this review proposed a constructive, but radical approach for transforming cultural institutions. The use of the term “degrowth” might have been helpful to criticize and de-construct the social and ecological problems of the art world, but not to guide the reader towards a new model of organising, making, or presenting art, yet.

To that end, I would like to briefly mention an example from my wider research on artistic practices aligning with degrowth thought. A legitimate pioneering example may be the emerging idea of commoning cultural institutions via commons-public partnerships (Hofman et al., 2022). In Berlin, the queer-feminist theatre initiative *Staub zu Glitzer* works on the collectivization and socialisation of Volksbühne Berlin as a place for exchange, learning, solidarity, participation, and care (Staub zu Glitzer, 2023). Staub zu Glitzer created a model which would transform the organisational strategy of one of Berlin´s biggest theatres in line with values as set out by commoning theorists. Their proposal concerns the institutional arrangements that guide the theatre, such as rigid hierarchies, the directorship model, and/or restricted accessibility, and transform them through the principles of democratisation and commoning. In 2017, they have pre-figured and tested their ideas during an occupation of Volksbühne Berlin.

Based on the results of this review, artists, art professionals, and degrowth scholars could work on identifying and practising such examples. It remains to be seen how the awareness of degrowth and art in the respective disciplines will further evolve, and which fruitful interactions could support art makers and degrowth theorists to gain a nuanced understanding of each other’s struggles.

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