

Sustainability should be at the heart of our collective artistic vision

Creativity is the most sustainable and renewable energy source on the planet. Let's use it, urges **Alison Tickell** of Julie's Bicycle



Sustainability is central to the future of arts and culture. Photograph: Alamy

We are going through a time of great change, a wholesale rethink of how we want to live and how to shift the tectonic plates of our economy so sustainability is at its heart. All our discovery vocations – engineering, architecture, physics and astronomy, technology, design and social sciences – are being mashed together, re-purposed, pulled into creative focus. This is part of a deep recalibration of meaning and values, shifts in thinking in our wider sphere that the arts and culture reflect – and sometimes lead.

External forces are asking us to articulate what we value: financing the arts, how to pay for content, intellectual property and freedoms, philanthropy and profit, entitlement, and artistic legitimacy form rich seams of thought. I'm pretty sure that in time this will be recognised as nothing short of a renaissance. And no wonder. 

Because this is inspired by the greatest challenge we will ever have to rise to – how to understand, accept and live at peace within the parameters of the natural world. Our planet's generative capabilities remain eons ahead of human imagination. The interdependent and endlessly reactive forces that we see in nature, the resilience and invention, represent creative recycling on the grandest scale, an inexhaustible source of inspiration, which we are far from understanding fully yet all benefit from marvellously.

Caught in a paradigm

Our anthropogenic age of fossil fuels is only 150 years old, a brief whisper in the context of the 3.8bn years for which life has existed, but boy, is it making a noise. Every year that [Julie's Bicycle](#) operates the picture seems to get bleaker – emissions and population increase, ecosystems degrade, and for many life gets much tougher. But we also have real solutions tabled on a daily basis. Never before have we seen such widespread creativity and ingenuity.

Resolving our environmental issues will be supremely difficult. Gathering the will to accelerate change is going to take the sort of [leadership](#) and cultural focus rarely seen

outside the context of war.

Fortunately there is an abundance of good ideas, productive economic alternatives, money, technology, entrepreneurial and cooperative endeavour to pull us out of this fix. The renewable energy industries, local, organic and conservation movements, plant sciences, true cost accounting and the circular economy are some examples – the green market represented some \$1.4 trillion in 2011.

And political shifts, while agonisingly slow, are happening. Already 118 countries are working to carbon targets and we have fledgling international cooperation across Europe and many developing economies. Despite progress, however, we need to be swifter. The costs of scaling up low carbon technologies are considerable, high standards of living fiercely protected, sensible debate often stifled and the sheer scale of the task has resulted in widespread confusion and inertia. Even the most committed are often fatigued by climate change. I have three central points:

- There has never before been such an exciting time to be involved in sustainability within the creative industries – now is the time to act.
- It is the responsibility of the cultural industries to make sure there is the process and will to fill the existing leadership vacuum
- Cultural leadership is imperative on this

Leading by doing

Julie's Bicycle was founded five years ago when climate change and environmental action looked very different. We wanted to pick a path that gathered the energy and inventiveness of the creative sectors without the complexity and confusion. The arts can do something very few other industries can – we squeeze the human heart so that it beats differently – and for that we are hugely desirable. Our job is to put sustainability and its principles of resilience and strength, creative regeneration, and respect for the earth at the centre of our artistic vision.

In April 2012, [Arts Council England](#) announced that it was putting sustainability reporting into its funding agreement, a world first and a hugely important signal, both domestically and internationally, that this matters. Julie's Bicycle is now six months into the three-year strategic partnership with the council to make this happen. In another six months we should have a fledgling base line in place with energy and water data from over 1,000 organisations. This is an incredible resource.

For the first time we will know what our environmental impacts are, how they compare across sectors, regions, activities, what works and what doesn't. Environmental policies will be sitting equally alongside other governance frameworks and, with some prompting, we expect boards and CEOs to be thinking hard about sustainability and what it means for these austere times – and for posterity.

This rich information, quite unique, gives us the power of self-determination. It allows us to talk back, to hot house good ideas and dispense with time wasters. It supports innovation, and prudence. And it makes a compelling business case for savings and investments into the arts. ACE has steadily extended its commitment to sustainability this year, adding more organisations and advocating confidently on the issue. This has been a year of great anxiety and yet ACE hasn't faltered.

The power of cultural partnerships

This is a wonderful lead from ACE, but what has happened to make it possible? First, the arts are bringing exposure to the science. They allow us to see beyond the imaginable, interrogate the detail and develop fresh perspective. The work of individual artists, and of organisations such as Battersea Arts Centre, Shambala festival and [Artichoke](#) is exploring the public mass of creative noise and diversity.

Second, it's about the exponential force that cultural partnerships are bringing. In Manchester we have been working with a group of over 25 iconic and heritage organisations. CEOs are boldly aligning, and then stretching the frameworks they work within.

Third, the business case: legislation, governance, brand, and stakeholder expectations. This is well-trodden territory but worth remembering in the context of the arts. We carry enormous value to possible partners – [Glyndebourne's](#) wind turbine did as much for the profiling of wind power as it did for the opera – and is bringing finance to both.

Earlier this month we did an analysis for ACE of 86 organisations and identified real savings of, collectively, £700,000. Scaled up to the sector that could total £15m across 2011 and 2012.

Thinking and acting as one

Collectively as the creative industries we convene an incredible network. Our impact goes far beyond our individual footprints and together we can change paradigms, but we must work together. From joint procurement of green goods, connecting with emerging trends, exploring the impact of digital technologies, or sharing knowledge around reshaping our arts ecology – we must continue to think ahead and learn from each other.

At Julie's Bicycle we are increasingly looking at other ways of modeling our arts ecology. Our 'coalface' is the interchange between the sustainability and creative spheres and we are constantly looking at what each can learn from the other. The principles of the circular economy whereby the concept of waste is eliminated, and how it could be applied to the arts is one that fascinates me. I wonder if we could base, say, our touring industries on a circular production model, just pushing the boundaries of recycling in all directions a little bit further, working with other industries and manufacturers?

And just in case it gets lost, our key agent for change is ethical. In all our conversations, with ACE, artists, government, it is tacitly acknowledged that this is the right thing to.

So what's the plan? At Julie's Bicycle we have a few key principles:

- 'Doing' sustainability has a direct impact on artwork so we don't keep the processes separate
- We work together at scale at a whole system level, and with other agents, disciplines and ideas
- We use our amplified voices across the creative supply chain – artists and CEOs
- We articulate value in material and non-material ways for financial, political and cultural leverage
- We actively support markets, harness emerging trends and use sustainability as a business parameter

We also think ahead, and we must. We need to cement the narrative from thermostat to theatrics. Creativity is the most sustainable and renewable energy source on the planet. Let's use it.

Alison Tickell is director of [Julie's Bicycle](#), a non profit organisation working on sustainability within the creative industries. This is an extract from her keynote speech at the [Regional Arts Australia National Conference](#)

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