Arts-based pathways for sustainable transformation towards a more equal world

Lilli Mittner[1], Lise Karin Meling[2], Kate Maxwell[3]

UiT The Arctic University of Norway, University of Stavanger

Abstract

The cultural sector is a potential instigator of change due to its experimental, performative, and relational nature. However, like everywhere else, the cultural sector re-enacts and thus conserves inequalities of various kinds through its outreach to wider audiences and its deep engagement in socio-cultural practices. By taking our actions within the ERASMUS+ project 'Voices of Women' as a creative catalyst, this paper scrutinizes a set of items for further discussion of arts-based pathways for sustainable transformation towards a more (gender) equal world. We discuss the ability of the arts to engage, educate, and transform power relations through three pathways towards sustainable transformation: 1. Canon critique; 2. Decolonization; and 3. New materialism. We argue that all three pathways enable novel forms of knowledge creation and actions in arts-based research, arts education, the cultural sector, and beyond.

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[1] lilli.mittner@uit.no

[2] lise.meling@uis.no

[3] kate.maxwell@uit.no

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The arts might show us a world in which gender balance exists as a matter of course. But they can also do the opposite. They can show us the lessons of what might happen if we don't try to work harder towards a more balanced society.

(Darla Crispin in film *'Music and Gender in Balance film'*,
Mittner and Bergli, 2018)

Introduction

The world needs forms of learning that include sustainable transformation in order to engage with the root causes of today's challenges (Losleben et al., p. 266). In this paper we argue that the arts – here understood as a shorthand for a conglomerate of creative practices that help us perceive our world – can provide such novel and broadly accessible transformative learning by their ability to engage, educate, and transform relations (Biggs, 2010). Given the pernicious and uneven dynamics in Western societies and beyond, the overall argument that we address in this paper is that the arts provide concrete tools for making sense of the world in ways that are different from most other academic disciplines (Leavy, 2018), and thus they open specific pathways to building more equal societies.

In academia, the arts are mostly employed in study design, data collection, research communication, and dissemination (Smith, 2012). They are seldom considered in terms of data analysis and theorizing. Furthermore, artistic practices at the crossroads of professional and everyday practice are rarely employed as a research method to create new knowledge on social challenges (DeNora, 2000). Nevertheless, the arts might have a unique ability to show us imaginary worlds and worlds that don't yet exist (Crispin in Mittner & Bergli, 2018). Therefore, this paper sheds light on the arts from a methodological stance and brings together thinking from the performative paradigm (Østern et al., 2021) and feminist theories (Haraway, 2016).

The cultural sector is no exception to the many ways in which gender is played out, be it in terms of distribution of resources and acknowledgement, multimodal representation, or the experiences of audiences (Christensen-Redzepovic, 2019). Speaking from a binary understanding of gender, counting male and female agents,

artistic outputs, and reception seems to be a well acknowledged pathway 'towards gender equality in the cultural and creative sectors' (European Commission & Menzel, 2021). Representation matters, and statistics from the field of higher music education show that gender segregation is still at work, often starting as early as the choice of which instrument to learn (Blix & Ellefsen, 2021). In spite of several waves of feminism, female artists still have, overall, less power, prestige, and acknowledgement compared to their male colleagues (Balansekunstprosjektet, 2023). A common attitude within the discourse about musical quality, for example, is that 'it is about music, not about gender', a sentiment that makes it challenging to address gender in artistic spaces at all. Furthermore, society at large is not trained to recognise gendered norms (Onsrud et al., 2021) including gender stereotypes, gender biases, and gender roles, nor do they know how to address them (Christensen-Redzepovic, 2019; Eriksen et al., 2022). Therefore, we acknowledge a need to train agents of change who can see differently and see different things and thus advance the pathways that are needed for sustainable transformation towards a more equal world.

Making sense of cultural practices through gender lenses has been one way of rethinking music theory, canon critique, and music education (McClary, 1991; Cusick, 1992; Solie, 1995). While the work of gender has been problematized in various ways across artistic expressions (e.g. McGee, 2009; Mittner, 2016; Hawkins (Ed.), 2017; Werner et al., 2021), there has been less discussion of how the arts can contribute to sustainable transformation and reducing inequalities, and how they can 'cultivate just, equitable and life-enhancing ways of living, being and dying together' (Losleben et al., 2023, p. 267).

Thus, in this paper we investigate how higher arts education (with a specific focus on music) can engage, educate and transform power relations towards a more (gender) balanced cultural sector and society

We have organized this article as follows: first, we start out with a short description of our research and education activities connected to the ERASMUS+ project *Voices of Women* (KA220-HED-F0575B4D), in which learning for sustainable transformation in higher music education plays a major role. Second, we situate this article in the fields of higher arts education and gender studies, and define our core concepts. Third, we propose a threefold methodological outline of how to think (and do) arts-based research along three pathways towards sustainable transformation: (1) canon

critique; (2) decolonization; and (3) new materialism. We close with a set of items that arts education can bring into transformative learning.

Writing from three different positions it has become clear that it is at this intersection of canon critique, decolonization, and new materialism that this article came into existence. We are therefore three separate voices writing together – only one of whom is a native speaker of English – and while our prose is a unified voice, in keeping with the collaborative and decolonial nature of the work we have nevertheless been inspired by Sara Ewing's concept of 'decolonizing research methods' (2022). This means that while our language is correct, we have chosen to allow the three voices to be heard, even though this goes against traditional – colonial – scholarly practice. Inspiration has also come from bell hooks (1994, p. 63) on appropriation, with the important difference that for the three white authors here it is linguistic appropriation at stake in the article, and racial appropriation in our references. It is for these reasons that there are some inevitable changes of writing style within this article.

The need for agents of change

The three-year international Erasmus+ project Voices of Women (VOW) commenced in January 2022, with students and teachers from Norway, the Netherlands, and Germany as participants (Mittner et al., 2022). VOW has two main objectives: the first is a contribution to the familiarization of higher education students, and the public, with musical works created by women composers with a specific focus on the 19th and 20th centuries. With its emphasis on music student involvement in gender equality work, the project explores how the arts in general, and music education in particular, can contribute to a more equal society. The VOW project focuses on art song, which may be one of the most gendered realms and, together with opera, last bastions of patriarchy in institutionalized music education. By focusing on this specific repertory, its performance, its analysis, and related research and dissemination initiatives in the participating institutions, VOW aims at a widespread ripple effect at a deeper level of inclusivity of all voices as equal contributors to the broader artistic canon.

The second objective for VOW is to establish a network and a corresponding roadmap for sustainable transformation. This objective is dedicated to creating a European, international 'Voices of Women' network. The network's backbone will be

the higher education participants in the project's activities, who will act as 'agents of change' to further expand the network to other countries and artistic disciplines.

The VOW project's approach and methodology rely on a mixture of several interrelated activities, including courses, conferences, lectures, workshops, masterclasses, concerts, cultural exchange activities, online teaching, dissemination, handling historical source materials, implementation actions, evaluation and quality assurance activities, and an evaluation seminar. VOW thus creates an interdisciplinary forum for sharing music making and engaging in conversations, workshops, masterclasses, panels, and discussions.

Gender diversity initiatives in the classroom and educational institutions are nowadays generally accepted, at least in the Western, white-majority Norwegian context in which we are writing. The authors are and have been part of and benefitted from various projects to promote gender equality, ranging from canon critique (Meling et al., 2023), via decolonial practices (Maxwell & Fosse Hansen, 2022) to recruitment processes and initiatives to increase the number of female professors (Mittner et al., 2022), as well as diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) work in academia in general (Maxwell, 2023; Mittner, 2023). Central to the VOW project is the arts-based research method RESCAPE that creates a specific form of engagement with research, education, and materiality. As stated in the RESCAPE manifesto, 'engagement means awareness. Being aware of and caring for what matters here and now […]' (Mittner et al., 2020). The VOW project is the first collective experience the three authors have shared, and it has led to new discussions and questions.

Situating arts education

One of the immediate problems which comes from singling out any one disciplinary area, perhaps particularly from the 'soft' side of the disciplinary spectrum (the arts, humanities, and social sciences that have all come under fire in recent years, for example for being the source of expensive impenetrable jargon (Benneworth et al., 2018)), is the danger of exceptionalism and tribalism (Becher & Trowler, 2001). In fact, it is the soft disciplines that have provided some of the necessary critiques of the sustainable development goals, particularly the oxymoron that is inherent in the concept of 'sustainable development' (see for example Kopnina, 2016; Spaiser et al., 2017). In reality, all disciplines are unique, and monodisciplinary approaches are not going to achieve any of the sustainable development goals or solve the Grand

Challenges (Karlqvist, 1999; Biagioli, 2009; Frodeman (Ed.), 2010; Maxwell & Benneworth, 2018).

Our working definition of arts education, for the purposes of this paper, is education that combines the creation of knowledge in the arts with the transmission of that knowledge through the arts. Meiqin Wang, in her article on the socially engaged practices of artists in China, puts forward 'the idea of the artist as an intellectual who bears responsibility for cultural critiquing and social change' (Wang, 2017, p. 34). This goes beyond 'learning by doing' and the traditional master-apprentice approach and instead embraces artistic methodologies, for example designing and carrying out a project that combines theoretical and artistic approaches, presenting a music analysis through performance, reflecting over one's own embodied experiences as a viewer or listener, co-creating and evaluating a piece of art, documenting the artistic process, situating art interventions, oscillating between zooming in and zooming out of micro and macro dimensions of practices (Stige, 2021), and so on.

Crucial to any situation of arts education is the role of students (Mittner, 2018). Students studying the fine arts are active in their communities and reach out to society at a close level. For example, music students often have part-time jobs as conductors of amateur and children's ensembles, as supply teachers for local cultural education institutions, as production or front-of-house staff in cultural venues, as musicians for faith communities, and so on. Even though individual students come and go, the links that are established between the higher education institution and the community endure and become cemented over time, and these are particularly important in more rural or remote regions where the available cultural activities for the community would be much sparser without the presence of a higher education institution and its students (Bathelt et al., 2004; Charles, 2016; Kurikka et al., 2018; Benneworth et al., 2022). This hands-on approach to discipline-based community involvement is broader in the arts than in other disciplines: comparable examples (such as sports or medicine) do not reach such a broad spectrum of the community on such an intimate and sensory level as the performing arts.

On the one hand, the cultural and creative sectors can become more gender equal through arts education. On the other hand, the arts and arts education can bring specific knowledge and methods to gender equality work. This demands, however, that we develop and practice arts-based research methods, and arts-based pedagogies related to other forms of creative outputs, that move beyond traditional

knowledge transfer and learning practices. The following list of items (fig. 1) derived from our reading of critical (Freire, 1972), feminist (hooks, 2003), and transformative pedagogies (Branlat et al., 2022) outlines our understanding of art as engagement, art as education, and art as relation.
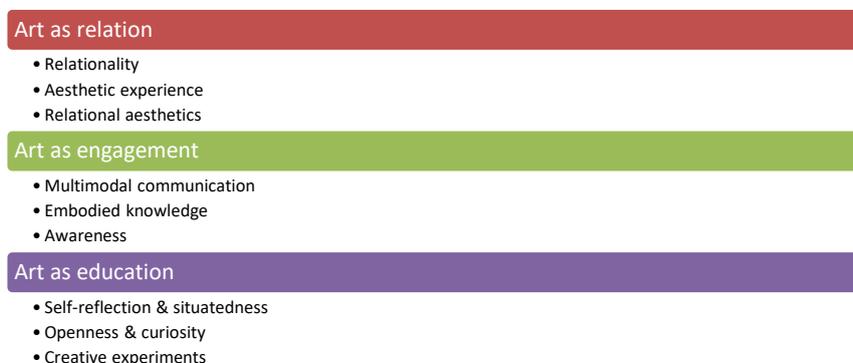
Art as relation
- Relationality
- Aesthetic experience
- Relational aesthetics

Art as engagement
- Multimodal communication
- Embodied knowledge
- Awareness

Art as education
- Self-reflection & situatedness
- Openness & curiosity
- Creative experiments

Figure 1. A list of items that arts education can bring to transformative learning (CC BY 4.0)

We would like to highlight that the arts bring the aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934) and relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2022) into gender equality work. It is an experience that involves the senses and the emotions, that demands openness, and can bring joy and playfulness, but also discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2002). Deep aesthetic experiences are often viewed as something amazing, wonderful, touching, or as an experience of awe. They include an openness both to the experience itself, but also to one's own feelings as well as to the possibility of change. The aesthetic experience can manifest itself into four main reactions: emotional; sensorial; intellectual; and communicative (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 28). We also acknowledge that knowing something about the work of art might enhance the aesthetic experience, and earlier research has shown that in order for an aesthetic experience to take place, it is important for the participants to be actively engaged and connected to the work of art (Dewey, 1934; for a more recent discussion that comes to a similar conclusion see Morton, 2021).

According to Uhrmacher (2009), several learning outcomes might happen in an aesthetic learning experience setting, such as student satisfaction, an increase in perceptual knowledge, meaning making, and creativity and innovation (p. 630). The students engaged in the material can find engagement and joy in the process. Meaning making is important because the students have found value in what they have learned, with personal consequences (p. 631). Factors that encourage

aesthetic experiences are active engagement, sensory experience, connections, imagination, perceptivity, and risk taking (p. 632).

Situating the sustainable development goals 5 and 10

We understand gender equality in its broadest sense of balancing power relations. This is rooted in an understanding of gender conceptualized as doing (e.g. power) instead of being (e.g. a more or less fixed identity). We do not connect gender equality to sameness, but rather to the idea that power is equally distributed and balanced in the sense of an equilibrium (Mittner, 2023).

SDG5 'gender equality' and SDG10 'reducing inequalities' can be understood as policy instruments to reach that goal. Even though SDG5 is an interdisciplinary challenge, the most common approaches to it still employ a binary representation of men and women, leaving behind discussions of power, difference, intersectionality, the many shades of gender, and the manifold complexities of gendered performances. The structural and cultural framing in which SDG5 is predominantly discussed is generally framed as follows: women and men should live and work equally next to each other, and conceptualizations of gender equal societies are designed along binary lines of equal opportunities and equal access. This, like the sustainable development goals themselves, draws on colonialist, Western assumptions and understandings of gender, and most current gender equality measures are designed according to this framing. Thus, our use of the term 'sustainability' here means the ability to root our present thinking and practices in the past to be able to act towards a livable future on this planet.

The most common critique of SDG5 (and other policy instruments) is that it is based on an assumption of gender as a binary, but to stop there does not examine the potential to see how different people (e.g. policymakers, researchers, educators, activists etc.) can speak and contribute from different positions towards a common goal. 'Goal' here is, in fact, a more equal word – equal in the sense of balanced diversity and equal/balanced distribution of power. Instead of shifting to DEI terminology (that seems to deliberately seek to avoid the term gender and talk about 'something else' such as justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, intersectionality, race, and class), from a managerial perspective it is worth keeping the focus on the drive for gender equality and its very potential to address power orders (between men and women in a binary framework; and between all genders and gendered entities in a non-binary framework). Equity and diversity are two concepts that have been

privileged in neoliberal discourses that deliberately avoid addressing the colonial matrix of power including 'the continual reproduction of economy, authority, gender/sexuality, and knowledge constructions' (Canton, 2022, p. 62).

Here, therefore, we employ a broader understanding of gender, which moves beyond the binary and focuses on gender relations instead of on gendered individuals. In this way, gender is less of a fixed category, a variable, or a 'being', but instead becomes a relational 'becoming' that connects to power and difference (de Beauvoir, 1972; Bey, 2022). The conceptualization of gender effects the understanding of gender equality: a narrow, colonial understanding would support a definition of gender equality as equal participation of men and women and thus a simple matter of representation (Christensen-Redzepovic, 2019, p. 25). Understanding gender in terms of power relations is a step towards decolonization (albeit against a colonial background). Following Ronan and Davies (2018), we understand the situational, collaborative work that we have undertaken so far in VOW, and in this article, as a fundamentally queer encounter. Through VOW and our working methods (co-creativity, situated knowledges, cultural intra-action) we question what is taken for granted. In addition, it is an encounter that recognises the structural and colonialist inequalities present in the world and in the contexts in which we are working, and seeks to take steps to change these, whilst at the same time recognising that change and transformation take time (Meghji et al., 2022; Maxwell & Fosse Hansen, 2022).

Transformative scholarship, such as feminist, queer, Indigenous, or decolonial scholarship that is able to interrupt and revise binary thinking practices, is paradoxically a scarce commodity within higher education and other organizational cultures. Structural barriers seem to be continuously reproduced and re-enacted (Ahmed, 2017, p. 125). Thus, there is a need to develop novel approaches to overcome structural injustices (Fjørtoft, 2020) such as white innocence (Wekker, 2016), and to effectively tackle the problems in societies caused not just by gender imbalances, but by intersectional inequalities and colonialism. Like with all of the sustainable development goals, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to SDGs 5 or 10.

While the arts can be perceived as a promising tool towards a more equal society in terms of gender and other differentiating categories, it is important to stress that the cultural and creative sector itself is highly imbalanced (European Commission & Menzel, 2021). Researchers, artists, music festival leaders, and other practitioners in the field are working hard to develop effective measures to counteract persistent

imbalances, define what equality within the arts might entail, and develop novel approaches to gender equal arts education. In the field of music, for example, gender imbalances, canon issues, and other issues within the discipline itself are frequently discussed (e. g. Citron, 1993; Green, 1997; McGee, 2009; Mittner, 2016; Werner et al., 2020; Wollenberg, 2021). These approaches are based on epistemologies that professional artists enact (Onsrud et al., 2020) and can be of interest for academics and policymakers beyond the field of the arts. Holdhus and Murphy (2021) ask to what extent the field of music education (and the question might be relevant for arts education in general) can make itself relevant to the 17 UN goals. They define sustainability in education as 'a dynamic and overarching multidimensional concept that includes epistemological, methodological as well as institutional and political dimensions' (p. 14). We therefore now turn to the three pathways that we have identified as having the potential to transform power relations and help lead toward sustainable education: canon critique; decolonization; and new materialism.

Canon critique

We are all individuals living our autonomous lives; however, our lives are interconnected, and we are co-dependent on others to create a healthy community of common values. Music making has the possibility to create these meaningful meetings with people, where we share music, musical instruments, bodies, voices, stage, and audience; this can be viewed as a new method of how to participate in and perform a community (Mreiwed et al., 2020).

It is natural to assume that student knowledge and attitudes are impacted by the lack of exposure to music made by, for example, women composers. The greater the exposure to composers of all genders, the greater the knowledge. Exposure to the established canon, however, does not provide more knowledge of women composers (Green, 1997; Citron, 1993). The canon is still mostly male: women composers are virtually not present in 'the imaginary museum of musical works', as Lydia Goehr (2002 [1992]) calls it, and as Samantha Ege reminds us, there is a silent 'white' before the term 'women composer' (Ege, 2021, p. 2). Linda Nochlin famously asked and answered over 50 years ago (Nochlin, 1971): 'why have there been no great women artists?' For music, we might ask: are all works written by the so-called 'great' composers of equal value? The majority of women composers have been forgotten or ignored, for reasons having little to do with musical quality. Many women composers in the 18th and 19th centuries wrote small-scale chamber music, as well as works for voice and for keyboard, rather than the large-scale symphonies or

operas that symbolized a robust musical training and acceptance into the cultural elite (Meling, 2005). This unbalanced canon has consequences for higher education curricula, playlists, performances, and repertoire (e.g. for orchestras, exams, and auditions). In 2019, the chair of the Norwegian Composers' Association presented a large repertoire survey which compared the repertoire of seven orchestras and six independent/smaller ensembles. The result was that 95% of music performed in the survey was written by men. Some of the orchestras had premiered zero – or under two minutes of – new material created by women over four years of programming (Moen, 2019). How Norwegian music institutions (as just one example) choose what music they programme naturally affects audiences, musicians, and composers alike. The classical music scene still proves to be very conservative and shows that a visibility project such as VOW is necessary.

One answer to the quality question that is often raised when it comes to a more inclusive cultural sector lies in arts education. Perhaps more than any other discipline, in their free time music students get their hands dirty in the communities in which they study (as discussed above). Greatness or international distinction are not the goals of such initiatives (not that these would be unwelcome were they to show up); rather, they can be understood as communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) that, because of the presence of students, become embedded between university, students, and community (for a model and detailed explanation of the process see Benneworth et al., 2022). This entanglement between town and gown, between students and community, is of benefit to all, but these mutual benefits are hard to measure on traditional scales of quality that posit excellence (e.g. greatness), metrics (e.g. citations), and financial gain (e.g. patents or external funding) as more worthy of reward and recognition than establishing lasting links for mutual benefit and community involvement.

VOW as a pedagogical approach can therefore both change power relations as well as create a more inclusive society by showing the breadth of composers and musical roles, as well as showing that gender need not be even an implicit factor in deciding creativity or quality. The VOW project lays a claim to innovation as it tackles a current societal challenge and cutting-edge developments in the arts in order to change and establish a new canon within the classical singing repertoire. This is crucial because there is transferability to other areas of the arts. In this sense, we are decolonizing the arts to understand a) who defines the canon, b) how the canon is created, and c) what we need to do in order to change it so that we can lay the foundation for how

other art forms can interact with societal challenges to a greater extent than they do today. There are changes afoot to address issues of intersectional inequality, particularly in North America and Canada (see, for example, Ewell, 2020; Figueroa, 2020; Stimeling & Tokar, 2020; Walker, 2020; Born & Devine, 2015), and there have also been changes in the curriculum and textbooks in Norway, such as the music history textbook edited by Hovland (2012). This textbook problematizes gender imbalance in Western music history and highlights some female composers (Meling, 2012), and is now on the syllabus in many higher music education courses in Norway.

Through communication between people and through arts-based working methods, it is thus possible to work for change. Working with and through art can establish new thoughts, shared feelings of inclusion, and new creative possibilities. The awareness of gender roles, gender imbalance, and how to make changes in society involves the participants in 'emphasizing the practical, transformative, and activating power of art, and creating new space for social interaction' (Wang, 2017, p. 35). Arts-based pedagogies and methods that work towards this goal can give their partakers an opportunity to contemplate gender roles and inequity through their work with art and music and start asking questions such as: who is performing? With which bodies? With which voices? Where? And what are the consequences of your/their choices? With reflections and critical thinking, the VOW project involves students and teachers alike, for we all are in the same situation and at the same level. As Ahmed puts it: 'To become a feminist is to stay a student. This is why: the figures of the feminist killjoy and willful subject are studious' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 11).

Decolonization

The role of the arts in knowledge creation and production both inside and outside of educational settings is often overlooked. This is as a result of a number of factors including a general devaluation of the so-called 'soft' disciplines both at a policy level and in the public consciousness, which has led to funding cuts in the arts in many educational systems – cuts not only in terms of pure financial resources, but also in terms of personnel and institutional attitudes (for a recent discussion of the effects of this see Behr, 2021). Yet the multifaceted problems facing the world in the first decades of the twenty-first century that the SDGs set out to solve require much more than cross-disciplinary collaboration (Maxwell & Benneworth, 2018); they require changes in hearts and mindsets, as well as in methodologies of knowledge production (Meghji et al., 2022). It is here that artistic research education and (co-

)creativity have the potential to excel, not just at a level of decoration or mediation, but through arts-based enquiries that question equality issues in ways that scientific knowledge has not traditionally been able to recognise.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that efforts to achieve greater diversity and equality in arts education can be met with resistance, including from students: in spring 2021, during a period of general unrest and uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of our heads of department received complaints from students that the music history course was too focused on societal issues such as gender and race. In other words, ongoing efforts to decolonize the curriculum were experienced by students as de-curriculumizing the curriculum: without the expected linear progression of dead white male composers (albeit interspersed with a few women and people of colour), the students felt that 'music history' was not being taught. The outcome was that the complaints led to a process, in which students were active, that resulted in the rehauling of the syllabus such that since autumn 2022 there has been a clear division: one module for a speckled but still fairly standard music historical survey, and another that is orientated towards performance practice and the implications of cultural and societal perspectives in music history.

One of the reasons for this resistance, as discussed by Maxwell and Fosse Hansen (2022), is Gloria Wekker's concept of white innocence (Wekker, 2016). Equality is meaningless if it is not equality for all, and in order to achieve this, historically white-majority Western (and mostly formerly colonialist) countries need to recognise and act on the intersectionality of gender with race, class, ability, and more. This means facing up to some uncomfortable – and, in an arts education setting, probably unexpected – truths in the classroom. More than that, the endemic nature of white innocence in former colonial nations is such that the problem is much broader than the arts teaching arena (be it classroom, studio, concert hall, or exhibition space) and cannot be solved there alone.

When teaching a more equal syllabus, resistance from students is disheartening, and results in some soul-searching: what are we, as teachers, doing wrong if students (and sometimes their performance teachers) experience a more balanced curriculum as insufficient to their expectations? On the other hand, what are we, as teachers, doing right if students are motivated enough to take an active role in curriculum design and change? Neither of these questions can be answered with any certainty, of course, but personal reflections – together with comments from examiners and

observers – suggest that a teaching environment in which all students feel valued and safe, and in which they are encouraged and rewarded for critical thinking, is something to be proud of, even if complaints are obviously disappointing and the processes of change are at times uncomfortable. The word 'uncomfortable' is important here. In order to achieve any of the SDGs, a certain amount of discomfort, particularly for those who enjoy privilege, is inevitable. As teachers, perhaps especially as forward-thinking teachers, we expect students to move somewhat out of their comfort zone in order to expand their knowledge. We should therefore not be discouraged if students ask us to do the same. Or, as one author's classroom mantra states: if you want to be progressive, you've got to fucking progress. This discomfort, this 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016), is a necessary part of living and working in ways that can meet the SDGs, and a gender-balanced, decolonized curriculum is no exception.

New materialism

Engaging with the arts beyond representation but rather as an on-going in-becoming of meaning and meaning making means taking part in what happens here and now in its very materiality (Kontturi & Tiainen, 2007; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Bennett, 2010). Since 2017, Lena Haselmann, Janke Klok, and Lilli Mittner have explored, on the basis of the white, Western, classical canon, how to make middles matter (Tianinen et al., 2020) by creating dramatic assemblages in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). They experiment with how to perform materialization of music and gender which resulted in a method they call RESCAPE (Haselmann et al., 2021). RESCAPE is an acronym for Research – Education – Sources – Creativity – Art – Performance – Engagement. The RESCAPE method is a situated art intervention that engages both staff, students, and others who become involved. The method is organized in three steps: (1) research artists create a dramatic assemblage by collecting, combining and diffracting ego-documents (journals, letters, postcards, notes, etc.), non-fictional texts, compositions, poems, stories, and other materials into a fictional dialogue between two or more agents of change 'as if they had met'; (2) the dramatic assemblage is performed on stage in the form of an everyday conversation at a specific site; and (3) in a subsequent workshop the audience is invited to reassemble the items and create further dramatic assemblages that make use of the same materials, but to different ends.

By assembling and performing historical sources in novel ways, RESCAPE initiates co-creative processes and opens new perspectives on materiality that enable

participants to understand, write, and tell history differently (Landwehr, 2020). The specific collage techniques, co-creative writing practices, and workshop facilitation build the basis for a deeper understanding of art and research as 'in becoming' (Østern et al., 2021). Within a non-representational, new materialist framework, it becomes possible to foster openness to the unexpected, to challenge binary propositions by privileging the chaos, to 'see differently and see different things' (Lotherington, 2023) and thus to challenge dominant social norms.

The arts then act as a creative space in which the unforeseen can become possible and where seemingly fixed positions can be scrutinized and re-enacted. This kind of engagement with materiality impacts how people assemble historical facts and create new ways of narrating history, such as finding new connections between protagonists, seing various ways of what it means to be a woman, a composer, and/or a singer, or uncovering unexpected patterns of oppression, freedom, and emancipation (Macarthur, 2016). RESCAPE privileges the creativity and imagination rooted in the material configuration of historiography and thus gives staff and students (and others that become involved in the VOW project such as policymakers, music managers, publishers, and other stakeholders in the cultural sectors) the possibility to situate themselves at the centre of the aesthetic experience of the past and explore their own preconceptions of music, gender, and history. Thus, RESCAPE is not only a method for knowledge production and transformative pedagogy; it is also in an epistemological sense a method of knowing differently. Composers who have also been women, such as for example Agathe Backer Grøndahl, Clara Schuman, and Ethel Smyth, together with their creativity and their agency become part of the lives of agents of change who are alive today. In this way, the past can – as it has always done – guide present actions towards a better future.

Learning for sustainable transformation

This article has brought together aesthetic and feminist perspectives by shining an analytical diffractive light on the relationship between the performative paradigm and feminist theories through our participation in the VOW project. From our discussion of how equality and gender (here understood as power relations) are at stake within arts education, we argue that the arts in their ability to engage, educate, and transform relations can open pathways towards sustainable transformation for a more equal society.

Based on our discussion of how the arts can contribute to sustainable transformation, we conclude by putting forward four pathways for further discussions within the field of higher arts education (fig. 2). They are not exclusive but build on each other and thus should not played out against each other. It is also important to uncover which approach is most at stake in certain actions in order to make collective efforts across different communities of practice possible at all. It is this collective effort across different pathways that we see as a powerful tool within the VOW project itself.

A basic requirement for educating agents of change is equal access to higher arts education. When those who have been marginalized in knowledge production enter academia, it becomes apparent what is missing, and new questions arise that generate a critique of what has hitherto been taken for granted. Canon critique, for example, allows us to challenge the traditional idea of what constitutes 'good' music. By engaging in canon critique, we can question the biases and assumptions that have led to inequalities, and work towards creating a more inclusive and diverse musical landscape. Through canon critique, we can also highlight the contributions of marginalized groups, and recognise the value of diverse perspectives and experiences in creating and interpreting music.

Decolonization addresses intersectionality and white innocence, and creates discomfort. It takes a step beyond inclusion and diversity in that it acknowledges the inherent colonial structures at work and seeks to dismantle them. In the context of European higher arts education in which we work and write, colonial structures are continually present (the very concepts of 'Europe', 'higher education', and indeed 'art' are all colonial). Scholarly publishing, too, is built on these same structures and expectations, and thus we participate in and write about decolonization within colonialist parameters, at least for the time being. For decolonization is a long process and requires the 'ripple effect' that students as agents of change provide as they progress in their lives and careers.

New materialism privileges more-than-human matter in the sense that it becomes possible to engage with the past, present, and future in different ways. By getting our hands dirty and performing what we find in the archives of Western classical music practices, and through the very act of collecting, assembling, and diffracting, present and future agents of change meet agents of change of the past and connect through their words, music, and other creative expressions.
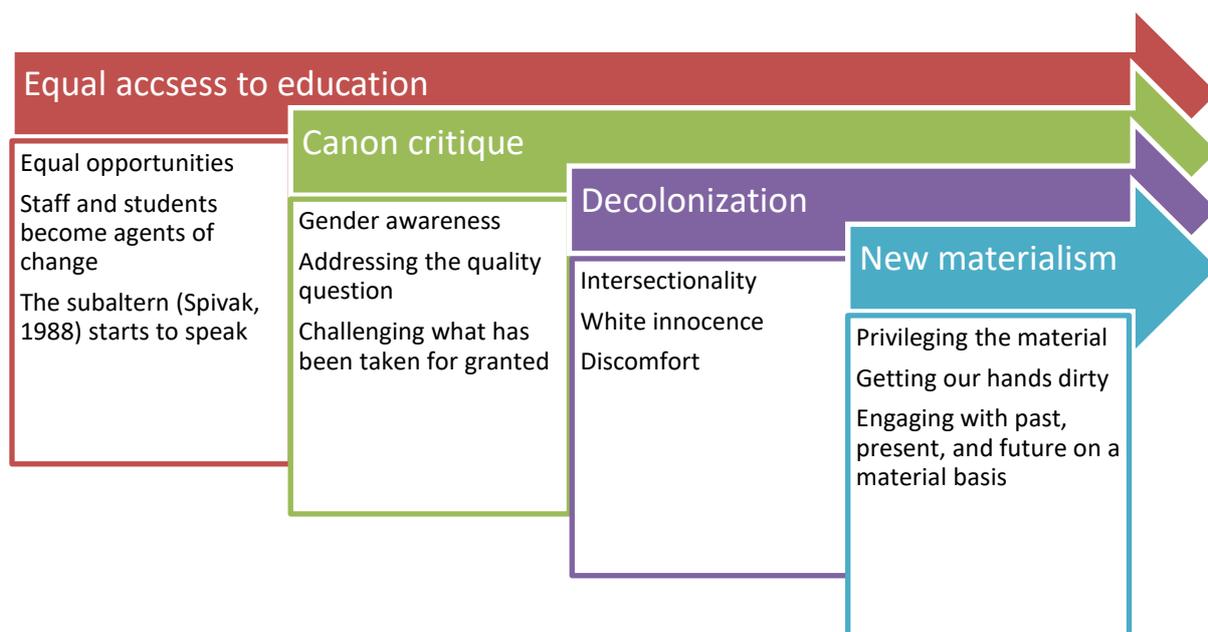
Figure 2: Processes and their effects that build upon each other and that need to be addressed by arts education in the strife for sustainable transformation (CC BY 4.0)

The four pathways we have outlined here need more attention in research and education. Engaging staff and students in canon critique, decolonization, and new materialism will create agents of change in various situations. This could be one aim and contribution of arts education towards a more sustainable transformation of society as it faces an unknown future.

About the authors

Lilli Mittner is an internationally renowned senior researcher at the Centre for Women's and Gender Research at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. She was trained at the Research Centre for Music and Gender in Hanover and received her PhD in 2014 from the University of Music, Drama, and Media in Hanover with archival work on nineteenth century women composers in Norway. Lilli is currently working on performative historiography and gender equality in academia and beyond. Her work encompasses research on gender balance, gendered heritage and canon critique, music and gender, voices of women, feminist posthumanist approaches in critical

dementia studies, feminist art intervention, gendered quality assessment in higher education and research leadership, and gender equality and sustainability.

Lise Karin Meling is associate professor of music at the Faculty of Performing Arts, The University of Stavanger, Norway, where she teaches music history and performance practice. Her research projects encompass topics in early music and music and gender: she has looked at the role of female composers and their social status, music historical discourses, and gender in music scholarship. Her latest research focuses on the gendered history of musical instruments, particularly keyboard instruments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She has authored several publications, both scholarly articles as well as textbooks in music history. Meling is also active as a harpsichord performer for which she has revitalized unknown works by female composers.

Kate Maxwell is professor of music history, theory, and analysis at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. They research music and gender in various contexts, including queer studies, the erotic, multimodality, children's music, medieval studies, and literature. They are a member of the environmental humanities network at UiT, and teach modules on music history, music and society, and artistic research methods. They are currently co-editing a book on queer materialities in the Middle Ages, and working on a monograph on music and the pornographic spectrum. Other recent publications include work on the gendered and capitalist connotations of flow in hip hop, curriculum diversification and decolonization, and the notion of bi/pantextuality.

Acknowledgements

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