

«Positive Economies»: Towards a Paradigm Shift in the Cultural and Creative Industries¹

The cultural and creative industries are proving to be a stable economic factor. Their various sectors — from music through the book market to design and software development — contribute significantly to gross added value (GVA) and create jobs ...

Does this tune sound familiar? For 20 years, I have been asked to strike this chord for different countries, regions and cities. I have also been asked to explain whether and how culture can make money.

A debate stuck in an infinite loop

These invitations and requests point to a deeper problem: the debate is stuck in a defensive, self-limiting loop. For years, the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) have been shoehorned into an unproductive dichotomy: on one side, a subsidised cultural sector increasingly struggling to legitimise itself; on the other, parts of the private sector having to account for themselves based foremost on economic indicators. This reactive stance forces the CCIs to constantly account for themselves.

Another obsolete aspect of this debate is its focus on different sub-markets. This logic is outdated. It ignores that the relevant creative production has long been hybrid: at the interface between analog and digital, between art and technology, in new alliances between design, materials research and social innovation. The former compartmentalised, siloed sectors no longer reflect this reality. Today, half of all so-called creatives work outside the CCIs.

What would a less defensive cultural sector look like, one which no longer asks: «How to make money with culture?» What role would the CCIs play if higher arts and design

¹ Translated by Dr. Mark Kyburz, English Projects, Zurich, Switzerland, on behalf of the author. Original version: Deutscher Kulturrat, Kosmos Kulturwirtschaft, Ein Politik & Kultur-Dossier, Hg. v. Olaf Zimmermann und Theo Geißler, ISBN 978-3-947308-72-9, ISSN 2199-1685, Erscheinungsdatum 01.02.2026

education, if political governance and if artists and cultural workers overcame the above dichotomy?

Three-step paradigm shift

Seeking to provide fit for the future answers to these questions, the Zurich Centre for Creative Economies (ZCCE) at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) distinguishes three dimensions:

1. Mindset

Cultural governance must learn to professionally consider possible futures — amid the tension between «What's (going) on?» (reality) and «What if...?» (potential). So what might a CCI based on a dual value model look like? A model which connects «value in itself» (intrinsic practice, experimentation) and «value for others» (the resulting societal and economic benefit). Current funding strategies overlook «value in itself» in an attempt to instrumentalise «value for others» (i.e. indirect profitability), thus producing precarious conditions for artists and cultural workers.

2. Ecosystem

A new map of the cultural sector needs to reflect the day-to-day reality of artists and cultural workers. Here we need to ask: How (best) to remeasure the siloed sub-markets and dismantle the ideological barriers between public and private? Creative ecosystems consist of dynamic relationships between three spheres: First, the «creative core», where «value in itself», where new things emerge. Second, the «extended sphere», which involves partners and producers in bringing new things into the world. Third, the «collocated sphere», the conditions (infrastructure, financing, regulations) under which new things can be created. Integrating these spheres creates values which not only reposition the CCIs and the entire cultural sector but also unfetter them from a compensatory logic.

3. «Positive Economies»

Sustainable business models for artists and cultural workers require new support mechanisms. Here we need to ask: How does creative entrepreneurship differ from supporting those struggling to make ends meet? Writing to his publisher, the French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) expresses his wish to live and work in Paris. This, he adds, requires an *économie positive*. By this «positive economy», he means fair conditions, ones which will enable him to earn a living with his poetry. Two of the concepts introduced above — «1. Mindset» and «2. Ecosystem» — enable deriving a formula from Rimbaud’s nineteenth-century demand: a positive economy protects the «creative core» («value in itself») *and* enables creating «value for others».

New economic logics and the question of evaluation

Closely examining positive economies provides a starting point for considering necessary changes, including new economic logics. If the CCIs create «value for others», among others, through driving innovation in the «extended sphere» or through fostering social sustainability in the «collocated sphere», then these spheres should also contribute to funding the CCIs. While this idea might sound provocative, we need to entertain it. Just as we need to debate the created values and how to measure and evaluate them.

Five hypotheses about a fit for the future creative sector

Based on the above, let me suggest five claims as a starting point for discussing positive economies:

1. From legitimising the present to shaping the future: Cultural policy needs to shift the discourse and ask: «Which futures do we want to shape and what role will the CCIs play in this regard?» This guiding question positions culture as a proactive driver of social innovation.
2. Cultural policy as an enabler of «positive economies»: Cultural policy needs to establish the conditions under which CCI actors can themselves develop

sustainable «positive economies». These economies need to do justice to the dual value model of culture («value in itself», «value for others»).

3. Artistic intelligence is pivotal to the «creative core»: in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, the human capacity for critical reflection and sense-making remains crucial. This capacity is not simply a resource but also a «value in itself». This value lies at the heart of the «creative core». Nurturing this reflective and sense-making capacity remains a core task for artists and cultural workers.
4. The «What if?» mandate concerns the digital sphere: the dominance of global tech firms requires the CCIs to embrace their mandate to shape the future. Rather than simply using technology, they need to understand, challenge and help shape algorithmic systems as part of the «collocated sphere».
5. Arts universities are society's «futures labs»: they need to be positioned and funded as transdisciplinary research laboratories for societal futures. They are hubs for prototyping alternative futures.

The author is director of the Zurich Centre for Creative Economies (ZZCE) at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK).

References

- Simon Grand & Christoph Weckerle, *Strategic Creativity: How to Shape the Future to Change the Present*. Wiley, 2025.
- *Entrepreneurial Strategies for a «Positive Economy»*, 3. Creative Economies Report Switzerland, 2018, Zurich Centre for Creative Economies.