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Zürcher Hochschule der Künste
Zurich University of the Arts
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Sustainship

Sustainability in the
Arts and Design

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“Sustainship: Sustainability in the Arts and Design”: A U Change programme

Between 2021 and 2024, Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) participated in SCNAT’s U Change programme with a project titled “Sustainship – Sustainability in the Arts and Design”. ZHdK is Switzerland’s largest arts and design university. It offers degree programmes in various artistic and design disciplines and has its own museum (which houses a number of collections).

Sustainship has two parts:

- Part 1 (Sustainship B1) deals with the structural development of sustainability at ZHdK along various dimensions (research, teaching, communication, transfer).
- Part 2 (Sustainship B2) promotes student and lecturer projects on sustainability at ZHdK on an annual basis.

Both parts were successfully completed in early 2025 and approved by U Change, including the final and financial reports, and are now documented here. During the project period, not only were numerous sub-projects undertaken at ZHdK but insights and new methods were also incorporated into teaching, research and communication to establish a holistic perspective on sustainability.

This report summarises the Sustainship project (its background and motivation, activities and projects, key findings). It aims to demonstrate to educational institutions, organisations, private enterprises and individual actors the potential of art and design in addressing sustainability.

Abbreviations:

SCNAT: Swiss Academy of Sciences
SDG: UN Sustainable Development Goals
SDSN: Sustainable Development Solutions Network
ZHdK: Zurich University of the Arts

Sustainship at ZHdK

Background and underlying idea

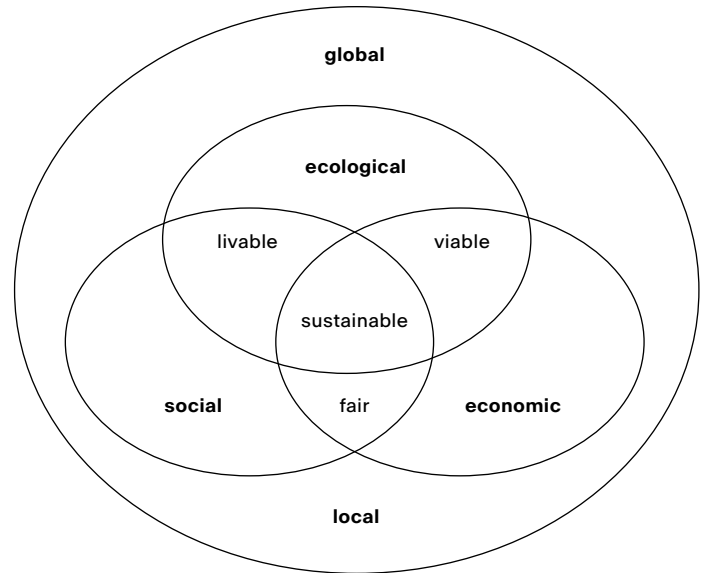
“Sustainship” is an artistic term composed of “sustainability” and “authorship”. We chose this term because it recalls words such as “friendship”, “partnership” and “fellowship”. Thus, “Sustainship” not only implies considerate and committed cooperation but also forges a connection with sustainability. “Authorship” refers to the key aspect of art and design: the person and the work, that is, the author and their creation.

In 2020, ZHdK’s board established the “Sustainability Dossier.” At ZHdK, dossiers are cross-disciplinary organisational units that extend beyond subject-specific training and introduce overarching issues and concerns—in our case, sustainability—into research, teaching and communication. They are also responsible for establishing relevant partnerships and networks. The concept of the Sustainability Dossier emphasises internal and external awareness-raising. The aim is to enable the arts and design, especially the creative disciplines taught at ZHdK, to contribute to sustainable transformation. This goal should be achieved on an equal footing and in collaboration with other disciplines.

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Thus, the Sustainability Dossier provides arts and design students interested in and committed to sustainability with a space at ZHdK where they can combine their creative energy and talent with the goals of ecological, social and economic sustainability. To this end, the Dossier has developed various formats and formulated sustainability-related methods, tools and models. Since its inception, the Dossier has developed a wide range of services, visibility and impact, which has significantly raised ZHdK’s sustainability-related profile. This has been recognised, among others, in the WWF’s rating report “[Sustainability at Swiss Universities 2024](#)”:

In a short period of time, ZHdK has succeeded in transforming itself institutionally and responding to the challenges of sustainability. With its focus on the contribution of design and art to sustainability, ZHdK has quickly established itself as a role model for other art and design universities in Switzerland.



Holistic understanding of sustainability

Sustainability has already become highly important and relevant in teaching and research at arts universities. It is also increasingly affecting the allocation of funds, the acquisition of external funding and the accreditation of higher education institutions. Moreover, it is playing an ever more important role in shaping future jobs in business and science. This is evident, among other things, in the shift to circular economic models, in which information, communication, services and the design of products and systems are central, as well as in exhibitions on the consequences of climate change. In all these areas, creative and artistic knowledge and corresponding methods are fundamentally important.

Please note that the Sustainability Dossier excludes operational sustainability, as this is anchored in ZHdK’s “Services,” with which we maintain close cooperation. The Dossier, and thus also Sustainship, therefore deals with sustainability in education, research and communication.

Sustainability in the arts?

In the context of sustainability, the arts and design are rarely perceived as key players today. On the contrary, design is often seen as a driver of unthinking consumption while art is frequently considered “nice to have,” elitist and not really relevant. However, a cursory glance at history shows that design and art have repeatedly made a significant contribution to raising awareness, developing and communicating sustainability-related issues. Below are a few examples (the list is by no means exhaustive):

- The Amish and Shaker, two religious communities in North America, are known for their craftsmanship, which they combine with minimalist aesthetic principles appropriate to the materials in their architecture and object design. Everything is characterised by functionality, simplicity and humility. Their philosophical attitude towards creation and nature continues to provide food for thought for a sustainable present and future, as well as for the responsible use of social and natural resources.
- In the 1960s, the Ulm School of Design (HfG Ulm) introduced environmentally conscious design, systemic thinking, technology and ethics into its courses, long before other universities addressed these topics. By critiquing consumerism and tradition, the Ulm School questioned existing values and strove for a new beginning, characterised by specific and recognisable forms of design (“good form”). This approach is consistent with sustainable thinking, which focuses on long-term, reflective and compatible solutions.
- Victor Papanek, an influential designer, author and thought leader in the 1970s, was strongly committed to social and environmental responsibility. His book *Design for the Real World* drew attention to the fact that a large part of the world's population does not benefit from modern achievements but rather suffers from them. He demanded that design be people-centred, environmentally friendly and ethically responsible.
- Joseph Beuys had 7,000 oak trees planted at Documenta 7 in Kassel in 1982. These trees still stand today and make Kassel a “green city.” Less well known is that Beuys was one of the founders of the Green Party in Germany. The distinctly different visual culture of the then-new Green Party was strongly influenced by an artistic style and diverse alternative forms of expression.

- In 1982, Agnes Denes planted a wheat field covering almost one hectare on a building plot in Manhattan. Titled “Wheatfield – A Confrontation” (and situated in New York's Battery Park Landfill), her work juxtaposed agricultural land and urban space. Planting and harvesting a wheat field on a plot worth 4.5 billion dollars was both paradoxical and provocative. The field stood for food, energy, trade, global exchange and the economy. But it also stood for mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological problems.



Typologies of artistic and design methods

- Olafur Eliasson is known for installations such as “The Weather Project” and “Ice Watch”. Eliasson combines natural phenomena with environmental awareness. He uses art to raise emotional awareness of climate change, demonstrating that sustainability in art extends far beyond the choice of materials: it also encompasses the impact and responsibility towards society and the environment as a message.
- The Zurich School of Design (formerly the School of Applied Arts), the predecessor of ZHdK, coined the term “environmental design” to raise awareness of the often invisible effects of design on society and the environment. In the late 1980s, two pioneering projects were initiated at the School: One involved designing solar power systems in the Alps, the other in urban areas. Both projects explored the impact of technology and the aesthetics of sustainable systems on society, landscape and perception.

As a result, and given the increasing social and political awareness of the ecological, cultural and societal impacts of human activity, arts universities introduced programmes and courses related to sustainability. These were based, among other things, on research findings and on raising awareness in and through education policy and international networks. The realisation that climate damage, resource consumption, social injustice and ecological crises are human-made led art schools in particular to the conviction that their teaching and research should more strongly address sustainability. At the same time, artistic and curatorial practices developed these themes in their own way and brought them to public attention. Practice and education thus influence and reinforce each other.

Sustainability in higher education: structures and anchoring

Sustainship involved systematically surveying sustainability in higher education. We focused on 50 universities in German-speaking countries, with a particular focus on Switzerland. Our aim was to find out how sustainability is embedded in these institutions, especially compared to Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). We examined whether the surveyed universities had designated sustainability units or offices, how the various dimensions of sustainability are structured and whether any operational activities were comparable to those at ZHdK.

Our sample included 38 institutions belonging to swissuniversities (including universities, universities of applied sciences and teacher training colleges), as well as selected arts universities in Germany and Austria. As the available information varied greatly, organisational charts had to be consulted in some cases to determine where exactly the respective sustainability units were located in the organisation. We focused on their affiliation (e.g. with the Office of the President), staffing and committee membership. We also sought to identify whether a structural separation existed between operational sustainability and sustainability in teaching and research.

Results

Most sustainability units are assigned to the Office of the President and have few staff members. In Germany, these are often individuals who perform an advisory function. Overall, sustainability is less visible on the websites of German universities than on those of Swiss universities. With a few exceptions, the units examined adopt a holistic approach ("whole institution approach") and cover various dimensions of sustainability. Two exceptions are the Università della Svizzera Italiana and Bern University of Teacher Education, where a clear separation exists between operational sustainability and sustainability in teaching and research.

Conclusion

In the ZHdK network (ETH, UZH, ZHAW), we found evidence of an increasing tendency towards the separation of operational and education-related sustainability (teaching and research).



Thinking Point Sustainability "Climate kills Mozart"

Sustainability at arts universities: governance, structures and visibility

Sustainship examined how the topic of sustainability is embedded in selected arts universities in Western Europe (as of August 2024). We analysed governance structures, identified the central units and offices dealing with sustainability and determined the institutional level at which these activities were being pursued at the time of investigation.

We paid particular attention to whether sustainability activities were pursued by individual departments, central bodies or specialised working groups. We also examined the extent to which sustainability is visible in a university's strategy and communications (e.g. website, official concepts, mission statements). However, we were unable to examine how the implemented sustainability measures or how organisational form impacted graduates' understanding of sustainability.

Methodology

A total of 21 arts universities were examined: 19 from Western Europe and 2 from the USA. They were selected based on their reputation and supraregional significance, and were located in nine countries: Germany, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria, Sweden, the UK and the USA.

- Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (AT)
- Mozarteum University (AT)
- University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (AT)
- Berlin University of the Arts (DE)
- Aalto University (FI)
- Paris Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse (FR)
- Codarts University of the Arts (NL)
- Design Academy Eindhoven (NL)
- Rietveld Academie (NL)
- Utrecht School of the Arts (NL)
- Oslo National Academy of the Arts (NO)
- Konstfack University of Arts (SW)
- Stockholm University of the Arts (SW)
- Umeå University (SW)
- Glasgow School of Art (UK)
- Goldsmiths, University of London (UK)
- Royal College of Art (UK)
- Royal College of Music London (UK)
- University of the Arts London (UK)
- Curtis Institute of Music (USA)
- The Juilliard School (USA)

The universities examined are only partially comparable with ZHdK: some are monodisciplinary (i.e. specialise exclusively in music or art), others combine several art and design disciplines, and yet others also have business or engineering departments (e.g. architecture).

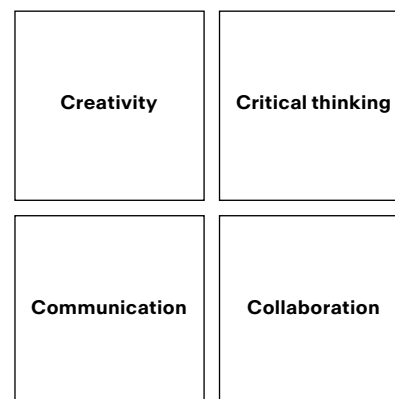
Results

Compared to universities affiliated with swissuniversities, investigating arts universities proved to be far more challenging. In our previous study, we found information more easily: many of the surveyed universities had designated sustainability offices, departments or institutes, which were distinctly visible on their university's website and clearly integrated into its governance structures.

Our research on arts universities found:

- **Lack of central structures:** Of the 22 colleges examined, nine had no recognisable sustainability units or contacts. In contrast, such units were much more common at swissuniversities affiliates.
- **Geographical differences:** Universities in German-speaking countries (DACH), Scandinavia and, to some extent, the United Kingdom were significantly more likely to have sustainability initiatives in place. In other regions, particularly the United States and Southern Europe, such initiatives were less visible or virtually non-existent.
- **Difficulties in obtaining information:** Overall, obtaining information proved to be challenging. Many arts universities provided little

or no information on sustainability on their websites. However, this does not necessarily mean that no activities exist; rather, they are often not documented or difficult to find.



The four Cs of artistic and design approaches

Detailed analysis of selected universities

Some universities stood out for their particularly well-structured sustainability strategies:

- **University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (AT):** The "green mdw" is a comprehensive sustainability strategy that is integrated into teaching, research and operational organisation. Various working groups (environmental working groups) develop and implement concrete measures. The issues covered include climate change in research and teaching, sustainable procurement, digitalisation and mobility.
- **Glasgow School of Art (UK):** The GSA Sustainability initiative addresses social and environmental justice issues in the curriculum and on campus. A full-time sustainability coordinator supports students in developing sustainable practices. This initiative has parallels with ZHdK's "Growing Sustainability in the Arts" platform, which also promotes best practices and sustainable projects.

Sustainability in specific disciplines

- **Music colleges:** The Juilliard School (USA) and the Curtis Institute of Music (USA) offer little to no publicly available information on sustainability. One exception is the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (AT), which pursues a comprehensive sustainability strategy with its "green mdw" initiatives.
- **Design and visual arts:** Some universities, such as the Design Academy Eindhoven (NL) and the Rietveld Academie (NL), specialise in

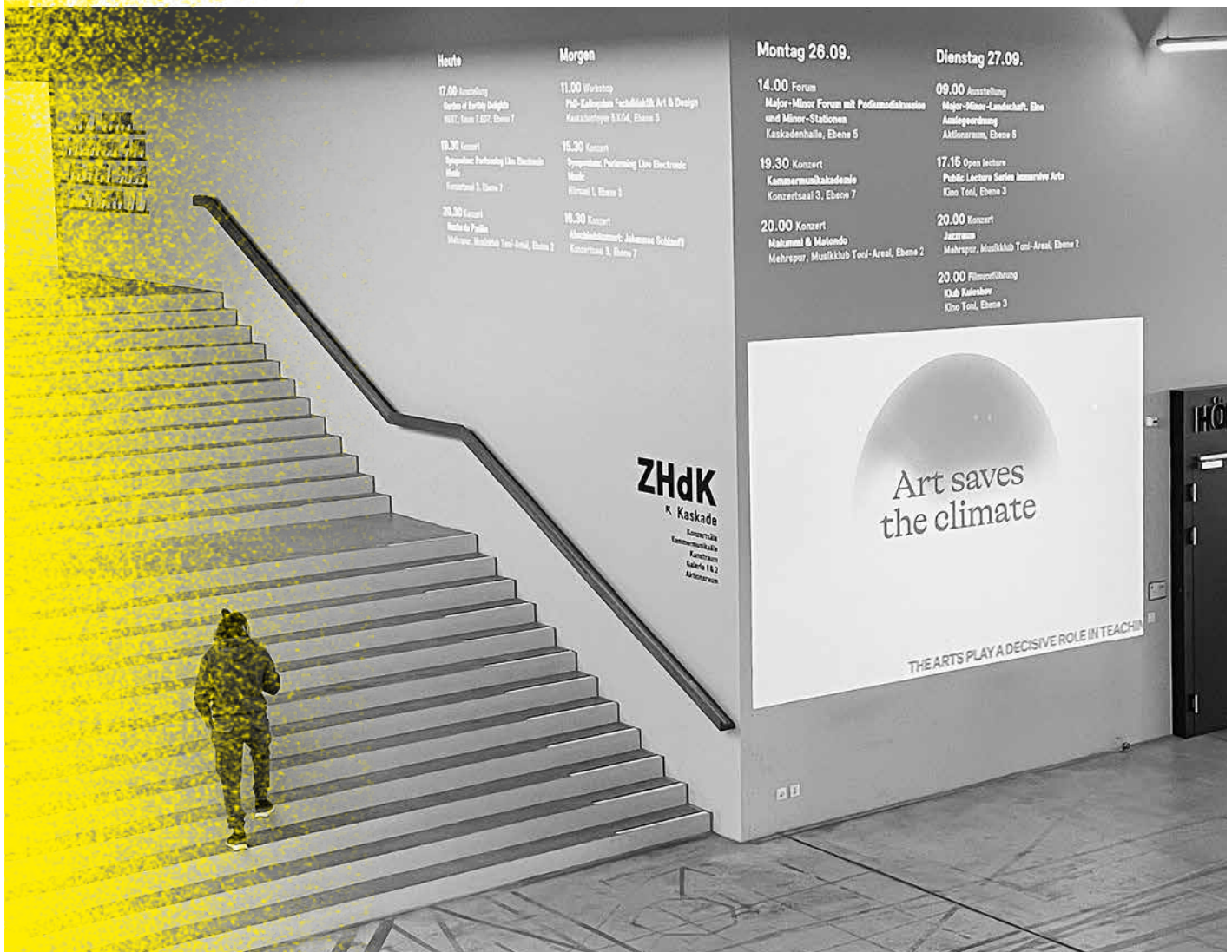
design and the visual arts but provide only limited information on their sustainability initiatives.

- **Dance:** Codarts University of the Arts (NL) integrates sustainability under the umbrella of “health” and thus pursues a holistic approach that focuses on health and well-being in the performing arts.

In contrast, social sustainability is rarely integrated into sustainability initiatives. Instead, most universities have established separate departments to address the topic of sustainability in the areas of infrastructure, equality, diversity, gender and health. Thus, social or economic sustainability are often considered separate issues and are therefore not covered by general sustainability initiatives.

Focus on environmental sustainability

One frequently observed pattern is that higher education sustainability initiatives focus strongly on ecological issues. At Berlin University of the Arts (DE), for example, working groups such as “AG Klima” and “UdKlima” explicitly address climate-related issues. The situation is similar at the Royal College of Music (UK), which has formulated a “Climate and Sustainability Policy”. Often, however, no clearly defined body is responsible for implementing such initiatives. As a result, it remains unclear whether and which specific activities are actually conducted in operations, research or teaching.



ZHdK entrance hall with a projected “Sustainable Thinking Point”

Conclusion

Our research shows that the topic of sustainability is embedded very differently at arts universities. While some of these universities have adopted comprehensive strategies and demonstrate a high level of awareness and clearly defined responsibilities, others lack any institutional anchoring, both in their operations and in teaching and research. Where sustainability is structurally embedded, a “whole institution approach” is often pursued, that is, sustainability is integrated into teaching, research and operations. Further research would be necessary to draw a more complete picture. In particular, interviews with those responsible for sustainability initiatives could provide valuable insights into the challenges, success factors and specific implementation practices at individual arts universities.

Sustainability in artistic education and practice

Sustainability in the arts and design is understood in very broad and diverse ways, just as the perspectives of the various ZHdK disciplines on sustainability are equally diverse. In addition to adopting a holistic view of sustainability, including concerted communication about

sustainability, the various perspectives of the arts and design should be identified and made visible. This would include addressing the following questions:

- What does sustainability mean in the respective field?
- What criteria characterise this form of sustainability?
- What does a sustainable future look like from the perspective of one's own discipline?
- What artistic theories, methods and practices of sustainability exist?
- How can artists and designers actively shape sustainability?
- How to collaborate on an equal footing with other disciplines?
- How can a reflective attitude be combined with meaningful, responsible practice?
- Is there such a thing as an “aesthetics of sustainability”?



Workshop “Generation Repair”, 2023

The various formats developed and tested by Sustainship are designed to explore this potential and make the interfaces between artistic and design disciplines and sustainability visible and tangible. The aim is to prepare students and faculty so that they can actively assume a creative role and possess the necessary knowledge and understanding of sustainable development and transformation.

Sustainship actively incorporates the interests of students and lecturers. Both groups are explicitly demanding that sustainability be taught in higher education (HE) in terms of values, knowledge and practices. This leads to a “whole institution approach”, which is considered groundbreaking in the field of education for sustainable development (ESD). It means that sustainability is anchored not only in teaching but across an educational institution:

- **Curriculum:** Sustainability is integrated in an interdisciplinary and practical manner into syllabuses and course contents.
- **Operations and infrastructure:** Universities value and promote environmentally friendly buildings, energy consumption, catering, waste management, mobility, etc.
- **Administration and management:** Sustainability is incorporated into strategy, organisational culture and decision-making processes.
- **Participation and inclusion:** All university members are involved.
- **Cooperation with society:** Universities work transparently with local actors, businesses, civil society and NGOs to promote sustainable development.

The aim is that higher education institutions become role models for sustainable action. They should not only teach sustainability but also make it visible in everyday life.



Workshop “Fermentation Stories”, 2022

Student engagement and orientation

Today, art and design students are demonstrating an increasingly strong commitment, interest and personal concern when it comes to their own future, that of society and the environment. At the same time, the question arises as to the future of their professions: “Where will my professional field be in five or ten years’ time?” This question motivates many students to focus on specific topics and career paths already during their studies. Many embrace the topic of sustainability—not so much because it is required by the curriculum but because they want to and consider it necessary. This willingness to engage with sustainability is evident across the creative disciplines, among others, in innovative concepts and ideas of how to build a sustainable future. It also highlights the importance of research: Only if the arts and design research and communicate sustainability, independently or interdisciplinarily, from their own perspective and with their specific methods will they be able to develop knowledge and approaches having a lasting impact.

Today, there is often a lack of basic knowledge, suitable methods and tools, and partners who are willing to collaborate with the arts on new projects. These shortcomings were yet another reason for establishing Sustainship. Our mission is to build and strengthen knowledge and skills for sustainable development at an arts and design university, based on its educational remit, potential and specific needs. Achieving this goal requires the structural development and integration of appropriate formats in education and research, a decided thematic orientation and practical knowledge in order to address future challenges from the perspective of the creative disciplines.

Obviously, this goal raises a key question: How exactly can the arts and design contribute to sustainable development? One thing is certain: Their concerns, issues and findings extend far beyond “decoration”, “representation” or “entertainment”. Today, sustainability is understood as a large, open and unfinished system—one that explicitly provides space for artistic methods, practices and forms of knowledge. In parallel, the emerging theory on sustainability in and for the arts and design is broadening and deepening this debate. What is often lacking, however, is a systematic structuring of these approaches within arts universities: suitable formats in which practice, theory and research are linked; clear thematic orientations; and institutional spaces that facilitate exchange. Interdisciplinary dialogue on an equal footing with other disciplines is just as rare, even though it would be essential. At the same time, the creative disciplines are aware that their own relationship to sustainability can be ambivalent. However, this ambivalence is not unique. It affects many disciplines that deal with transformation and sustainable development.

The goals of Sustainship

Sustainship creates offerings and formats for ZHdK as a whole, as well as specifically for individual disciplines and partner organisations. The transversal minor in “Alternative Futures: Sustainability and Ecology in Practice” and project-related funding are key components of Sustainship, as are courses, workshops and events. Sustainability is to become one of ZHdK’s “universal learning outcomes”. Sustainship develops, tests and reflects on the principles, methods and formats needed to achieve this outcome.

Sustainship pursues two central goals:

1. To engage with, understand and communicate sustainable development in line with the SDGs.
2. To interpret, implement and reflect on sustainability in the arts and design.

Sustainship lays the foundations for communicating sustainability in the arts and design. One of its key objective is to develop positions and perspectives in collaboration with a wide range of disciplines, including design, film, fine arts, music, dance, theatre and teacher training. On this basis, it seeks to foster and enable appropriate and, above all, independent practices and approaches to sustainability.

- Anchoring sustainability in different disciplines: Creating access through personal attitudes, actions, participation, reflection and profiling.
- Educating for sustainability: Effectively identifying, shaping, positioning or further developing future fields of activity in the long term, especially with regard to sustainability issues.

At ZHdK, Sustainship operates through various formats, events and educational offerings. At the same time, it also aims to reach a wider audience, as well as its partners and affiliated networks.

- Students and faculty develop a deeper understanding of the complex, sometimes contradictory dimensions of ecological, social, economic and cultural sustainability. The role of the arts and design, as well as their historical and current contributions, are made visible.
- Disciplinary practices and skills are linked to sustainability issues. Students learn methods through which the arts and design initiate transformative processes and develop their own positions on the “aesthetics of sustainability”.

- In transdisciplinary teams, students and faculty gain experience of working with experts from diverse organisations and institutions.
- Applying knowledge about sustainable development in the real world. Recognising and analysing the problems of unsustainable development, drawing conclusions about ecological, social, economic and cultural developments, and implementing these insights and learnings artistically and creatively.
- Thinking and designing alternative futures. The arts and design imagine, illustrate and test possible futures and make their diversity tangible.

Sustainship aims to anchor these issues and concerns at ZHdK in the long term. This will involve researching and identifying the potential and desiderata existing at and beyond ZHdK. Referencing other educational institutions, associations and networks, as well as student commitment, will provide guidance. One main goal is to build ZHdK’s sustainability capacity.

To this end, Sustainship collects and systematically organises stakeholders, topics, methods, potential projects, existing and required knowledge, and best practices. Accompanying events and educational offerings support this process. This work reveals strengths, potential and existing practices, as well as gaps and areas for development. At the same time, it defines the areas in which collaboration with external disciplines is useful or necessary. The active involvement of ZHdK disciplines and stakeholders is crucial, as this is the only way to achieve impact in relevant fields and in disciplinary and interdisciplinary programmes and projects.

Symposia, workshops and (guest) lectures enable students and faculty to learn about the central principles of ecological, social and economic sustainability. Courses,



Clothing swap at ZHdK, 2024



Guided tour of ZHdK degree theses dealing with sustainability, 2024

projects or summer schools encourage students and faculty to experiment with and continue developing (practical or theoretical) approaches from their own perspective. These formats facilitate collaboration between experts from various fields at and beyond ZHdK. They also enable participants to engage across disciplinary boundaries and hone their decision-making skills in a complex, often contradictory setting.

Sustainability is highly relevant to ZHdK: It teaches students and faculty how the arts and design can make independent and unique contributions to sustainability. It develops criteria, skills, methods, tools and perspectives that are specifically geared towards the artistic and design disciplines. Their potential becomes evident and tangible in concrete teaching and student projects. At the same time, Sustainability highlights how the arts and design differ from other disciplines, what history they bring with them and what potential lies in cross-disciplinary cooperation. Students should recognise, apply and reflect on sustainability as a central component of their artistic practice. If sustainability, in its various dimensions, becomes a relevant criterion in the assessment of artistic and design work, much will already have been achieved.

Sustainability contributes to the development, communication and implementation of each discipline's aesthetics and practices of sustainability. Risks, impacts and interactions are understood as an integral part of artistic and design exploration. Students learn theoretical principles and methods and are given the space to experiment with them in order to continue developing their knowledge and skills.

Sustainable transformation through the arts

Sustainability and transformation with and through the arts?

It is important to understand sustainable education and development holistically: ecologically, economically and socially. The Sustainability Dossier consciously adopts the perspective of the arts and design and teaches the skills needed to actively and responsibly shape the future as a designer or as an artist. In this context, rational, emotional and action-oriented skills are equally important.

Despite or perhaps because of AI, creativity is widely considered one of the key skills of the 21st century. “Art as a counter-model to specialisation” means perceiving developments from unfamiliar perspectives, developing new methods and intervening in creative processes. The UN, for instance, considers the integration of artistic perception, aesthetic principles and methods, and the speculative potential of artistic, creative and cultural work into sustainable social transformation processes as a tremendous opportunity.

Sustainable development means not only deriving orientation from existing “problems” or concerns and solving them but also adopting a holistic perspective. Challenges can be understood both as opportunities and as impulses for changing or at least shifting perspective. The potential of artistic and creative disciplines for sustainable development is often neglected, underutilised or not taken seriously enough, even within their own fields. Yet the arts and design, like hardly any other discipline, have the ability to develop alternative futures while referring to the real world.

Forging alternative futures means shaping and presenting various possible or desirable developments for the future based on alternative assumptions, knowledge bases and events. Artistic approaches enable visualising, understanding and experiencing complex interrelationships—and using them as a basis for strategic thinking and planning. The arts and design show not only one conceivable future but a variety of conceivable futures. They combine influences from technology, politics, the environment, culture and society, and thereby make opportunities and risks better recognisable. This helps to assess different scenarios and to prepare for them. The focus is less on “How do we solve a problem?” than on “What if...?” The arts and design thus make important contributions to opinion-forming, argumentation and public discourse as a thought space, a field of experimentation and a source of inspiration for sustainable development.

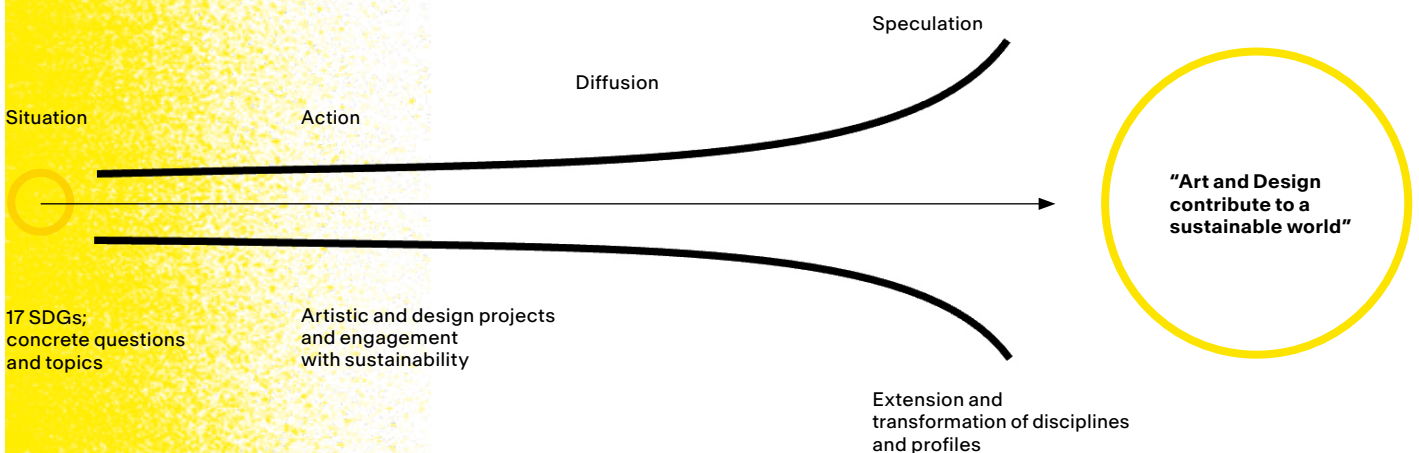
The concept of authorship

Authorship is a key starting point for enabling individual development. In the arts, it is integral to a creator’s self-image and, at the same time, drives the exploration of content. Authorship defines responsibility and originatorship: Authors bring their own ideas, perspectives and experiences to their work, and thereby shape both the work and its intended perception. At the same time, authorship is a social and cultural process that is influenced by expectations, norms and audiences. It thus involves a complex interplay of creativity, responsibility and social impact. If we relate sustainability to this responsibility and social influence, or rather to the impact on the environment and the wider world, we quickly realise the potential of the creative disciplines. The prerequisites are knowledge, interest and commitment. By way of context: Authorship can be understood and practised individually and collectively.

The desire to be or become an author, performer, actor or educator is one motivation for attending ZHdK. In contrast to “anonymous” disciplines such as engineering or finance, where the individual barely matters, artists (in all disciplines) almost always associate their work with their creative will and energy. Authorship thus distinguishes



Guided tour of ZHdK degree theses addressing sustainability, 2024



The arts and design as catalysts for a sustainable world



Workshop "Botanical Thinking", 2025

the arts from other disciplines. However, authorship not only distinguishes the creative disciplines from others but also defines their essence: The will to create a unique, often irrational work from an individual position that can be application-oriented, entertaining or communicative. The intrinsic motivation to approach a topic in a self-determined manner, combining artistic competence with a high degree of individual fulfilment, is essential.

What happens when authorship meets sustainability? Through action, diffusion and speculation, Sustainability connects questions of sustainability with the understanding, methods and practices of the arts. This, however, also raises the question of responsibility: Where does art draw the line? And where does it draw on the knowledge and practices of other disciplines, which may have a different understanding of authorship? The necessary structures and formats create opportunities, identify best practices and results and support students and faculty in undertaking their projects. Authorship also means working together with partner institutions. Yet collaboration should not just be "bolted on" but rather reflect an understanding of authorship in sustainability as an essential area of knowledge and practice and as an opportunity to distinguish one's discipline.

Community and capacity building

In addition to individual authorship, work in this area is also about building an artistic community able and willing to embrace and engage in sustainability. Capacity building describes the process through which individuals, organisations and communities develop their knowledge and skills to enhance their effectiveness, visibility and collaboration. The aim is to pool resources, expand competencies and jointly develop sustainable solutions. In fact, at least within art and design education in Switzerland, neither a binding community of practice nor a common understanding of sustainability in the arts and design exists. A similar situation existed in artistic and design research in the mid-1990s: At the time, it was still unclear how art and design education might undertake research and integrate the findings into practice. Today, 35 years later, we have come a long way: Research within the arts and through the arts is recognised, established and part of everyday practice, even if it needs to be continuously developed, bottom-up and top-down. This means that funding is important. Only when the arts are understood and taken seriously as a relevant factor in sustainable development will institutions be able to join forces, develop a common understanding and create real potential – in other words, build capacity.

Important aspects of capacity building:

- **Training and further education:** Teaching and deepening skills and knowledge.
- **Access to resources:** Provision of financial, material and human resources.
- **Networking:** Promotion of cooperation, exchange and mutual support between actors.
- **Institutional development:** Strengthening structures, processes and responsibilities within and between organisations.
- **Documentation and communication:** Making existing and emerging projects, findings and results visible.
- **Connectivity:** Enabling access for those seeking to become involved in sustainability for the first time.
- **Joint activities and platforms:** Establishing and maintaining forums, formats and spaces for collaboration and joint learning.

Disciplinary or interdisciplinary?

The arts and design are broad fields that are often not clearly defined. Seen from a disciplinary perspective, they have their own approaches, traditions and histories in relation to sustainability. However, monodisciplinary approaches can only partially address the complex challenges of sustainability today and in the future—or not at all. The interrelationships are too complex, and the necessary specialist knowledge is often not sufficiently available at art or art-related institutions.

This perspective gives rise to three basic models:

- **Disciplinary approaches:** Sustainability is addressed within a single discipline.
- **Intradisciplinary approaches:** Various creative disciplines adopt a common perspective.
- **Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches:** Artists collaborate with scientists or other disciplines, for example.

These models reflect the increasing complexity of collaboration. The reasons are not merely technical or factual but often also cultural: Traditionally, the creative disciplines have seldom cooperated with each other or with other disciplines. One factor is the great disciplinary breadth, which has continued to increase in recent years. The boundaries between disciplines are becoming

increasingly permeable, and the methods and tools used today are very diverse. In areas such as design thinking, gamification and social design, artistic approaches overlap and merge with economics and management studies, engineering and technical sciences, and the humanities and social sciences. The challenge is to preserve both the respective dynamics and specific expertise in such collaborations while making them visible and operationally usable for the outside world.

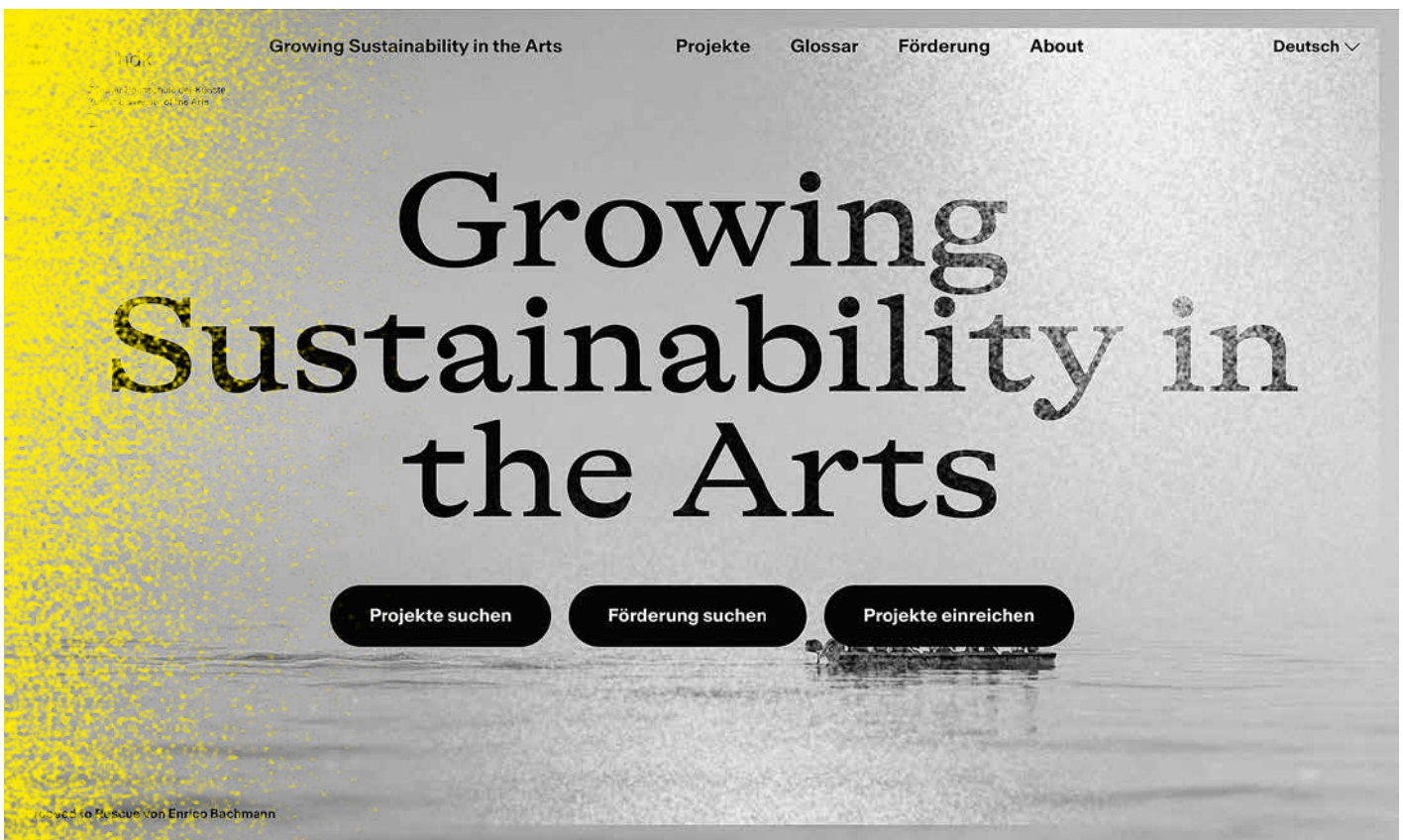
This raises the question of whether traditional roles and the understandings of those roles are still viable—especially as collaborative models are increasingly transcending disciplinary boundaries and as AI has begun providing new, powerful and inherently multi-disciplinary tools. At the same time, “craft” remains an essential cornerstone of many creative disciplines, as does the artistic potential of observation and creative-innovative action. Still, Sustainability clearly shows that the future lies in collaboration. After all, sustainable transformation can only be achieved together.



Sustainability Science Dialogue at Zurich University of the Arts, 2022

The “Growing Sustainability in the Arts” platform

It is important to reflect on one's own practice: Which ZHdK art and design projects deal with sustainability? What are their starting points and results? What future activities can arise from them? And what insights do the outcomes offer? These questions have led to establishing “Growing Sustainability in the Arts”. This web platform comprises over 200 project entries that can be filtered and displayed. The platform aims to highlight sustainable practices in the arts and design. It serves as a place for students, teaching staff, researchers and cultural professionals to exchange ideas about and to joint address ecological, social and cultural sustainability.



Project platform "Growing Sustainability in the Arts"

Central to the platform is an extensive project database that documents degree theses, teaching formats, educational projects and research initiatives related to sustainability. Users can search the database by topic, keyword or person to find inspiration for their own projects or to further utilise the knowledge gained. The platform also includes a funding section, which provides information on foundations, competitions and programmes committed to supporting sustainable art and design projects. A glossary and further resources help to define key terms and deepen user knowledge. Overall, the platform sees itself as a catalyst for future-oriented cultural creation that understands sustainability not only as a topic but as an attitude.

Sustainship activities

What does Sustainship do?

Sustainship is organised as an institutional space for action at ZHdK, which has been anchoring sustainability in its academic, non-operational domain for several years through various activities. Through the Sustainability Dossier, Sustainship is structurally linked to ZHdK and operates across departments and activities. However, it does not see itself as directive but as supportive. Its mission is to serve the ZHdK community.

Research and formats

Sustainship researches, develops and gathers topics, best practices, as well as teaching and transfer formats. In doing so, it uses methods, strategies and specialist knowledge to make sustainability in the arts and design visible and accessible. This also includes the organisation and hosting of university-wide events and communication formats such as:

- "Denkpunkte" (Thinking Points) – the awareness campaign
- "Ereignispunkte, Perspectives of Change" (Event points and Perspectives of Change) – the event series
- "Sichtpunkte" (Viewpoints) – the degree show
- "Hörpunkte" (Listening Points Sustainability) – the podcast

Support and promotion

Sustainship supports student and institutional projects, identifies funding opportunities and supports relevant projects. It advises students on how best to plan their studies and career and faculty on how to create to sustainability-related teaching portfolios. Workshops, presentations, input and individual consultations are offered as required.

Information and dissemination

Sustainship develops tools for knowledge dissemination and documents skills, experiences and results within and beyond ZHdK. Work in this area includes establish-

ing and maintaining an accessible archive of knowledge and experiences: the “Growing Sustainability in the Arts” platform (see above). Sustainship also supports project- and event-related communications.

Networks and collaborations

Sustainship establishes, maintains and develops sustainability networks in the arts and design, within and across disciplines. It collaborates actively with:

- Sustainability network of swissuniversities
- Zurich Knowledge Centre for Sustainable Development (ZKSD)
- Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)
- International networks

Sustainship also regularly participates in the annual Sustainable University Day (SUD) organised by swissuniversities.



Sustainability Science Forum Bern, 2022

Knowledge and information

Understanding key concepts and meanings of sustainability; learning about theoretical principles and methods; developing an awareness of complex and transdisciplinary challenges. How do you deal with contradictions and conflicting goals? What role do the arts and design play in sustainability, historically and today?

Communication and reflection

How is sustainability communicated in the arts and design? Explore diffusion, reflection and reception strategies. Become familiar with terminology and cultures of dialogue in the arts and design. How is something asserted—and how does it actually work? How to deal with “greenwashing”, especially where art and design are instrumentalised or misused for this purpose?

Aesthetics of sustainability

Collect and discuss specific aesthetic approaches to sustainability in the arts. Make forms, formats and aesthetic

models visible. Is there an aesthetics of sustainability, and would it be desirable? What historical references and examples are there?

Action and impact

Testing methods and practices that can be used to initiate sustainable transformation processes. Formulating one's own values and positions to develop an individual practice. Collaboration with experts in transdisciplinary teams.

Viewpoints and roles

Sustainship assumes that the core competencies of art and design—critical questioning, developing one's own points of view and creating new perspectives—can be put to good use for sustainability. Since the arts and design have so far been less clearly positioned in the sustainability discourse than, for example, the natural sciences, future-oriented projects can be used to explore and further develop one's own attitudes, responsibilities and roles. Learning from history, assessing risks and consequences, as well as reflecting on role perceptions, should be part of artistic and design practice. The insights should be incorporated into ZHdK's quality development.

Sustainability in practice

Making the various dimensions of sustainability visible and tangible from the perspective of the arts, design and culture through concrete practice, participatory knowledge exchange and conscious, action-oriented design is a central concern of the Sustainability Dossier at Zurich University of the Arts. This concern was expanded and deepened in various formats as one part of the Sustainship project : Sustainability in Practice. Behind this lies the conviction that sustainability is not only a technological or political issue but also a cultural and creative one. The concern can be mobilised and further developed through creative, performative and experimental formats. Sustainability is understood as a living process that is initiated through joint action, artistic experimentation and critical exchange.

Enabling sustainable approaches, ideas and projects to enter social discourse and practice at ZHdK opens new spaces for reflection and change, as well as raises student and faculty awareness of today's challenges. The arts and design have the potential to make complex contexts tangible, to open up new perspectives and to actively shape social transformation.

Where the arts and design meet the expertise of sustainability research, a special space emerges, an intermediate field in which scientific findings and systemic questions are not simply illustrated but set in motion. These collaborations give rise to experimental ways of thinking, speculative scenarios and aesthetic explorations that



Workshop “What Design Can Do”, Zurich Knowledge Centre for Sustainable Development (ZKSD), 2023

challenge entrenched assumptions and open up unfamiliar perspectives. Such formats provide fewer answers than raise questions. In doing so, they provide orientation in a time that needs a new way of thinking about the world more urgently than ready-made solutions.

Communicative formats for communicating sustainability

Sustainship involved developing various formats that complemented communication, broadened the sustainability discourse at ZHdK and impacted everyday campus life. These formats included the awareness campaign “Denkpunkte Nachhaltigkeit” (Thinking Points Sustainability) and the podcast series “Hörpunkte Nachhaltigkeit” (Listening Points Sustainability), which examined ecological, social, political and cultural issues from different perspectives. Both formats made a significant contribution to making sustainability visible, audible and tangible at ZHdK and beyond.

Awareness campaign: “Thinking Points Sustainability”

The “Thinking Points Sustainability” campaign aimed to raise awareness of sustainability in the immediate vicinity of the university. In the form of short thought-provoking

prompts placed on walls, doors and passageways at Toni-Areal, these thought points encouraged reflection on sustainable action—contemplatively, critically, humorously or surprisingly. QR codes provided interested parties with more in-depth information, practical tips and interactive content. As an awareness campaign, these thought points combined spatial intervention with communication and education. They encouraged students, faculty and the wider public to engage with sustainability in daily life. They also invited viewers to question their habitual thinking and to explore their own scope of action while highlighting ZHdK’s manifold activities in this area.



“Denkpunkte Nachhaltigkeit” (Thinking Points Sustainability): Awareness campaign at Toni Areal, 2022–2023.

Podcast series: "Listening Points Sustainability"

"Listening Points Sustainability" was a podcast series designed to foster debate on sustainability at ZHdK and to bring together a wide variety of perspectives. The podcast addressed the question of how the arts and design can contribute to sustainable transformation: in teaching, in artistic and design practices, in production processes and in university operations. In each episode, stakeholders from academia, practice and society discussed the values, visions and challenges that shape sustainable action in their respective fields.

Discussion opened up a wide range of artistic, design and institutional perspectives on sustainability. Filmmakers, designers, teachers, students and experts from fields such as nutrition, theatre, technology, curation, education and transdisciplinary research discussed their experiences and working methods. The topics ranged from sustainable production processes in film and theatre to durable design approaches and future-proof food systems to questions of institutional responsibility and the development of sustainable learning and teaching cultures.

The podcast series highlighted the different ways in which sustainability is approached at an arts university: as a creative task, a cultural attitude, an organisational challenge and a collaborative learning process.

Combining knowledge, experience and reflection, "Listening Points Sustainability" brought together diverse voices in an open-ended, polyphonic dialogue.

Event series: "Event Points Sustainability"

Since 2022, the event series "Event Points Sustainability" has created experimental learning spaces in which questions of sustainability have been explored, communicated and negotiated through participatory, practice-oriented and interdisciplinary formats. The series was aimed at students, teaching staff, external experts and interested members of the public, thus establishing connections beyond ZHdK. It showed how artistic and creative formats and methods can become effective tools for knowledge transfer, collective imagination and critical dialogue. Where artistic practice, creative action and scientific knowledge came together, new perspectives and scope for action opened up.

Events and formats (in chronological order):

**Workshop: "Fermentation Stories:
An evening of knowledge exchange, collaborative practices and tasting" (2022)**

The metabolic process underlying fermented foods not only strengthens the human intestinal flora but also opens up a wide field of cultural, political and ecological



Workshop "Fermentation Stories", 2022

references. In the process, fermentation becomes a narrative medium that provides insight into food policy, self-sufficiency and local and small-scale forms of production. The presented fermented products are in constant flux, illustrating the symbiotic coexistence of plants, animals and humans.

Traces of decomposition, stains, smells and the slow transformation of the arrangement during the evening made change visible and tangible. This experimental knowledge lab was an invitation to unlearn and to act together in the spirit of the DIWO principle (Do It With Others). For a moment, we ourselves became “microbial”, that is, connected in a network of collective, living thought.

With Anne-Laure Franchette, Corinna Mattner and Maya Minder from the BadLab network for the exchange of plant knowledge, feminism and speculative practices.

Clothing swap and workshop: “Clothing Identities in Times of Excess” (2023)

In this age of excess, how can we think and live more sustainably when it comes to clothing? The “Clothing Identities in Times of Excess” workshop explored this question in a sensual and reflective way. As part of a clothing swap, participants exchanged their personal stories, shared their experiences and designed labels to be attached directly to garments. The result was a collective textile archive that gave each garment a new meaning and history, as a reminder of its previous wearers and their relationship to the piece of clothing. A poetic and political exploration of consumption, value and identity. The workshop was accompanied by a dance performance that translated the transformation of body, textile and identity into movement.

With Anna-Brigitte Schlittler – lecturer in art and design theory and fashion theory at ZHdK. Iris Delruby Ruprecht – fashion designer, lecturer at F+F School of Art and Design and board member of Fashion Revolution. Rudolf Jost – freelance costume designer with many years of experience in theatre, opera, film and television. Performance: Marco Volta – contemporary dancer, choreographer and lecturer at ZHdK.

Workshop and panel discussion: “Generation Repair?” (2023)

What does it mean to study design amid the climate crisis and increasing sustainability requirements? What responsibility do designers have in a changing consumer culture? What creative freedoms open up in a potential repair society—and how does art and design education prepare students for these challenges?

These and other pressing questions were addressed in the “Generation Repair?” workshop, which was based on industrial design student projects. Together with experts from academia and practice, participants experimented and discussed how design can act as a transformative discipline, not only at ZHdK but also with regard to social realities. In addition, a workshop held in advance invited participants to try their hand at repairing as a creative and economic practice.

“Generation Repair” was co-produced with the Museum für Gestaltung. With Smilla Diener & Géraldine Waespi – BA Industrial Design students at ZHdK. Susanne Marti – designer and lecturer in BA Industrial Design at ZHdK. Robert Wettstein – collector and lecturer in BA Industrial Design at ZHdK. Moderators: Sara Zeller – curator of the “Repair Revolution!” exhibition at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, and Karin Zindel – designer and co-director of re-source | Sustainability in the Arts.

Workshop: “Garden Sunday: Natural Medicine from the Garden” (2023)

The community garden at Grenzsteig focused on medicinal, immune-boosting plants, which were explored and processed using artistic methods, including rosehip, elderberry, sloe and thyme. The harvested herbs were used to make oxymel, a traditional remedy made from honey and vinegar that absorbs the active ingredients of the plants and is used to prevent colds and flu, especially in winter. The workshop offered a practical approach to herbal medicine and combined traditional knowledge with artistic and creative approaches.

With Grit Röser – phytotherapist and cultural educator at ZHdK. Garden Sunday is part of the “Growing Together!” project sponsored by the Sustainability Dossier.

Event series “Perspectives of Change: Exploring Sustainability through Art and Design”

The event series “Perspectives of Change: Exploring Sustainability through Art and Design” was launched in 2024 to foster dialogue between artistic, creative, scientific and social fields of knowledge. In collaboration with internal and external actors from education, research and practice, various formats are being developed to test the arts and design as connecting forces in transformation processes and to support them in an exploratory and research-oriented manner.

Sustainability is a complex term whose meaning varies depending on perspective and context. However, amid the tension between ecological urgency and social change, those qualities that are central to an in-depth examination of sustainability often take a back seat: imagination, critical thinking and experimental practice. The “Perspectives of Change” series creates precisely such spaces. It combines artistic and creative approaches with social dialogue, opens up new approaches to questions of sustainable development and connects committed actors from different disciplines. The focus is on shared experiences, speculative explorations and the interplay of different forms of expression that provide impetus for cultural reflection and change.

Events and formats:

Film screening and panel discussion: "Perspectives of Change: Stories of Possibilities" (2024)

Which stories shape our thinking even though they are long outdated? What new narratives are needed to make change possible? And how can audiovisual work challenge the status quo and point to new paths towards a more sustainable future?

The evening offered insights into Tobias Luchsinger's film "Der Wert der Dinge" (The Value of Things) and opened up perspectives on the future of cinematic storytelling in the context of social transformation. In the subsequent discussion with Sonja Schenkel and Reto Schaerli, the possibilities and challenges of narrative strategies in the field of tension between fact and fiction were discussed.

With Tobias Luchsinger – director, screenwriter and ZHdK graduate. Dr Sonja Schenkel – filmmaker, artist and researcher. Reto Schaerli – producer and head of Master Creative Producing at ZHdK.

Workshop: "Perspectives of Change: Botanical Thinking – An Ecosystem of Ideas" (2025)

Change is a central principle of life. Only that which changes can survive, adapt and remain relevant. This principle applies not only to biological systems but also to knowledge, methods and disciplines. "Botanical Thinking" was dedicated to the interplay between botany, artistic practice and scientific research. It focused on

questions such as: How is plant knowledge conveyed? How open and interdisciplinary can knowledge exchange be? How do we deal with plant knowledge that originates from other geographical and cultural contexts? And what ethical and creative questions does this raise?

The exploratory format combined artistic and scientific perspectives and focused on the interaction between research and creative practice to foster collaborative learning. The event invited participants to question the boundaries of thinking, to challenge assumptions and to discover new connections in a dynamic knowledge ecosystem.

With Alisha Dutt Islam – botanical illustrator, artistic researcher; Neyen Pailamilla – Mapuche artist, both MA Transdisciplinarity in the Arts at ZHdK. Dr Manuela Dahinden – Managing Director, Zurich-Basel Plant Science Centre.



Workshop "Botanical Thinking", 2025



Artistic sustainability and its fields of reference

Workshop: “Perspectives of Change: Beyond Beans – The Exploration of a Culinary Artefact” (2025)

The third event in the “Perspectives of Change” series invited participants to rediscover beans as a culinary artefact, cultural repository and symbol of sustainability and our connection to nature. Key questions: Can a single ingredient become the key to transformation? Can food, beyond consumption, become a starting point for reflection, dialogue and collective action?

This artistic participatory workshop explored what beans can tell us about their origin and cultivation, climate and taste, community and memory. Together with experts from the fields of nutrition, sustainability and food culture, participants cooked, experimented, shared and discussed their ideas and experiences. The result was a shared meal, a sensory experience that not only nurtured but also raised questions such as: How do we want to eat, live and connect with each other and the earth in the future?

With Prof. Dr. Christine Brombach – ZHAW, Research Group for Food Sensory Science. Nicole Perez – designer & futurist.

Degree show with “Perspectives on Sustainability”

As part of ZHdK’s degree show, “Perspectives on Sustainability” enables students to present their final projects and provide insights into their thought and design processes. The guided tours show how student projects address ecological, social, economic and political issues and how these concerns are translated into aesthetic, experimental, narrative or performative practices. The works highlight the diverse approaches to sustainability in the arts: as a critical examination of existing structures, as a blueprint for possible futures, as creative responsibility or as a poetic and sensual form of research. They also reveal the role that systemic thinking, interdisciplinary methods and creative approaches play in transformation processes.

The tours guide visitors through selected projects and focus on both conceptual considerations and design decisions. Outstanding works exemplify how artistic research, technological approaches and social issues intertwine and achieve impact beyond ZHdK. Firmly established at the degree show, the “Perspectives on Sustainability” tours provide a framework for joint exploration and further reflection. They illustrate how students create new perspectives with their artistic and design positions and make an independent contribution to the understanding of sustainability.

Between Practice, Exchange, and Impact

The formats developed within the Sustainship program make visible, how diverse and engaged sustainability is lived at the Zurich University of the Arts – in teaching, research, artistic- and design practice, within the departments as well as in individual and collective initiatives. This diversity of perspectives and working methods is a central strength of the university and forms the basis for a vibrant engagement with sustainable development. Sustainship built on existing activities, brought them into dialogue, and created spaces for exchange and networking across disciplinary and structural boundaries. In this way, sustainability was not reduced to a single viewpoint but was made tangible and further developed as a complex, open process.

Against this backdrop, the significance of a university-wide, transversal perspective becomes particularly clear: it provides orientation amid diversity, strengthens sustainability as a shared concern of the institution, and highlights the specific contributions that art and design make to addressing sustainable development. At the same time, it supports the transfer of knowledge, experience, and attitudes within the university and into broader societal contexts. The experiences from Sustainship demonstrate how targeted impulses, communicative formats, and experimental collaborations can foster sustainable thinking and action in everyday university life while also generating societal resonance. Beyond the project itself, this task continues: to carry forward sustainability in the arts as a living, collective process, to connect it, and to make it effective.



“Perspectives on Sustainability” Guided tour of degree projects at ZHdK, 2025



“Perspectives on Sustainability” diploma exhibition guided tour featuring selected final projects from ZHdK, 2023

Methods

Methods at a glance: Mapping artistic and design practices

A number of events in the outreach programme have produced a variety of different working methods that show how artistic and design practices can function as forms of learning, research and outreach. These formats were used to derive a catalogue of methods that illustrates how the various approaches to sustainability were translated into different situations and tested in practice. The following overview illustrates how aesthetic, social and ecological issues are intertwined in artistic processes. It also highlights the significance of these methods in the context of sustainability, transdisciplinary collaboration and cultural transformation.

Thus, the methods presented below describe not only technical procedures but also ways of thinking and acting that structure experiences, create relationships and create new approaches to complex topics. Methods are described in terms of their general characteristics and their significance for the arts, design and sustainability. Each method is illustrated with practical examples from the programme.

Narratives and storytelling

Narratives and storytelling use narrative forms to convey complex topics in an understandable, emotionally appealing and meaningful way. Narratives place experiences and information in a larger context while storytelling uses linguistic, visual or performative means to shape these stories to attract attention, appeal to emotions and enable reflection. This makes narratives and storytelling particularly suitable for conveying abstract content, unlocking meanings and creating new perspectives.

Both methods gain additional relevance in the context of the arts, design and sustainability. Artistic and design practices often work narratively themselves by structuring experiences, negotiating identities or making social issues visible. Narratives and storytelling can be used to make ecological and social issues tangible, translate complex interrelationships and design alternative future scenarios. As such, they promote awareness, stimulate critical debate and support the cultural dimension of sustainable transformation processes.

Examples:

- Fermentation as a vehicle for stories: In “Fermentation Stories”, the microbial process was not only examined biologically and culinarily

but also used as a narrative practice to vividly convey food policy, local self-sufficiency and cultural knowledge.

- Clothing as a vehicle for identity: “Clothing Identities in Times of Excess” linked personal reflections on consumption and identity with individual stories that became visible through clothing and self-designed labels. A creative form of storytelling that brings social issues to life.
- Future storytelling in film: In “Stories of Possibilities”, the power of cinematic narrative between fact and fiction was used to question existing ideas and create alternative visions of the future.

These examples show how narrative and storytelling serve as effective methods in the context of the arts, design and sustainability: They make connections tangible, expand the imagination and support changes in attitude, perception and everyday practice.

Participation and collective practice

Participation and collective practice refer to methods that encourage the active involvement of many people in joint processes,

decisions or design tasks. Participation encompasses involvement, co-determination and influence; collective practice emphasises cooperation in groups to jointly develop knowledge, ideas or forms of action. These approaches create spaces in which different perspectives become visible and from which emerge joint learning, exchange and responsibility.

In artistic and creative practice, participatory and collective approaches enable social and ecological issues to be explored together, new forms of coexistence to be tried out and cultural patterns to be reflected on. In the context of sustainability, they create spaces in which participants can become active, experiment with each other and build sustainable skills. Through joint action, alternative practices can be experienced directly and anchored as collective knowledge. Participation and collective practice thus contribute to anchoring sustainable transformation processes socially and culturally.

Examples:

- Do It With Others (DIWO): The DIWO principle was implemented in several events, such as joint fermentation, repair or clothing swaps. Collaborative action created spaces for learning and encounter, where knowledge was shared and new practices were experimented with collectively.



Workshop “Fermentation Stories”, 2022

- Culture of remembrance through everyday objects: The performative clothes swap combined personal reflection with public interaction and illustrated how identity, consumption and social relationships can be expressed, negotiated and reinterpreted through everyday objects such as clothing.
- Taking action: Workshops such as “Generation Repair?”, “Garden Sunday” and “Beyond Beans” encouraged participants to experiment with collective processes of learning and design through joint activities such as repairing, caring, gardening and cooking. The focus was on shared responsibility, mutual support and collective knowledge.

Participation and collective practice activate shared knowledge, strengthen social bonds and enable sustainable behaviours to be developed in a practical and collaborative way. They promote cultural and social change by guiding participants from mere observation to active participation and shared responsibility.

Experimental knowledge formats

Experimental knowledge formats come into play when conventional teaching methods reach their limits. They create fields of learning and thinking in which knowledge is not primarily imparted but jointly generated, tested or questioned. Such formats often spring from a curiosity to make things visible in a different way, or sometimes for the first time at all: through laboratory situations, installations, media experiments or performative encounters. Here, knowledge emerges less as a ready-made answer than as a process that can be tentative, playful or unsettling.

In artistic and creative contexts, such formats create a special closeness between experience and reflection. They enable examining questions physically, spatially or materially, thereby extending thinking and action beyond the purely analytical. When applied to sustainability issues, these working methods take on an additional significance. They make ecological and social contexts tangibly perceptible, provide room for uncertainty and invite us not only to think about possible futures but also to try them out. The resulting knowledge is more immediate, dialogical and often more sustainably anchored than purely theoretical approaches.

Examples:

- Laboratory of unlearning: Various formats focused on open, non-linear learning processes. Knowledge was not simply imparted but negotiated, questioned and reassembled collectively, as a counterpoint to routine knowledge production.

- Sensory approaches: Events such as “Fermentation Stories”, “Garden Sunday” and “Beyond Beans” used taste, smell and touch as an introduction to complex issues. Here, knowledge was literally gained through the body, creating a connection between theoretical understanding and lived experience.
- The body as a knowledge bearer: In “Clothing Identities”, a dance performance translated processes of transformation and identity into movement and space. The body itself became a medium of knowledge, an interface between personal history and social significance.

Experimental knowledge formats show how learning can be shifted from linear teaching to spaces of experience in which knowledge is shared, sharpened, expanded—and sometimes even completely rethought. Especially in the context of sustainability, this creates an approach that not only makes complex interrelationships understandable but also tangible.

Transdisciplinary dialogue

Transdisciplinary dialogue describes forms of exchange in which different fields of knowledge and social actors work together rather than alongside each other. Such dialogue begins where disciplinary thinking becomes too narrow to understand complex problems. Instead of isolating approaches, transdisciplinary dialogue combines scientific, practical and cultural approaches, creating spaces in which new insights can emerge, ones unable to be produced individually or linearly.

This approach focuses on a distinctive quality of artistic and creative practice: The arts and design apply and enabling creating approaches that intertwine analytical, aesthetic and embodied forms of knowledge. In the context of sustainability, this combination becomes essential: Ecological and social issues can only be meaningfully negotiated when experiential knowledge, scientific findings, cultural interpretations and social concerns are brought into dialogue. Transdisciplinary dialogue creates connections that open up new perspectives, understandings and possibilities for action.

Examples:

- Cross-border exchange: In “Botanical Thinking” and “Beyond Beans”, scientific expertise met artistic approaches and everyday social practices. The issues discussed ranged from ecological concerns over ethical questions to cultural-historical perspectives.
- Theory meets practice: Input from experts from various disciplines, combined with open discussions and practical exercises, linked

theoretical knowledge with guided experience. This created learning spaces in which thinking and doing became more closely aligned.

- Open university: Through the active involvement of external guests, ZHdK itself became a site of public dialogue. The events extended beyond the university community and strengthened ZHdK's role as a social actor.

Transdisciplinary dialogue thus functions less as a method in the classical sense and more as an attitude: It fosters the willingness to convey knowledge, address common questions and reflect on processes of change not within a disciplinary logic but from different perspectives.



Workshop "Botanical Thinking", 2025

Speculative and future-oriented practices

Speculative and future-oriented practices consciously address what does not yet exist. They work with possibilities rather than certainties and use artistic, creative or research methods to open up spaces for thought and imagination in which new scenarios can be explored. Such practices do not generate predictions but invite us to question assumptions, transcend existing patterns and develop alternative visions of the future. This process often begins with a simple question: "What if...?"

Speculative approaches have a long tradition in the arts and design because they enable not only analysing social, technological or ecological developments but also enacting them imaginatively and playfully. In the context of sustainability, they take on a particular urgency. They create spaces for thought in which the future can be understood not as fixed but as open, malleable and diverse. Speculative practices enable reflecting on values, comparing desirable and possible futures, and revealing concrete scope for action in the present. As such, they combine aesthetic thinking with ecological awareness and social responsibility.

Examples:

- Repair as an attitude: "Generation Repair?" asked how design can contribute to a consciously more sustainable future. Repair was understood not as a technique but as a creative and ethical positioning towards consumption, materials and time.
- Plants as models for thinking: "Botanical Thinking" combined scientific and artistic perspectives and used plants as models for change, networking and knowledge circulation to create an experimental space for alternative forms of thinking.
- The bean as a symbolic artefact: In "Beyond Beans", the bean served as a cultural and ecological symbol. Through cooking and exploring together, questions about nutrition, sustainability and visions of the future were negotiated in a sensory way.

Speculative and future-oriented practices do not claim to know the future. Rather, they create conditions under which people can begin to jointly design the future as a possibility, discuss it critically and test it with artistic means in the here and now.

Site-specific and situational learning

Site-specific and situational learning focuses on the space of experience itself. Knowledge does not arise in the abstract but in direct interaction with a place, its materials, atmospheres and social relationships. Learning thus becomes shaped by spatial conditions, by a garden's climate, by the dynamics of a kitchen or by a workshop atmosphere. This approach relies on the idea that understanding becomes stronger when people share the same space, help shape things and experience the connections within a situation directly.

This form of learning is particularly important in arts, design and sustainability discourses. Places embody stories, rhythms, practices and relationships. When we enter a garden, we are not only working with plants but also with ecological cycles and cultural meanings. When we cook in a kitchen, we are moving amid rituals, materials and political issues. Situational learning thus creates spaces for experience in which knowledge is developed in a practical, context-sensitive and collaborative manner, often leading to a deeper understanding of sustainability nurtured by direct encounters with the world and the environment.

Examples:

- **Learning in the garden:** “Garden Sunday” combined knowledge of medicinal plants with creative activities. The garden became a shared learning space where practice, environment and community were directly intertwined. “Botanical Thinking” and “Beyond Beans” also used specific locations—garden, kitchen, workshop—as spaces for shared exploration.
- **Everyday life as a learning space:** Several formats were situated deliberately in everyday or informal settings. This created a connection between the university, the living environment and social practices. Learning was not only taught but embedded in everyday situations.

Site-specific and situational learning thus increases awareness that knowledge always arises in relation to places, people, materials and practices. This kind of learning invites us not only to discuss sustainability but to experience it as a concrete, tangible reality.



Workshop “Garden Sunday”, 2023

Connections and spheres of influence

“Ereignispunkte Nachhaltigkeit” (Sustainability Event Points) and “Perspectives of Change” are more than just a series of events. They form a lively communication format that exemplifies how the arts and design can contribute to social transformation processes. The documented methods and practices are intended to invite students and faculty to develop their own formats, both within and beyond ZHdK. They also highlight how aesthetic experience, joint action and critical reflection promote sustainable learning and why cultural and creative perspectives are indispensable to the sustainability discourse.

The applied methods also show how artistic and design practices expand knowledge, foster relationships and create new approaches to sustainability. By combining experience, reflection and experimentation, they enable addressing societal questions differently and collaboratively. The diversity of approaches illustrates that transformation does not take place on a single level but arises from the interplay of aesthetic, social and cultural processes.

Sustainship funding

The Sustainship student and faculty funding programme

Sustainship also funds student and faculty sustainability projects. Students are invited to apply for funding for master's or bachelor's theses, semester projects or research projects addressing sustainability. Besides individual support, the programme showcases student projects, especially the artistic and creative practices they are developing and how the various disciplines link their own content with sustainability. Another important aspect is transfer: Sustainable approaches should be integrated into art and design education in the long term. To this end, funding instruments and criteria are being defined to enable student initiatives to become integral to new ways of teaching even beyond “Sustainship”.

From funding to dissemination:

- Call for proposals (including terms of participation)
- Evaluation and selection of project proposals
- Implementation of selected projects (in the same calendar year)
- Mentoring (provided by the Sustainship programme)
- Submission of a final report and presentation of results
- Inclusion of completed projects in the “Growing Sustainability in the Arts” database
- Dissemination of results and ensuring that the knowledge gained is firmly established in training programmes



Funding project “Von Menschen und Pflanzen” (Of People and Plants), documentary film, Antshi von Moos, 2023

Funded projects 2022–2025

Abbreviations:

DDE: Department of Design
 DDK: Department of Performing Arts and Film
 DFA: Department of Fine Arts
 DMU: Department of Music
 DKV: Department of Cultural Analysis

Funded projects 2022

Lecturers/mid-tier faculty:

- Mining-Map Zurich, Nadia Fistarol and Sarah Burger, DKV
- Solarisation ZHdK, Guido Köhler, DDE
- The Invisible and the Unspoken, Bernadette Kolonko, DDK

Students:

- The Value of Things, Tobias Luchsinger, DDK
- TIP 3000, Jonatan Bischof and Lukas Grauwiler, DDE
- Hyper Zone, Ana Hofmann, DFA
- Soil experimental lab, Alisha Dutt Islam, DFA

Funded projects 2023

Lecturers and mid-tier faculty:

- With the senses of a spider, Barbara Schuler, DDE
- Growing together!, Grit Röser, DDK/DKV
- Tiny Food Forest, Sophie Vögele, DKV

Students:

- The Future of Today, Laura Weber, DDE
- R for Reuse, Carla Opetnik, DKV,
- Almost Ready: Cooking Workshop 0.1, Margaretha Jüngling, DKV
- Bittersweet: Longings of an Older Trans Woman, Linda Steck, DDE
- Of Plants and People, Antshi von Moos, DDK

Funded projects 2024

Lecturers and mid-tier faculty:

- Mountain drama, Elena Kaeser, DDE
- Stories that shape us, Sophie Vögele, DKV/DMU
- Design and Agogics as Sustainable Education in a Prison, Susanne Marti, DDE

Students:

- A collective work between an artist and an environmental scientist, Yue Wu, DFA
- Possible Futures, Hans-Jakob Mühlethaler, DKV
- Leaf – Flame – Ash – Soil – ?, Yusuf Orhan, DFA
- Bodies of Water, Jonas Bernetta, DKV
- Visualisation Beyond Sight: Designing an Inclusive Learning Experience, Helena Viktoria Klein, DDE
- Project Umkreis, Co-designing the neighbourhood, Aline Siegenthaler, DDE
- TONI HELP BOTH, Carla Opetnik, DKV

Funded projects 2025

Lecturers and mid-tier faculty:

- Climate Content Day, Caroline Feder, DDE
- Wallmapu ex situ: Revisited / Reworked / Repositioned, Aldir Polymeris, DKV
- Flower Field by the River Season 3: Diversity Continues to Grow!, Smilla Jost, DKV
- HANDS ON: Self-efficacy in the chaos of consumption, Henriette-Friederike Herm, DDE
- ZZZ – Circular Future Space Züri, Visions for Urban Resource Awareness, Helena Viktoria Klein, DDE

Issuing the call and the evaluation process raised attention among all participants, both in terms of their knowledge and interests. Even if a project is not selected, participation contributes significantly to student engagement with sustainability-related issues. Research support and evaluation, as well as publication on the “Growing Sustainability in the Arts” platform, also create valuable internal and external knowledge transfer. Project visibility also inspires further initiatives and thus strengthens ZHdK’s long-term sustainability-related development.



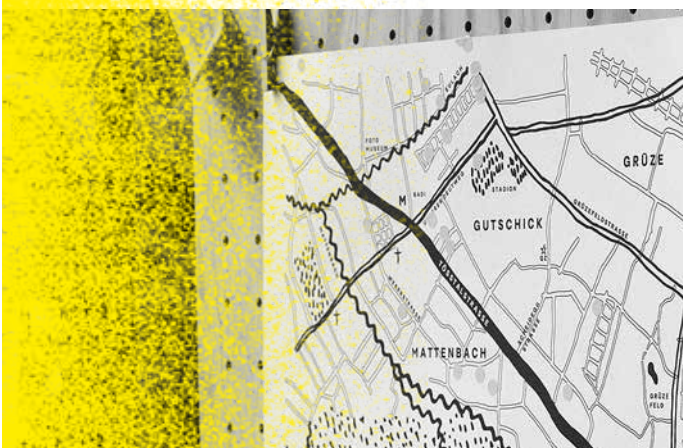
Funded project: "Cooking Workshop", Margaretha von Jüngling, 2023

All projects were supervised, advised and evaluated by the degree programmes themselves as well as by research assistants. The final presentations of the funded projects from a wide range of disciplines are diverse, highlighting different topics and approaches to sustainability. The final presentation offers the opportunity to discuss aspects of sustainability in one's own discipline compared to other disciplines. The fact that the funding programme for mid-tier faculty and lecturers runs parallel is also valuable and inspiring.

Selected topics of student projects:

- Sustainable materials, circular use, circular economy
- Food waste and food production, food systems and nutrition
- Communication of scientific facts about the climate and the environment
- Sustainable coexistence in communities
- Sustainable working practices in design and arts professions
- Gender, age, equal opportunities and diversity
- Community building
- Technology and craftsmanship
- Health and well-being
- Green touring in film and music
- Cooperation with other cultures

To ensure that student projects can be firmly established in the curriculum in the long term, which many students expressly desire, knowledge, methods and experiences are systematically collected, documented and passed on. This results in a high degree of dissemination and competency building. The projects supported were diverse, ranging from dissertations and semester projects to research work and self-initiated projects. Students summarise their findings in a final report; their insights are incorporated into the evaluation and further development of the next funding period.



Funded project: "Umkreis" (Perimeter), Aline Siegenthaler, 2024

Conclusion and outlook

During its lifetime, ZHdK's Sustainship project, funded by U Change, enabled numerous formats, interventions, presentations, workshops, the development of knowledge bases and methods, and an intensive debate on sustainability in the arts and design. When funding ends in 2025, the success of establishing sustainable structures at ZHdK will be evident, as will the large number of projects that were made possible thanks to Sustainship. From ZHdK's perspective, this is a welcome development on the path towards the sustainable transformation of teaching, research and communication.

Even more important, however, is the participant perspective. Even if they were only involved in a small part of Sustainship, they have gained an understanding of the importance of sustainability at ZHdK as a whole and in their respective fields of knowledge. The fact that sustainability is now being addressed in various degree programmes independently of Sustainship bears witness to the programme's success, which can be attributed largely to the awareness raised by Sustainship.

On programme completion, the content, methods and, in particular, the knowledge gained will be pursued further at ZHdK. With this in mind, we would like to thank everyone who made Sustainship possible, contributed to its success and supported it at ZHdK. Special thanks go to U Change, whose funding made Sustainship possible in the first place.

Useful links

- Zurich University of the Arts
- ZHdK Sustainability Dossier
- Project platform "Growing Sustainability in the Arts"
- Sustainability funding programme
- Zurich Knowledge Centre for Sustainable Development (ZKSD)
- Swissuniversities, Sustainability Network
- SCNAT U Change Programme
- Swiss Academy of Sciences SCNAT
- ETH Zurich USYS TdLab

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