

Abstract: We examine in our article how art and cultural activities in rural regions can support social sustainability by fostering local social relations, social cohesion and cultural participation. Our analysis draws on four ethnographic case studies in four different rural areas in Germany. We argue that the impact of art and cultural practices on the social fabric of villages and small towns should not only be examined regarding art and cultural activities in a narrow sense i.e., the activities defined as “artistic” and “cultural”. Instead, it is necessary to consider more comprehensively the actors’ social, economic and political activities as well as the local and material environments connected to them. Drawing on cultural and social practice theory, we analyze four modes of practice of art and cultural work distinguished by different ways of working on the social fabric in rural regions: artist mode, social worker mode, cultural entrepreneur mode and activist mode. The differences observed between these modes of practice and their impacts on social sustainability amount, in part, to different understandings of art and culture held by cultural workers themselves but also unfold regarding the socioeconomic and spatial contexts of the cultural initiatives investigated.

Keywords: Art and cultural work, rural revitalization, cultural participation, social cohesion, Germany

Zusammenfassung: In unserem Beitrag untersuchen wir, wie künstlerische und kulturelle Aktivitäten in ländlichen Regionen zur sozialen Nachhaltigkeit beitragen können – etwa durch die Förderung lokaler sozialer Beziehungen, gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalts und kultureller Teilhabe. Unsere Analyse basiert auf vier ethnografischen Fallstudien in unterschiedlichen ländlichen Regionen Deutschlands. Wir argumentieren, dass der Einfluss von Kunst- und Kulturpraktiken auf das soziale Gefüge von Dörfern und Kleinstädten nicht nur mit Blick auf eng gefasste, als „künstlerisch“ oder „kulturell“ definierte Aktivitäten betrachtet werden sollte. Vielmehr ist es notwendig, auch die sozialen, ökonomischen und politischen Aktivitäten der Akteurinnen und Akteure sowie die mit ihnen verbundenen lokalen und materiellen Kontexte umfassend zu berücksichtigen. Auf Grundlage kultur- und sozialtheoretischer Praxiskonzepte analysieren wir vier Modi künstlerisch-kultureller Praxis, die sich in ihrer jeweiligen Bearbeitung des sozialen Gefüges ländlicher Räume unterscheiden: der künstlerische Modus, der sozialarbeiterische Modus, der kulturunternehmerische Modus und der aktivistische Modus. Die beobachteten Unterschiede zwischen diesen Praxisformen und ihre jeweiligen Wirkungen auf soziale Nachhaltigkeit lassen sich teils auf unterschiedliche Kunst- und Kulturverständnisse der Kulturschaffenden zurückführen, zeigen sich aber auch in den sozioökonomischen und räumlichen Kontexten der untersuchten Kulturinitiativen.

Stichworte: Kunst- und Kulturarbeit, Ländliche Entwicklung, Kulturelle Partizipation, soziale Kohäsion, soziale Nachhaltigkeit, Deutschland

Highlights

- Four different modes of practice of doing art and cultural work are identified: artist mode, community worker mode, cultural entrepreneur mode, activist mode
 - Modes of practice are characterized by different understandings of art and culture, primary and secondary actions
 - Modes of practice unfold in relation to socioeconomic and physical-material contexts and have varying impacts on social sustainability
 - Secondary actions are crucial to understand the impact of art and cultural work on rural social sustainability
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1. Introduction

Research has shown that arts and cultural workers support the social sustainability of rural communities by deepening existing networks and building new ones between local and non-local actors. It has been particularly argued that art and cultural activities have a positive impact on rural communities by creating social capital. However, there is little evidence on how these practices specifically impact local social relations and how social cohesion is produced. Our paper aims to deliver some answers to the question of how art and cultural activities can support social sustainability by fostering local social relations, cultural participation and community engagement.

Drawing on four ethnographic case studies in four different rural areas in Germany, we argue that the impact of art and cultural practices on local social networks should not only be examined regarding what we call the primary actions of art and cultural work, i.e., activities that are primarily aimed at the production and facilitation of sensual-aesthetic objects and experiences, and evaluated and denominated by the participants themselves as “artistic”, “cultural” or “creative”. Instead, it is necessary to scrutinize how these actions are related to what we call secondary actions, i.e., the social, economic and political activities that constitute a large part of art and cultural engagement and must, therefore, be considered more comprehensively. Furthermore, we also take the local and material environments connected to these practices into account.

We will identify four different modes of practice of art and cultural work in rural regions and their socio-spatial-material localities in our analysis: the “artist mode”, “community worker mode”, “cultural entrepreneur mode” and “activist mode”. We examine the actors’ understandings and conceptions of art and culture, their target groups and how the primary actions of the different modes of practice relate to specific secondary actions.

2. Literature review

Our paper focuses on different practices of art and cultural work and their impact on social sustainability and its cultural aspects in rural areas. The concept of social sustainability has been situated within the framework of sustainable development and its economic and environmental dimensions. It addresses issues of social equity (Agyeman & Evans, 2004; Boström, 2012), security and cohesion (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Chan et al., 2006), and has been defined as an ongoing process of fostering equitable, cohesive and resilient communities, in which individuals have the capacity and opportunity to develop within just and inclusive social structures. It has also been related to questions about place and belonging (Dempsey et al., 2011), as it entails the capacity of places to support long-term, liveable and resilient communities. Vallance, Perkins and Dixon (2011) point out in their differentiation of different types of social sustainability that in addition to addressing poverty and inequity or fostering eco-friendly behavior, it can also be concerned with sociocultural issues, such as traditions or cultural preferences (Vallance, Perkins and Dixon, 2011: 344). Connected to this, Andersen, Skrede and Grevstad-Nordbrock (2025) have argued that social sustainability cannot be disentangled from the cultural dimension, i.e., from aspects such as cultural values and rules, beliefs, ethnicity or place-based identity. In the same vein, Hofstad (2023) argues on the topic of a neighborhood’s social sustainability that one has to consider issues such as traditions, values and the subjective meanings that they have for members of neighborhood communities (Hofstad 2023: 1206).

Debates on cultural sustainability as a relevant factor of social, economic and environmental development are strongly related to this. Meireis and Rippl (2019) distinguish a wider and narrower concept of culture which is compatible with our definition of cultural work. While the wider notion refers to any symbolic and communicative practices “by means of language, images” or concepts, the narrower concept of culture designates “the act of expressly producing, reproducing or modifying cultural symbols in performance, artistic, scientific or scholarly production” (Ibid: 5). According to them, culture can mediate between ecological, social and economic aspects (Ibid: 4, see also Dessein et al. 2015: 20–37). Meireis and Rippl have stated that culture has to be considered because sustainable development always draws on certain ideas and concepts (Meireis & Rippl: 2019: 5). Thus, they argue that cultural products, such as

literature or films, impact how people perceive their environment, societal problems and capacity to envision their future (Ibid). Soini and Birkeland (2014) have identified different strands of how to understand cultural sustainability and its relevance for social, economic and environmental development. In sum, they distinguish conservative, neoliberal, communitarian and environmental contexts, in which different understandings of the relevance of culture exist (Soini and Birkeland 2014: 220). While conservative understandings focus on the preservation of cultural heritage in the dynamics of societal change, others highlight the relevance of cultural sustainability to foster progressive and radical future visions as well as ecocultural resilience (see also Horlings, Battaglini, Dessein 2016). Thus, the notion of cultural sustainability can refer to very different and even contradictory projects, for example, a rather conservative idea of preserving traditions and heritage in the dynamics of societal change, fostering the acknowledgment of and sensitivity for cultural diversity, developing cultural capacities of landscapes and communities into economic resources, enabling communities to adjust to necessary social, economic or ecological transformation, or developing their capacities of “self-determined cultural representation and production” (Turner/Mason 2020: 82).

Regarding these debates, it is not surprising that the contribution of art and cultural work to the revitalization of rural areas has received increasing attention within rural studies and policy discourses alike (Mahon et al., 2018). Duxbury (2021) observes a “cultural turn” in rural development which has “encouraged greater attention to the role of culture in the construction of rural identities and futures” (p. 3). Reviewing the literature on culture-led development, she discerns three main discursive strands constituting the culture-led development nexus: “cultural vitality”, the “rural creative class” and “creative economies and entrepreneurs” (ibid, p. 1). Other scholars have contributed specific insights into how culture- and art-led initiatives contribute to creating a sense of belonging (Waitt and Gibson, 2013), building social networks and capital (Argent, 2018; Duxbury and Campbell, 2011), strengthening “community resilience” (Beauregard et al., 2020) and boosting economic viability (Dunphy, 2009; Markusen, 2007a, 2007b; Balfour and Alter, 2016).

Scholars have also critically reviewed the “cultural” or “creative economy” model when simplistically transferred and applied to rural areas. Bell and Jayne (2010) highlight the urban bias in the “creative class” concept, which often overlooks the unique social, cultural and economic contexts of rural areas. Others emphasize that rural cultural initiatives must reflect local heterogeneity and community values, contrasting with urban models focused on economic clustering and industry density (Gibson and Kong, 2005).

Countering enthusiastic narratives of flourishing rural cultural economies and positive impacts of ‘creative’ practices on community life, scholars have turned their attention to the disconnects and fractures of artistic, cultural and creative practices and how they impact on rural localities. Lu and Qian (2023), for example, highlight the contested, uneven and heterogeneous processes of externally implementing arts in Bishan village, PRC, by showing how artistic striving for autonomy collides with the state and villagers’ expectations of economic growth. However, they also demonstrate how creative activities were turned into public events by villagers, linking them to the “ordinary aesthetics” of everyday life (ibid, p. 266). Local villagers considered participating in such events primarily as leisure, showing “more interest in free drinks and snacks than art works” (ibid, p. 264). Yet, on a second plane, they engaged with artistic practices as a means of “self-improvement”, reflecting social relations in the village through the lens of arts and creativity (ibid). Similarly, other studies have emphasized the “diagnostic” function of arts and creativity regarding social relations and wider socioeconomic contexts (Liepins, 2000a, 2000b; Crawshaw and Gkartzios, 2016). Departing from a relational perspective, artistic and creative practices are seen as a means of knowledge making and a methodology of learning from place or experimenting with social relations rather than as a tool to solve community problems (Lu & Qian, 2023).

Understanding artistic and creative practices as relational processes, i.e., mediating between self, others and physical space as well as being embedded in the social and material fabric of everyday life, Crawshaw and Gkartzios (2016) suggest considering artistic and creative practices as a medium to read “micro-relationships *within* communities”, thereby, becoming part of a network of relationships amidst other people, space and the political context (p. 142). In the context of counter-urban mobilities in Greece,

others have pointed to the experimental dimension of creative activities characterized by voluntary collectivism and shifting patterns of cultural consumption towards resistance and solidarity (Gkartzios & Scott, 2015). On the flip side, crisis-induced cultural activities can also lead to new frictions, when urban migrants are constructed as change agents “of a ‘new wave’ of ideas, cultural activities (both commercial and non-commercial), and perhaps a more ‘liberal’ mindset, in contrast to a previous ‘cultural darkness’” (ibid, p. 852).

All in all, these contributions raise questions regarding the material practices and sites of arts and culture-led development activities in rural areas as well as in terms of cultural participation for individual community members. Qu and Zollet (2023), for example, ascertain that “how micro-entrepreneurs – including in-migrants – help to creatively transform exogenous art interventions into community-level capital and enhance community resilience has scarcely been explored” (p. 107). Balfour et al. (2016) have provided a conceptual framework of the creative, entrepreneurial and interactional contexts of creative work to better understand the conditions that facilitate community-embedded, arts-based development in rural places. While this also highlights the relational character of rural creativities, the authors emphasize that the framework needs to be tested empirically. As they further elaborate, the effects of art and creative entrepreneurship on local communities occur in both urban and rural settings, since both contexts suffer from a loss of attachment to place. Nevertheless, they conclude that rural areas have to face specific challenges in this regard, as they “are often burdened with youth out-migration, increased senior populations, reduced tax bases to support infrastructure improvements, longer commute times, poor employment conditions, and low levels of endogenous entrepreneurship” (p. 231). In a similar vein, Rammelmeier and Greinke (2025) contend that cultural engagement in rural areas occurs in distinct settings and requires well-defined competencies, skills and network resources. They state that “[f]uture in-depth analyses of the specific relationship between localisation and creativity based on the specific types of engagement would be highly valuable. This requires elaborating on the explicit differences in engagement practices” (p. 10).

Our argument ties in with these debates as we examine how art and cultural workers employ different modes of practice to work on the social relations of their narrower or broader socio-spatial environments and networks. Thus, our contribution addresses these issues based on empirical evidence from four regional case studies in Germany. We argue that to understand how art and cultural workers impact social relations of rural communities and social networks, one has to consider more broadly what we call secondary actions of art and cultural work and how they relate to different primary actions and understandings.

3. Theoretical framework: Modes of the practice of art and cultural work

To scrutinize the understandings of art and cultural work that impact the practitioners’ actions, the target groups the practices are aimed at and, specifically, the relations between the actors’ heterogeneous activities, we employ current approaches of cultural and social practice theory as defined – albeit not always coherently – by authors such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Theodore Schatzki and Andreas Reckwitz (2002). We define practices as socially shared “heterogeneous bundles of physical and mental actions” (Reckwitz, 2003, p. 289, translated by the authors) that unfold temporally and are spatially dispersed. These actions are held together by certain skills, applied know-how as well as certain norms and values. Furthermore, they have to be carried out by at least one human actor and unfold in interconnection with certain materials, artifacts and tools, i.e., their bodily handling and sensual experiencing. Practices can be structured in terms of routines: the embodiment of practical understanding and knowing; by socially shared and more or less explicit rules and knowledge about how to act in specific social situations; by what Schatzki has called “teleoaffective structures” (Schatzki, 2002, p. 80), i.e., individual ends and motives and also emotions connected to certain bundles of actions, artefacts, organisms and meanings (Schäfer, 2019, pp. 109). Following Schatzki, we are also interested in the ideas and world views that are linked to the practices concerned. More concretely, we are interested in the discursive value concepts and orders of knowledge that shape social relations of cultural work. At the same time, we are interested

in actions in terms of conscious and intentional activities *as well as* routinized, embodied and habitualized physical actions and skillful performances.

We distinguish between primary and secondary actions of art and cultural work in our contribution. By primary actions, we mean those activities that are primarily aimed at the production and facilitation of sensual-aesthetic objects and experiences that are evaluated and denominated by the participants themselves as “artistic” or “cultural”. This also includes artistic activities in the sense of aesthetic-performative, -curatory and -compositional actions. Primary actions of cultural work enable physically practical, technically and materially aestheticizing reflections and adaptations of social, cultural and political routines of thought and action. The actions enabled also fulfill a social function (e.g., differentiation and/or communitization) as well as a communicative function. In this sense, primary actions of art and cultural work are linked to institutions that evaluate and regulate access (e.g., universities, museums, galleries, auction houses) and actors (art historians, gallery owners, patrons, investors). The evaluation and regulation are conflictual and controversial simultaneously, as primary actions of art and cultural work can draw on different evaluations (e.g., art and culture in the classical-normative bourgeois understanding versus alternative and countercultural understandings of socioculture). At the same time, the abilities and opportunities to produce, consume and evaluate textual, visual, theatrical or musical actions are linked to “cultural capital” in the sense of artistic and cultural education, institutional degrees and incorporated skills, as well as “social capital” in the sense of valuable social networks, such as art scenes or patronage relationships (Bourdieu, 1986). Connected to this, actions of artistic and cultural work are aimed at different target groups in the sense of audiences, cooperation partners or allies.

We define those activities as secondary actions of art and cultural work that mainly aim at processing and establishing or limiting “connections” (Feldman, 2011), i.e., social relationships that involve direct and immediate contact between people and, thus, that work on the social fabric. Secondary actions especially comprise activities by which the actors support, form and maintain or take care of communities in which they are situated, such as villages, neighborhoods, circles of friends, and professional or activist networks. Above that, they can also comprise actions by which actors support, maintain and take care of individual relationships to different kinds of actors, such as politicians, the elderly or sponsors. Furthermore, secondary actions can comprise activities by which the actors attempt to limit their adversaries’ scope of action.

4. Methodology

Our paper emerges from the ongoing AMuRaKK project (Actor Networks and Multifunctional Spaces for Art, Cultural and Creative Work in Rural Regions⁴), which aims to explore the interplay between actor networks and multifunctional spaces in four rural areas in Germany⁵.

The core objective of AMuRaKK is to analyze how cultural actors, including both professionals and volunteers, engage with local communities and administrative actors to jointly develop and sustain multifunctional spaces. These spaces – ranging from community centers to repurposed public buildings, such as old train stations or schools – serve as hubs for cultural, social and economic activities. They counteract spatial segregation and promote the formation of social capital, acting as “social anchor points” that enhance public engagement and community resilience.

The project examines actor networks, brokerage among diverse stakeholders, the material and spatial logics of multifunctional spaces, and the impact of political-administrative frameworks through a comparative analysis of four qualitative case studies, combining ethnographic methods and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. It seeks to identify key actors, understand the conditions necessary for

⁴ *Akteursnetzwerke und multifunktionale Räume der Kunst-, Kultur- und Kreativarbeit in ländlichen Regionen.*

⁵ The project is carried out jointly from 2023 to 2026 by the Department of Empirical Cultural Analysis and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Bonn and the Institute for Rural Development Research in Frankfurt/Main. As part of the broader “Faktor K” research initiative funded under the Federal Rural Development Program (BULE+), AMuRaKK investigates how arts and culture can contribute to rural revitalization.

cultural participation and offer policy recommendations to support sustainable cultural infrastructures in rural settings.

Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out through a series of shorter and longer residencies over the course of the project. This allowed for insights into cultural work across different project phases and seasonal variations at each site, ranging from intensive periods right before events to relatively calm intervals dedicated to project development and regular or long-term initiatives. During a total of 16 field stays, we gained an in-depth understanding of the everyday operations, spatial practices and collaborative interactions of the cultural work at the initiatives.

The fieldwork consisted of four key components: 1) participant observations focused on the daily management of cultural projects, event organization and interactions with network partners. These observations provided insights into working routines, decision-making processes and spatial practices within multifunctional spaces. 2) Informal interviews and unstructured conversations were conducted with project participants, representatives of interest groups and political stakeholders. These informal exchanges helped to contextualize observed practices and gather preliminary reflections on challenges and opportunities faced by cultural initiatives. 3) Digital-ethnographic methods provided data on public discussions on digital platforms, which were analyzed to capture public perceptions of the cultural initiatives and their events. Online forums, social media interactions and public discourse were examined to assess the reception and impact of cultural activities. We also conducted 4) on-site workshops and focus groups over the course of the project: Workshops were organized with cultural workers to facilitate structured discussions on shared challenges, interests and practices. These focus groups also served to highlight differences in local and regional policy conditions, enabling comparative insights across case studies.

Thirty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the ethnographic fieldwork, with a diverse, albeit for each case study consistent, range of stakeholders, including cultural workers, volunteers, representatives of interest groups, visitors, consumers, local politicians and municipal administrative staff. The interviews, lasting between 20 minutes and two hours, were designed to elicit detailed reflections on participants' experiences, motivations and perceptions of the cultural initiatives as well as modes of cooperation and networking.

All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and facilitate systematic analysis. Data were anonymized where necessary to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

We relied on desktop research for our sampling strategy of cultural initiatives prior to project implementation; this was conducted to identify best-practice examples of multifunctional cultural venues. The selection was based on a comparison of model projects from political funding programs for cultural work in rural areas, such as *Land.KULTUR*, *Regionalität und Mehrfunktionshäuser* and *Dritte Orte NRW*. The key criterion was the presence of cultural activities aimed at local residents alongside other uses of the spaces. The case studies were selected based on the following comparative dimensions: 1) the degree of institutionalization, ranging from self-organized, volunteer-driven initiatives to publicly funded ones; 2) the project phase, comparing early-stage projects with stabilized ones to identify enabling and inhibiting factors at different development stages; and 3) resource availability, contrasting endogenous resources (e.g., volunteer work, civil society networks) with exogenous resources (e.g., public funding, external staff) to examine their influence on the project development.

5. Analysis: Practice modes of art and cultural work

5.1 Artist mode

Degree of institutionalization	• Self-organized initiative with volunteer support
Project phase	• Early-stage (first year)
Resource availability	• Combining endogenous resources (real estate property volunteering and funding acquisition) with exogenous funding (public funding programs for renovation and retrofitting of the building in terms of accessibility for several years and private donations for realizing short-term renovation necessities)
Understanding of arts and culture	• Experimental and open-minded life mode; • Space for unconventional thinking • Art for art's sake
Primary actions	• Curating and organizing experimental art events at a renovated medieval building
Secondary actions	• Offering resources to support the artistic capacities of locals, curating nonprofessional projects • Support in organizing and carrying out events of locals
Target groups	• Artists and open-minded residents with familiar lifestyles

Socioeconomic context and project description

The “SpaceXperiment Association” is an initiative centered around the preservation and revitalization of a medieval building in Mühlenbach. Mühlenbach is a small village in a rural district with a population of under 1,000 residents. The surrounding area is characterized by agriculture and technical businesses. The village belongs to the municipality of medieval Berghausen, with a population of around 15,000 residents. Due to its proximity to large forest areas, the region is characterized by the wood-processing industry. Large companies of electrical engineering have offered regional employment opportunities (the largest company there has about 5,500 employees) since the 1960s. Consequently, there is a local middle and upper class contrasting with the mainly low socioeconomic conditions of the district (Thünen, 2025). A further effect of this is that the municipality has a relatively stable municipal budget due to high business taxes and can afford a municipal cultural officer on a marginal employment basis, which facilitates the coordination of local cultural networks.

The coordinators of “SpaceXperiment Association”, Paul and Anna⁶, are renowned and well-connected mediators of arts and culture in the federal district and the driving forces behind the restoration and cultural revitalization of the building. They have a background in art history and have worked for many years in the management and consultation of art foundations. They successfully developed stipends and coordinated grant programs for artists in the federal district in former projects. As an example, they built up an artists-in-residence program with the help of regional grants, although funding for arts is scarce in rural areas. During the last few years, they have transformed the building into a dynamic and, in parts, inclusive cultural hub addressing both the local residents and trans-local artists. They successfully established an open meeting place for residents and visiting artists in one part of the historic building complex by acquiring federal funding and managing the renovation process. They initiated a local association that allows them to receive donations and involves residents in their projects.

The building complex has been the site of numerous well-visited cultural events, including exhibitions of contemporary and historical art, also highlighting regional artists or themes related to the village’s history, concerts and performances, as well as workshops and educational programs on regional nature and history.

⁶ The names of individuals have been changed throughout to preserve anonymity.

Understanding of arts and culture, target group

Anna and Paul view their artistic and curatorial endeavors as a distinct life mode characterized by adventure and the exploration of everyday life with minimal constraints. Their primary interest in their cultural work, therefore, revolves around self-fulfillment. They perceive art as a medium that should ideally be avant-garde and of high quality, yet accessible to nonprofessional artists and a broader nonexclusive audience. Their approach often involves creating societal spaces for experimentation and unconventional activities. This is encapsulated in the following statement: “Paul: In our society, a lot of things are timed. Art and culture should be free of this and be open to other things than efficiency”.

Although they do not consider themselves artists, they have a strong opinion on the quality of the art projects they organize. They do not count this in terms of quantifiable success but more on a scale of originality and experimentality concerning the conditions under which art is presented to the public. In their case, this refers to the usual perceptions of life and cultural offers in the countryside:

Anna: It always irritated or disturbed me a little that I had the feeling that country culture usually means a marksmen’s festival or carnival or whatever. And nothing else works. But I always thought that couldn’t be right. There are also great things you can do in the countryside. And for decades, there was such an extreme concentration of cultural projects in the big cities and I don’t think that has to be the case. You can also do totally experimental and very cool things in the countryside. And they work really well.

Paul: That’s very, very important to me or us. So you can give [the artists] a lot of freedom in different areas, but the quality should be there in any case.

Primary action

The project coordinators can rely on their comprehensive network of artists and institutions for curating and organizing experimental art events, which is their key primary action. These relations are characterized by being transnational and local at the same time, as they emphasized in the interview:

Anna: We do a lot in networks, right? That’s super important to us and there are somehow these very different levels that you can always use and fall back on again and again. So, first of all, the international ones. Let’s say in every area where someone comes from or where someone wants to go or something, we know someone there. And that’s always good. So it’s a network, a worldwide network of artists, so to speak. And then there is the network here in the town, and also the network in the district here.

Paul and Anna act as “network brokers” (Tinius/Macdonald, 2020, p. 36), who have access to resources and decide on their distribution. This role grants them a level of authority and influence. They have long-term experience in acquiring funding by writing grant proposals and coordinating those resources. They create a point of intersection with their events and projects where their different networks meet. They have organized in recent years, for example, a light art event including artists from the University of Fine Arts in Berlin as well as regional artists who were invited to exhibit their audiovisual projections on the building site. This reflects the field of tension they span with their curating actions, being “gatekeeper[s] of artistic visibility and translator[s] of different epistemological realms” (ibid.). How they foster social cohesion in the face of wide-ranging ideas of art can be explained by looking into their secondary practices surrounding the events they organize.

Secondary actions

Their first key secondary action is rather predictable, as it aims at establishing social connections with residents who are similar to Anna and Paul in terms of their social and educational background, i.e., middle- and upper-class residents who are interested in art as an aesthetic event and experimental lifestyle. Located in a topographically peripheral region, such offers are rare to find and are mainly found around metropolitan centers. By explicitly stating that rural areas should not suffer from a lack of high-quality and avant-garde art, they address this desire of middle- and upper-class lifestyle migrants, often

coming from urban metropolises. Our interviewee Maria, for example, with an academic background who had moved to the neighboring village from a major city with a thriving artist scene, stated that networks in the countryside have to be chosen with a certain awareness, as there is not so much to choose from:

Maria: [...] there were writers and musicians and visual artists together. And that was fruitful. I found it totally fruitful on a human level. That really impressed me. And so I said to myself: I'll be involved as long as I can.

Interviewer: So you found a place for yourself where you can find offers in the region and where you like to go?

Maria: Exactly. [...] I remember when we came here, we said that we would take a very close look at every person we meet here and consider whether we could imagine doing something with them. We didn't have that attitude in the city we came from. You met enough people there if you wanted to. But I don't want to go to thousands of events anymore. I don't want to consume that. I would like to somehow deepen and understand what I experience.

Finding connections to like-minded people with a sense of art and having a meeting place, offers residents like Maria a quality of life.

The second key secondary action fostering social cohesion focuses on target groups that differ from the first: they support non-established local artists by curating projects and events and offering access to resources to carry them out. Based on an extended idea of art as an open-minded thinking breaking with the paradigm of efficiency, they manage to involve residential nonprofessionals in their artistic endeavors. They honor, for example, local artistic skills by organizing an annual arts and crafts market during the Christmas season. The market is open to various local and nonprofessional artisans who offer hand-knitted socks, jewelry made from natural resources or handcrafted woodwork without having to pay a stall fee.

By extending their curating activities to local creativities, they break with an aesthetical hegemony of art as exclusive high-quality and professional avant-garde aesthetics (as also described by Lu and Qiang 2023 regarding the Bishan festival). Instead, nonprofessionals gain access to normally closed resources, such as exhibition space or marketing.

In addition, such events offer residents the opportunity to engage with each other without a specific aim. As could be observed during fieldwork, visitors to the artisan market who had not seen each other for some time began talking to each other and shared stories and news from their private lives:

Later, when I was sitting at the booth with Anna and chatting, a woman came by who also had a booth. The two of them struck up a conversation about the goods on display, sharing an enthusiasm for the crocheted bags. The woman told us that she had made eight euros, and she emphasized how relaxed it is that there are no stall fees. Then the conversation suddenly turned to a completely different topic. Anna asked: "What's it like with your mother now?" They obviously knew each other well enough to talk about such personal topics, but hadn't spoken for a while. She said that her father had been in need of care for some time now and that she had been with her mother at an assisted home for elder people the day before. She said that this first conversation had gone well, although there had been some pressure behind it. Nevertheless, she was relieved that her mother had shown understanding.

There were a lot of personal details in her story and I found it interesting that the event was also an opportunity to share very personal, almost existential topics. (Observation protocol November 2024.)

As Lu and Qiang (2023) have already pointed out concerning their case study, there are also events in Mühlenbach that have the potential to be out of touch with the everyday lives of residents due to the specific expertise required to engage with the topic. Nevertheless, the project coordinators try to include the residents by asking for support in organizing the event, which we see as the third key secondary action. This is exemplified in a statement by a very engaged volunteer of the association who contributes to the events by preparing meals and cakes for the audience. We were told in an interview

carried out after the talk of two artists at the historic building: “I did not understand anything, but I am not into arts that much anyway. I am more the organizing person and this is what I appreciate here, that I can get involved even without having an idea of art”. Similarly, other residents are not interested in art but regularly engage in creating a cheerful social frame for the events.

5.2 Community worker mode

Degree of institutionalization	• Volunteer association with municipally funded building and European Union-funded part-time position for two years (LEADER)
Project phase	• Established for several years
Resource availability	• Mainly exogenous resources (real estate and its renovation is municipally funded, basic services also) combined with endogenous resources (volunteers)
Understanding of arts and culture	• Rural cultural heritage, tradition and everyday life
Primary actions	• Organizing sociocultural events • Providing space • Networking
Secondary actions	• Embedded community building • Care work
Target groups	• Volunteers • (Cultural) associations • Disadvantaged • Elderly/children • Local community

Socioeconomic context and project description

The initiative *Community Hub* focuses on the revitalization of a converted historic building located in the small rural municipality of Grünfeld (3,126 inhabitants) in the former GDR. The eponymous initiative has created a multigenerational community hub to address the challenges posed by demographic change, rural depopulation and the thinning of basic services (StaLa, 2024).

Grünfeld has experienced significant demographic shifts over the past decade. The district has seen a substantial decline in population. Between 2010 and 2020, the population of the district fell by approximately 9% to a bit more than 300,000 inhabitants, mainly due to outmigration and negative natural population development. Grünfeld itself has witnessed a similar trend, with a population decrease of around 15% during the same period (ibid.).

This population decline poses a challenge for maintaining basic services. Health and care services, for example, have diminished, and social support structures for the elderly have been stretched thin. The percentage of residents over 65 years old in Grünfeld is about 30% (900 inhabitants), significantly higher than the national average (ibid.). The aging population and outmigration create a pressing need for new models of community support and infrastructure that address both the economic and social challenges of rural life.

The *Community Hub* initiative seeks to respond to these challenges by transforming the former historic building into a multifunctional, intergenerational space. It combines a professional day-care facility and a dentist with self-organized sociocultural activities in the *Bürgerbereich* (translates as ‘civic realm’), which is operated by the *Community Hub* association. Activities range from a community café (*Grünfelder Kaffeetafel*, which translates as ‘Grünfelder coffee table’) to arts and crafts workshops to celebrate local traditions, such as tying and burning herb bunches at the end of summer or a carp dinner in winter. The activities mostly tie in with or seek to revive cultural meanings and memories of handed-down practices and traditions in that rural area, thereby reconnecting the villagers to their cultural heritage and nurturing a sense of place attachment. The building is owned by the municipality and the association, as tenant, is commissioned to manage it while basic services are provided by the municipality.

The association does not provide their own funds but is dependent on funding for the realization of its program.

Understandings of arts and culture, target group

Clara, the voluntary project coordinator and chairwoman of the eponymous association *Community Hub*, has a professional background in architecture. She moved to the village of Grünfeld after having finished her studies in the nearby regional capital. Asked about her understanding of artistic and cultural work in the interview, she states that it revolves around

rural everyday culture: coming together, experiencing the course of the year together and also somehow shaping and maintaining this village life together. [W]e just want to uphold, support and promote this shared everyday life. It is not primarily about concerts, but talking together and being together. [...] I think it's about somehow preserving and continuing to help shape what is perhaps still practiced in rural areas, what has been created together and what has also proved its worth.

Her approach to cultural work through the lens of everyday life emphasizes that culture is not primarily artistic expression but encompasses the “ordinary aesthetics” of everyday practices, social institutions, language, rituals and material objects that shape how people live their lives in the village. It is thematically open and includes both tangible elements (e.g., food, clothing, architecture) and intangible aspects (e.g., beliefs, working biographies and customs), influencing how community members think, act and relate to others within their community.

Primary actions

According to Clara's understanding of culture as a way of life, she considers provisioning a “semi-public” space for residents in the village as her primary objective. However, in practice, mostly elderly people and, to a lesser degree, families are targeted by the project's services and events. Most of the latter are realized on their own initiative with the support of local associations and volunteers. Thus, the primary actions of Clara as the project coordinator are organizing socio-cultural events (exhibitions, coffee tables, craft workshops, physical activities) with a broad variety of topics and relevance for the lifeworld of local residents (e.g., aging, health, media competency, local history, customs and traditions). Being a member of the community and a well-known family, her primary actions do not only encompass organizational tasks but also active participation in the events. Clara considers being recognized as a “doer” with her own topics and viewpoints as a prerequisite for her work as a coordinator. In her view, her voluntary activities in numerous associations (mostly linked to children and schoolwork) give her the ‘authenticity’ to represent the community vis-à-vis state authorities and cooperation partners.

In addition to organizing its own events, another primary activity of the *Community Hub* is maintaining relationships with the community, local institutions (e.g., churches and schools), associations and service providers, such as adult education. These primary actions provide new opportunities and impulses for the programming at the *Community Hub*.

Secondary actions

Linked to these primary actions are the secondary actions of caretaking and community building. Asked about what counts for her in the realization of events, the project coordinator gave the example of a carp dinner which takes place once a year in the winter:

So it's the little things, like our carp dinner, which only takes place once a year. But there are people who look forward to it for three-quarters of a year. Then they meet here in the morning and peel potatoes together and chat and someone brings the table decorations. They cook everything themselves. Many people love it, and it's something so typically rural and regional in late fall and winter. Many people no longer cook carp at home. The first time it took place, I lived

up there. Old Mr. Schmidt was still there, he was 90, and he said, “I’ll bring some celery”, and he brought a huge amount of celery that you need to cook the fish.

Her summary of the “little things” illustrates very nicely that not only the carp dinner itself is a social event. Rather, the entire process leading up to it is interwoven with the social fabric of village life. Residents contribute homegrown vegetables as well as their specific skills and expertise. In doing so, they experience themselves as members of a living community. Asked about my observation that the event not only satisfies hunger and thirst but also basic social needs for bonding and belonging to some kind of community, the project coordinator responded in a consecutive interview:

I’ll give you an example [...]. Brunhild lives over there now, she’s about eighty and comes to us. She’s a super exhausting woman, she grumbles about her neighbor and [...] does an awful lot of dirty laundry. People often get upset when she enters the living room. But when Brunhild doesn’t show up for three days, people get a bit worried. It’s about that kind of understanding for each other and putting up with each other.

Her observations about a ‘difficult’ community member match our observations and informal conversations during fieldwork regarding dealing with differences and contradictions in community life. During the event, social contradictions and hierarchies are overlaid by commonalities, as the participants can contribute their skills (peeling potatoes counts also as such) and, thus, contribute to community life. Clara’s task as coordinator is to orchestrate the social world, linking customs and traditions to the lived experience of residents. To perform this task, she has to *know* the community through being part of it, i.e., by talking with residents about all kinds of everyday matters at any occasion. This involves practices of care, for example, when Clara is aware of the financial needs of elderly residents with low pensions and pays them financial compensation for taking on facility management duties. At the beginning of our research, when we had only attended the events at the *Community Hub*, we did not understand why the project coordinator considered her presence as essential. It was only after some time that we understood the importance of these secondary actions of care work and community building and, thus, that primary and secondary actions are inextricable linked in the community worker mode.

5.3 Cultural entrepreneur mode

Degree of institutionalization	• Municipally funded project coordination
Project phase	• In consolidation (second project cycle)
Resource availability	• Mainly exogenous resources (municipal funding, vacancies offered by real estate owners) combined with endogenous resources (expertise in real estate brokerage and urban development)
Understanding of arts and culture	• Cultural and social Innovation
Primary actions	• Stage setting • Networking/Social events • Organizational/technical support
Secondary actions	• Social curating • Cultural brokerage
Target groups	• Pioneers • Social innovators • Change agents

Socioeconomic context and project description

The *DIY Space* initiative in Burgberg was set up to transform vacancies into multifunctional spaces for communal and adaptive reuse. Burgberg is a small town of about 14,000 inhabitants in a central federal state of Germany, where exogenous and endogenous factors have contributed to rising commercial and housing vacancies. Vacancy rates have risen to above 12% in certain inner-city areas (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). The aging population and the outmigration of younger residents have reduced both

the demand for housing and commercial spaces as well as purchasing power. However, the immigration of foreign nationals in recent years has contributed to a positive demographic development and increased cultural diversity in Burgberg, specifically in the inner city, with rates of foreign nationals above 40% (ibid.). This poses significant challenges regarding social inclusion and cohesion.

At the same time, many local businesses have been unable to adapt to changing market conditions, especially online commerce. Suburban development has shifted cultural and leisure activities to the urban fringe. Some older buildings in the inner city have become unattractive or unsuitable for modern uses due to neglect or insufficient maintenance, making them harder to rent or sell. There has been a self-reinforcing cycle of decline in perception and investment. Vacancies in Burgberg create an impression of neglect, discouraging revitalization. Property owners hesitate to lower rents or invest, further prolonging vacancies. Consequently, the municipality has decided to take things into their own hands and started to buy up or rent vacant buildings.

The *DIY Space* is a social enterprise created by the *Pioneers*, who are commissioned by the municipality to develop concepts for vacancy revitalization and implement the process in a participative way. Rebranding vacant properties as *Potenzialräume* (capability spaces) for future – as yet unknown – uses is a component of the municipality's redevelopment efforts and is embedded in a larger town development plan. The *DIY Space* invites residents to identify and test uses in a participatory way. Vacancies, for instance, were previously reused as, for example, a biweekly pop-up bar, art gallery, maker space or venues for workshops and cultural events – often in a combination of uses. The professional backgrounds of the project coordinators Nathalie and Hannah are in real estate development, with a focus on community-oriented and participatory processes that contribute to the creation of integrated open spaces for common well-oriented use. Depending on the project, they gather a multidisciplinary team of professionals from various backgrounds, such as cultural studies, digitization, architecture or crafts.

The *Pioneers* employ a series of instruments – from opening up and rebranding vacancies as capability spaces to giving time-limited *DIY scholarships* for cultural and creative workers to transform the spaces into places of work, exhibitions or whatever form of cultural expression suits their cultural and creative practices.

Understandings of arts and culture, target group

The project coordinators provide a framework for social and cultural activities of all sorts – as long as they pertain to certain cultural norms and values, i.e., common good orientation, social inclusion, egalitarianism and solidarity. In this role, they come closest to what Klamer (2011) and others have termed “cultural entrepreneurs”, in that they leverage cultural and creative resources to foster social, cultural and, to a lesser degree, economic development. They do not operate with an understanding of arts and culture in the strict sense, but rather see them as a capacity and means to catalyze innovation and transformation. In this sense, they understand their own cultural and creative work similar to what Chang and Wyszomirski (2015) define as “a management process through which cultural workers seek to support creativity and autonomy, advance capacity for adaptability, and create artistic as well as economic and social value” (p. 24). Based on this understanding, they provide the framework for cultural actors, who are perceived as social innovators and other agents of change, to realize their potential and ideas. The *Pioneers'* activities require a diverse range of practical skills and social capabilities, such as resource orientation, adaptability to changing social arenas and a sense of sociocultural dynamics, the ability to tap into and mobilize varying knowledge systems and networks, and a commitment to community engagement. Above all, they must be able to cope with and overcome resistance to change.

Primary actions

Asked about their role in the process, Nathalie and Hannah – two dynamic women in their 30s – primarily named the creation of capability spaces which would make visible the potentials of what is already there but remains to be realized.

Thus, the first primary action can be described as stage setting, i.e., setting the scene for others to show their potentials which can be business ideas, communal life or simply artistic expression. This primary action comprises all kinds of organizational and technical support provided to the users of capability spaces, such as the promotion of events, providing social media outreach and ensuring compliance with legal regulations (e.g., royalties for music events). It can also simply mean ensuring the availability of appropriate seating arrangements and rearranging chairs on the day of the event.

In addition to providing a stage for others and related to it, a second primary action aims at creating spaces that enable and promote encounter and exchange between different participants on an equal footing. These designed spaces should level or fade down social hierarchies and power asymmetries for the time of the encounter. This includes the proper stage setup to an atmosphere of familiarity and the use of requisites, such as cake and coffee. The project coordinators describe this approach as creating “dialogue spaces”:

[...] we also called it an open coffee table. It is a low-threshold approach that is also familiar. In other words, if we want to create spaces for conversation, then these should be formats where people are not somehow exposed, where they have to have a special ability to speak into a microphone in order to be allowed to say something, but rather familiar conversation formats [...] where we feel comfortable and where we enjoy talking. Because what it's all about when we want to communicate is that we also want it to be a space where we are heard and where we can express our concerns. [...] we have very different participants in such an urban development process, who are also quite separate from each other hierarchically, so for me it was a question of how do we get them to the same place at eye level? So, the dialogue spaces are a format where people at least sit at a table. Everyone drinks coffee and eats their piece of cake. That may seem banal, but it's really important because the practices are the same.

“Dialogue spaces” are, thus, not only spaces which encourage exchange on a specific topic between participants but also social spaces that temporarily suspend predominant norms and hierarchies in order for participants to get to know different lifeworlds and encounter each other on an equal plane. This function of dialogue spaces is linked to the very closely interwoven secondary action of cultural brokerage.

Secondary actions

The project coordinators, in their roles as cultural brokers, perform this key secondary action to tease out individual standpoints and interests as well as to find commonalities and match interests – i.e., they translate between the different intentions, objectives and ambitions of the people they bring together (Mosse & Lewis, 2006). The project coordinators stated in the interview that the translational work revolves around “shared responsibilities” toward each other and the town as a shared lived space. One of the authors became part of this cultural work himself during a field trip to participate in an *open coffee table* designed as a dialogue space to assess needs and generate ideas for future uses of vacancies in the town. The event took place in a former store, which had been transformed into a dance studio for an artistic research process by a performing artist. The approximately 15 participants were sitting around a nicely decorated coffee table in the middle of the room talking about the heterogeneous motives which brought them there. In the course of the event, the project coordinators did not only engage with the participants present but also invited people in the public space in front of the former store to share their perspectives or simply join in to listen. Local and non-local artists, property owners, representatives of the municipality and a person from the local business incubator were among the participants.

Participants in smaller groups, facilitated by the coordinators, engaged in a process of revitalizing cultural memories of formerly vibrant places of public life, such as the old power plant or the iconic water tower which hosted a restaurant. In the course of events, participants developed ideas how to revive these places, and the usages envisaged transgressed single user groups or responsibilities such as ‘the town’ or ‘property owners.’ While it might be too daring to proclaim shared responsibilities, the example, nevertheless, demonstrates how the coordinators as cultural brokers induced the identification of commonalities. They did this by calling on diverse participants to bring in their memories, experiences,

expectations, etc. regarding community life and public space. Summarizing the event in an interview a few weeks later, the project coordinator stated that

the stakeholders were suddenly understanding and I believe that the town administration was also understanding the stakeholders' urgent concerns. Yes, so that's how we manage this translation. And I think that's what it's all about, creating spaces where we understand the positions of the other person in order to find a joint solution. Because you don't do that on your own.

The translation work of the project coordinators is multidirectional and multilayered. Translating between the needs, interests and expectations of municipality employees, residents, artists, property owners and various other stakeholders is a necessary prerequisite for a sense of "shared responsibility" to emerge. Cultural work, in the sense of the cultural entrepreneur mode, actively creates and manages this interface between social, lived and physical spaces.

5.4 Activist mode

Degree of institutionalization	Self-organized volunteer initiative with publicly funded part-time workers
Project phase	Established for more than ten years
Resource availability	Combining endogenous resources (volunteering in small-scale projects and funding acquisition) with exogenous resources (publicly funded part-time workers and diverse project fundings from private and public programs with diverse aims; longest funding provided by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture for three years with the objective of rural cultural development)
Understanding of arts and culture	Broad and alternative understanding of culture as <i>socio-culture</i>
Primary actions	Providing access to existing cultural offers to a broader audience
Secondary actions	- Empowering marginalized groups to contribute to cultural projects - Political campaigning offering resources to countercultural actors
Target groups	- Marginalized residents - Countercultural actors and civil society

Socioeconomic context and project description

The cultural project *Artstation* is situated in a historical building in Buchendorf, a municipality in the district of Eichental with approximately 32,000 inhabitants (Statistisches Landesamt, 2023). The town's economy is diverse but faces typical challenges of smaller towns and cities in rural areas, including a decline in traditional industrial jobs, the outmigration of younger residents to larger urban areas and an aging population (with an average age of 45.5 years, *ibid.*). In comparison to other municipalities in the region, the town features its own theatre and cinema. With a 50-minute train drive from one of Germany's largest cities, the town belongs to its metropolitan area. This geographic proximity influences local labor dynamics, with many residents commuting for work, and also affects the cultural activities in Buchendorf. Cultural projects there are often characterized by a competitive orientation towards the metropole. At the same time, Buchendorf is surrounded by many smaller municipalities where access to cultural offerings is limited, mainly due to poor public transport connections.

These conditions influence the cultural landscape of Buchendorf, making grassroots initiatives, such as the *Artstation*, essential for bundling local cultural activities with a focus on local needs instead of competitive interests. The *Artstation* is a nonprofit initiative dedicated to fostering a space for cultural, artistic and social projects. Cultural (media) productions are a key focus of the organization, particularly those aimed at children and young people, as well as to develop and support culture projects for underprivileged actor groups, for example, for people with disabilities.

There is a small core team of partly volunteers and partly publicly funded part-time workers responsible for organizing and maintaining daily tasks with a professional background in the media industry, cultural management and journalism, while many additional workers contribute on a project basis. The number of staff members varies depending on the scope and scale of ongoing projects, which sometimes include temporary staff financed through specific grants. Ensuring long-term financial stability is a constant concern. In addition, they face structural constraints, particularly regarding the accessibility of their physical space. Although they acknowledge that their current location is not fully inclusive due to the stairs, relocating is financially unfeasible, limiting their ability to address this issue.

Actors' understanding of arts and culture, target groups

The main interest of the project coordinators Carsten and Sara is to foster a more just and accessible environment for local cultural production, particularly by providing resources to actors beyond the traditional high-cultural domain. They commit themselves to the principles of "socioculture", a concept of cultural work that connects cultural activities with social and sociopolitical concerns. It promotes self-initiative, co-creation and cultural participation while aiming to address societal challenges through creative means. The concept of socioculture evolved in Germany during the 1960s and 70s and was heavily influenced by "New Social Movements", such as the student movement of 1968, the women's movement, the anti-nuclear movement and further efforts toward democratization during that period. These movements called for the democratization of cultural institutions and challenged traditional concepts of culture, which were perceived as elitist and disconnected from the "everyday culture" of the broader population. Alternative cultural centers, citizens' initiatives and autonomous projects emerging during this time and also in the region studied emphasized culture as a dynamic process of community building rather than merely an aesthetic discipline (see Knoblich, 2002, 2007).

The project coordinators of the *Artstation* view their role as instrumental in securing democratic principles within local cultural politics. They define themselves as representatives of civil society and a voice for marginalized groups. They actively oppose populist and nationalist ideologies, as their political orientation is explicitly leftist. Their networks of cooperation extend to residents and local politicians who share similar political attitudes, ensuring alignment in sociocultural initiatives and projects.

Primary actions

Connected to their understanding of socioculture, their key primary action is to make existing cultural offerings and events accessible to a broader audience. This specific approach to cultural work is expressed in one of their longest projects, the "Culture Bridge". One of the few workers of the initiative with a long-term contract, asks regional cultural institutions monthly for any remaining tickets for museums, exhibitions, theatre and musical productions, concerts or cinema seats. These are collected by the part-time employee and redistributed in a network of interested people with low or no income that the organizers have built up over the course of the project. They know that offering tickets is often not enough to make cultural offers accessible. Due to the geographical fragmentation and the poor public transport connections in the district, mobility constraints are a key concern they include in providing access.

The project coordinators are also engaged in a translocal network of socioculture, for example, in the association of socioculture of the federal district. They keep a good relationship with other centers of socioculture by taking part in regular meetings and organizing networking events. One of the leading organizers emphasized that being in such networks usually makes gaining knowledge about funding opportunities more accessible. Nevertheless, as they explained in the interview, the challenge is to overcome and bundle such particular interests to bring them into the political discourse. This shows the activist impetus of the initiative regarding the interests of the community. The project coordinators' activist approach characterizes the secondary actions in particular, as the following section illustrates.

Secondary actions

The first key secondary action of the *Artstation* project coordinators is to empower marginalized population groups to produce cultural projects themselves. They engage in their education media projects especially with pupils who do not have equal access to education, for example, those with disabilities or whose main language is not German. Cooperating with local teachers, the *Artstation* offers guidance and advanced media equipment to produce short movie clips or radio plays in order to enhance the child's language and social skills and, thus, help them to develop greater self-confidence. The children can bring in their own perspectives and try out things on their own, as could be observed during fieldwork. By encouraging them to use professional and expensive media equipment on their own, they gain the experience of being trusted and considered capable of contributing to a cultural project. In so doing, the *Artstation* offers what Rantala (2009) called "third spaces of media education [that] are emerging in terms of creating: (1) senses of authorship of the medium; (2) connections between children's everyday cultural worlds and school work; and (3) practices for identity construction in school and everyday contexts" (Ibid., 395).

The project coordinators' next key secondary action is political campaigning, in terms of bundling nonaligned local culture projects and setting up cooperations between political representatives and counter-hegemonic, bottom-up initiatives. This was made clear by one of the head organizers:

Our urban lab, for example, is about involving citizens, initiatives and associations in the town in the public discussion of issues that concern them. In other words, we occasionally organize events at which we bring politicians and participants from various interest groups on board to improve communication in our town. The background to this is that there have been various citizen initiatives in our area that have completely paralyzed major political decisions on regional development. [...] And that has already led to some successes, and we have achieved some good results. And one of the results is that the municipality has, for example, set up a full-time position to look after the groups and initiatives and their interests.

As the statement exemplifies, one of their key concerns is being an advocacy initiative for civil society groups who aim at an intervening in regional planning processes and neighborhood development, pursuing the idea of "a good life" in their town.

6. Discussion and concluding remarks: Varying trajectories of art and cultural work

Our findings demonstrate that the different modes of art and cultural work – the artist mode, community worker mode, cultural entrepreneur mode and activist mode – have varying impacts on social sustainability in rural areas in terms of social cohesion and cultural participation. Each mode comprises specific conceptions of art and culture, engages different target groups, and includes both primary and secondary actions that go beyond artistic and cultural production to encompass community building and political engagement. At the same time, however, they also reveal tensions, limitations and contradictions regarding how art and culture function in the revitalization of rural areas.

The artist mode focuses on fostering experimental, high-quality artistic practices while maintaining a connection to the local community. As seen in the case of the "SpaceXperiment Association", the cultural workers prioritize avant-garde artistic expression and see their role as curators of artistic networks that intersect trans-local and local spheres. This mode contributes to social sustainability by challenging stereotypes of rural cultural life and introducing new forms of artistic practices that attract both local and external audiences. However, the integration of local nonprofessional artists into these high-quality experimental practices can create tensions. While the project includes local artisans through events such as the artisan market, there remains a gap between the curators' vision of experimental art and the everyday cultural practices and world views of many local residents. This aligns with findings by Lu and Qian (2023), which highlight that local residents approach artistic events primarily as leisure rather than as participatory artistic experiences. Further research could explore how cultural and artistic interventions can irritate everyday practices and world views and open them up to more just socially inclusive visions without reproducing existing social class relations.

By contrast, the community worker mode, exemplified by the *Community Hub*, prioritizes cultural activities embedded in everyday life. This mode's contribution to social sustainability lies in creating third spaces for community engagement, particularly for elderly residents. Events such as communal meals and seasonal celebrations revive local traditions and foster a sense of belonging. Unlike the artist mode, which introduces external artistic influences, the community worker mode centers on preserving and reactivating local cultural memory. However, while this mode effectively nurtures social cohesion by practices of care, it risks reinforcing existing social relations and cultural representations based on social inequality rather than opening up new social and cultural possibilities. Crawshaw and Gkartzios (2016) emphasize that arts-based rural revitalization should not merely reproduce historical traditions but also function as a medium for experimenting with social relations. The challenge for this mode, therefore, is to balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the inclusion of new, diverse social forms that might challenge existing local trajectories.

The cultural entrepreneur mode, as observed in the *DIY Space* initiative, represents a different approach by positioning arts and culture as tools for social innovation. This mode aligns with theories of cultural entrepreneurship (Klamer, 2011) by revitalizing vacancies and turning them into "capability spaces" for communal and adaptive reuse. The project coordinators act as cultural brokers, facilitating encounters between local residents, business owners, artists and municipal officials. Their work demonstrates how cultural activities can serve as a vehicle for place-making and social innovation, rather than being purely aesthetic or heritage-driven. However, this mode also faces limitations. While it promotes inclusivity through "dialogue spaces" and participative planning events, the reliance on temporary, project-based funding structures raises concerns about long-term sustainability. Further research is required to understand the temporalities of project-based funding and especially their long-term impact on community life. Connected to this, policy actors should be concerned more about the specific temporalities of contemporary rural development programs. Moreover, the emphasis on creative entrepreneurship often found in contemporary rural development discourse risks sidelining community groups that do not align with the economic rationale of cultural-led development. In the same vein, the exogenous nature of the intervention risks overseeing established networks of cultural engagement, prompting resistance by those who feel marginalized by discourses of change and innovation.

The activist mode, exemplified by the *Artstation*, takes the most explicitly political approach, positioning arts and culture as tools for advocacy and social justice. This mode engages marginalized groups, such as low-income households and immigrants. The activist mode extends beyond the conventional boundaries of cultural work into activism and policy advocacy by framing culture as a form of sociopolitical engagement. However, cultural policy in rural areas often lacks a clear framework for integrating activism into official cultural development strategies which focus on the instrumental uses of culture as a tool for development. Consequently, while the activist mode effectively mobilizes cultural work for political engagement, it also encounters resistance from local political structures and funding bodies that may view its activities as too oppositional. Recommendations could be derived from this for political decision-makers to create funding measures for grassroots democracy laboratories in which activist initiatives, municipalities and political decision-makers jointly address issues relating to shaping the common good.

One broader implication of these findings is the need for more comprehensive policy frameworks that support diverse modes of art and cultural work. The findings suggest that the practice modes of art and cultural work unfold in relation to the socioeconomic and physical-material contexts of the cultural initiatives. Policy frameworks must account for this socio-spatial heterogeneity to support tailor-made solutions adapted to the varying needs of rural areas. On the one hand, these findings align with theories of the New Rural Paradigm (OECD 2006, Høst 2016) and its implementation via policies such as LEADER, which value place-based and bottom-up approaches to leverage endogenous (cultural) resources to pursue idiosyncratic development paths. This echoes critiques by Gibson and Kong (2005) that rural cultural policies often adopt an urban-centric "creative economy" model that does not account for the heterogeneous social realities of rural areas. On the other hand, financial support for cultural projects within rural development policies should play a greater role in general, particularly in view of its effects on social cohesion and the stimulation of civic engagement or social entrepreneurship. Regarding Germany, for example, in addition to LEADER, the "LandKultur" funding program of the Federal Ministry

of Food and Agriculture (BMEL 2024), which has been in place since 2017, is relevant. Connected to this, cultural activities in rural areas should not be reduced to their impact on the rural (creative) economy or their importance in strengthening regional identity, as they also play an important role in promoting social relations and even grassroots democratic structures. Additionally, our findings deliver arguments for stronger relationships between cultural and rural development policies. This could also create incentives for local authorities to organize their administration and support of cultural projects more professionally to meet the diverse strategies and competencies of cultural actors in rural communities more competently. It should, however, be borne in mind that financial bottlenecks particularly in rural communities also hinder the implementation of such projects.

At the same time, the modes of cultural work presented here should not be seen as exclusive to rural areas, as they could also develop in a similar way in urban settings and, as our cases exemplify, are already partly interwoven with urban influences. However, as the analysis of secondary actions has shown, the presence of a particular mode is not arbitrary, but rather a specific response to certain socioeconomic, material and community structures that are more likely to be found in rural areas, such as vacancies or a more senior population. This may cause certain constraints in rural areas on the modes that can be carried out, whereas in urban settings, it can be assumed that the way in which cultural work is practiced is more contingent. Nevertheless, unresolved tensions remain. The reliance on precarious funding models across all modes raises questions about the long-term viability of cultural work as a tool for rural social sustainability. The fact that many cultural workers operate in volunteer or project-based roles reflects broader structural challenges in the cultural sector (Duxbury, 2021). Additionally, while all four modes contribute to social sustainability, they do so in various ways with different ends. The artist mode's emphasis on high-quality, experimental art with a focus on exogenous art networks contrasts with the community worker's focus on local everyday culture. Similarly, the cultural entrepreneurs' vision for social innovation and focus on change agents might be at odds with the activist mode's critique of market-driven cultural policies.

However, we consider the plurality of approaches to art and cultural work, and how they impact on social sustainability in rural areas as a strength. The findings suggest that rather than viewing cultural work as a singular force for the betterment of rural life, policymakers must recognize the diversity of practice modes, their frictions as well as divergent social impacts in order to align them with political objectives.

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