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Silent Exhaustion, Collective Resilience

Reflections on Sustainability in Cultural Work

Introduction

This report presents a preliminary qualitative analysis of responses collected during the collective reflection session *"What is breaking, and what is holding?"*, organised as part of the conference *Resilient Ties* (19.05.2026). The session focused on the lived realities of people working within the broadly understood cultural sector and explored questions related to exhaustion, sustainability, solidarity, care, and the conditions necessary for continuing cultural work under increasing pressure.

The exercise was conducted using anonymous written responses collected through Padlet. Participants were invited to complete a series of six unfinished sentences concerning their experiences of cultural work, burnout, support, vulnerability, and visions of a healthier cultural sector. The anonymous format was intentionally chosen in order to create a space in which participants could express experiences that are often difficult to articulate publicly, including emotional exhaustion, financial insecurity, relational tensions, or feelings of disillusionment. Given the large number of participants and the limited duration of the session, this method also allowed for broader participation and the inclusion of voices that might otherwise remain unheard. The number of responses varied between individual questions. On average, each question received between 30 and approximately 40 responses. Due to the open and anonymous character of the exercise, not every participant responded to every prompt.

The responses collected during the exercise do not constitute representative research data in a statistical sense. Rather, they should be understood as a form of collective qualitative reflection emerging from a specific professional and emotional context. Nevertheless, the material reveals strikingly consistent themes and recurring tensions that offer important insight into how cultural workers currently experience both the pressures and sustaining forces shaping their work and everyday lives.

Across the responses, participants repeatedly described cultural work as characterised by chronic overload, emotional labour, financial precarity, bureaucratic pressure, blurred personal boundaries, and the normalisation of exhaustion. Burnout appeared not only as

fatigue, but as a condition frequently hidden behind professionalism, productivity, and continued performance. At the same time, participants consistently identified relationships, community, solidarity, shared values, creativity, and moments of rest or human connection as the primary factors enabling them to continue working in culture despite structural instability.

Particularly significant is the extent to which the responses shift attention away from institutional productivity and toward questions of human sustainability. Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of protecting mental health, time, dignity, relationships, creativity, and the possibility of living meaningful lives beyond constant professional acceleration. The vision of a "healthier cultural sector" emerging from the exercise is therefore not primarily market-oriented or efficiency-driven, but deeply relational and human-centred.

The following sections present thematic analyses of responses to each question discussed during the session. The aim of this report is not to produce definitive conclusions, but rather to document recurring experiences, tensions, and aspirations articulated collectively by participants during the conference.

Reflections in context

The themes emerging from the collective reflection resonate strongly with existing research on precarity, emotional labour, and sustainability within the cultural and creative sectors. Previous studies have repeatedly shown that cultural workers experience chronic instability, blurred boundaries between work and personal life, emotional overload, and the normalisation of unpaid or underpaid labour (Comunian & England, 2020; Oakley & Ward, 2018). These conditions are often intensified by project-based employment structures, financial insecurity, and the expectation that passion and personal commitment should compensate for structural instability.

Particularly relevant to the present material is the concept of *emotional labour*, originally developed by Hochschild (1983), referring to forms of work that require the continuous management of emotions, relationships, and emotional expression. Research has demonstrated strong links between emotional labour and burnout, especially in professions characterised by care, affective engagement, and interpersonal intensity (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The responses collected during the session strongly reflect these dynamics, particularly in relation to invisibility, "silent suffering," emotional exhaustion, and the pressure to maintain professionalism despite depletion.

The findings also correspond with broader discussions concerning sustainability and collective care within the cultural sector. Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises that resilience in cultural work is sustained less through institutional stability than

through relationships, trust, collaboration, and communities of support (Banks, 2017; Gross & Wilson, 2020). In this context, the recurring references to community, solidarity, and shared meaning within the responses can be understood as forms of relational resilience emerging in conditions of structural precarity.

At the same time, the material reflects wider critiques of the increasing marketisation of cultural work and the growing tension between cultural values and neoliberal models of productivity, competition, and self-management (McRobbie, 2016; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Participants repeatedly articulated a desire for a sector organised around dignity, care, meaningful work, and human sustainability rather than constant acceleration and performative productivity.

Taken together, the responses collected during the session should therefore be understood not as isolated individual experiences, but as part of broader structural and emotional transformations affecting contemporary cultural labour across different contexts.

What is Breaking, and What is Holding? A Thematic Analysis of Collective Reflections

The responses to the first question – ***"Something we rarely say out loud in the cultural sector is..."*** – revealed a strikingly honest picture of the emotional, structural, and relational tensions experienced by people working in culture.

One of the strongest themes emerging from the responses was the normalisation of exhaustion and burnout. Participants repeatedly referred to emotional overload, the pressure to constantly continue, and the difficulty of openly admitting fatigue or vulnerability. Statements such as *"We need to go home," "Overwhelm and burn out,"* or *"I need help"* suggest that exhaustion is not experienced as an exceptional situation, but rather as a common and often silently accepted condition within cultural work. At the same time, several responses pointed to blurred personal boundaries and a persistent feeling that one is never doing "enough."

A second highly visible theme concerned financial precarity and the invisibility of labour. Participants openly addressed the difficulty of discussing money, salaries, and the material realities of cultural work. Responses such as *"i need money," "Za ile? [How much will I get?]," "How to get payed?"* or *"Non-profit do not mean NO COSTS"* expose a strong sense of taboo surrounding economic conditions in the sector. Particularly meaningful was the recurring reference to unpaid or underpaid labour, captured in comments such as *"always volunteer job."* Together, these responses suggest frustration with a system in which passion and commitment are often expected to compensate for instability and insufficient resources.

The answers also revealed tensions related to solidarity, recognition, and interpersonal relationships within the sector. Participants referred to competition, ego, lack of appreciation, and difficulties communicating frustration openly. Responses such as *"That we are competing," "recognition of others achievement,"* or *"ego has to calm down"* point toward a fragile relationship between the ideal of solidarity and the realities of everyday professional life. At the same time, comments such as *"Let's respect each other"* suggest a strong desire for more mutual recognition, care, and trust.

Finally, some of the shortest responses turned out to be among the most emotionally significant. Statements such as *"Truth," "What is the purpose?"* or *"I am bored"* indicate that the silences within cultural work are not only organisational or financial, but also existential. They reveal uncertainty about meaning, value, and the emotional sustainability of remaining engaged in cultural work over time.

Taken together, the responses suggest that what is "rarely said out loud" in the cultural sector is not a single issue, but rather an entire landscape of exhaustion, precarity, emotional vulnerability, and unmet needs for recognition and support. At the same time, the willingness of participants to articulate these experiences anonymously indicates a strong need for spaces in which such realities can be acknowledged collectively rather than carried individually.

The responses to the second question (***"Lately, the thing that drains me most in cultural work is..."***) reveal a pervasive experience of chronic overload, fragmentation, and emotional exhaustion within cultural work. Participants described not only excessive workloads, but also a deeper sense of depletion connected to bureaucracy, instability, relational tensions, and the difficulty of sustaining meaning and creativity under pressure.

One of the most visible themes concerned the feeling that cultural work is endless and structurally overwhelming. Participants repeatedly referred to never-ending tasks, constant responsibilities, lack of time, and the impossibility of disconnecting from work. Responses such as *"job is not ending," "your job list is never ending,"* and *"Balancing work and real life"* suggest that exhaustion is closely connected to the erosion of personal boundaries and the expectation of constant availability. Several participants also referred to the accelerating pace of work and the pressure to continuously adapt, captured in statements such as *"It goes fast here."*

Another strong theme concerned bureaucracy, procedures, and administrative burden. Participants frequently mentioned paperwork, inflexible systems, institutional expectations, and procedural complexity as significant sources of exhaustion. Responses including *"Paperwork," "Procedures," "Bureaucratie,"* and *"Lack of flexibility"* indicate frustration with systems perceived as rigid, time-consuming, and disconnected from the creative or social purpose of cultural work. In several responses, bureaucracy appeared not simply as an organisational inconvenience, but as something actively draining energy away from meaningful cultural activity.

Financial instability and resource-related anxiety also emerged as recurring concerns. Participants referred to *"bad financial conditions," "Looking 4 financial,"* and *"Relationship with finances,"* suggesting that economic precarity remains one of the central emotional pressures within the sector. Importantly, financial stress was often linked to broader feelings of insecurity, instability, and the need to constantly justify cultural work in conditions of limited support.

The responses also strongly highlighted emotional labour and interpersonal strain. Participants referred to communication difficulties, tensions within teams and institutions, negativity, ghosting, interpersonal politics, and the emotional burden of care. Statements such as *"Emotional work. How to communicate with others," "Tension and interpersonal politics,"* and *"Negativity of people around me"* reveal that exhaustion is not only organisational, but also deeply relational. Particularly significant was the response *"Too much individuality with NOT as much understanding to the common goal,"* which points toward perceived fragmentation and weakened collective orientation within cultural environments.

At the same time, several answers revealed a sense of disconnection from the core values and motivations that originally brought participants into cultural work. Participants referred to having *"No time for anything creative,"* difficulties focusing on the importance of culture in a world in crisis, and frustration with work increasingly dominated by administration rather than meaning or creativity. One participant noted exhaustion stemming from the expectation that every aspect of cultural work should be performed "out of passion," even highly administrative tasks. This points toward a broader tension between vocation and exploitation within the sector.

Finally, some responses exposed a deeper emotional and existential fatigue connected to uncertainty, delayed outcomes, and the struggle to maintain hope or agency. Statements such as *"that results is not immediate," "Not receiving answers,"* and *"fighting the government"* suggest frustration with the slow, uncertain, and often politically difficult conditions in which cultural work takes place.

Taken together, the responses portray cultural work as increasingly characterised by simultaneity: simultaneous responsibilities, emotional demands, administrative pressures, financial anxieties, and relational tensions. What appears most draining is not a single factor, but the accumulation of multiple forms of pressure occurring at once – often without sufficient time, resources, recognition, or recovery.

The responses to the third question (***"In cultural work, burnout often looks like..."***) reveal a deeply paradoxical understanding of burnout within the cultural sector. Burnout appears not only as exhaustion itself, but as something frequently hidden, normalised, and difficult to recognise from the outside. Participants repeatedly described a situation in which professional appearance and internal emotional reality no longer correspond to one another. Responses such as *"A big smile," "Looking awesome,"* or *"It*

doesn't. Is invisible" suggest that burnout in cultural work is often masked behind competence, productivity, enthusiasm, or professionalism. Particularly meaningful was the phrase *"Silent suffering,"* which captures the tension between outward functionality and internal exhaustion.

At the same time, many responses portray burnout as a gradual emotional withdrawal rather than a sudden collapse. Participants referred to decreasing involvement, loss of meaning, lack of hope, and a growing sense of disconnection from both work and collective purpose. Expressions such as *"Quiet quitting," "less involvement,"* or *"Automatically following already discovered paths"* indicate a form of resignation in which people continue functioning professionally while internally disengaging from creativity, agency, or emotional investment. Burnout therefore appears not only as fatigue, but as the erosion of motivation, imagination, and emotional presence.

The responses also reveal how closely burnout is linked to mental and emotional wellbeing. Participants openly referred to anxiety, depression, aggression, conflict, and "mental downfall," suggesting that burnout is experienced as a serious psychological condition rather than merely temporary tiredness. Several answers point toward the emotional consequences of prolonged pressure and unresolved tension within cultural environments. Burnout is described as affecting not only individuals, but also relationships, communication, and collective dynamics, as reflected in references to arguments, "snappishness," and the "end of the team spirit."

One particularly striking theme emerging from the responses is the paradoxical tendency to respond to burnout through even greater productivity. A participant described burnout as *"Saying yes to even more things to somehow prove you're not burning out,"* while others referred simply to *"Even more work."* These responses suggest that within cultural work exhaustion is often concealed through overperformance, hyperactivity, or constant availability. In this sense, burnout becomes difficult to identify precisely because the external signs of productivity may intensify at the moment when internal resources are already depleted.

The responses also indicate that burnout is experienced as a form of social and existential exhaustion. Participants referred to family problems, lack of meaning, getting "stuck behind the screen," and eventually "stopping to fight the procedures." Together, these responses portray burnout as a slow process of emotional erosion, characterised by invisibility, disconnection, and the gradual loss of hope or agency. What emerges most strongly from the responses is not the image of dramatic collapse, but rather the normalisation of silent suffering – a condition in which people continue to function professionally while increasingly losing energy, meaning, connection, and emotional sustainability.

The responses to the fourth question (***"What helps me continue is..."***) introduce a significant tonal shift in comparison to the earlier parts of the exercise. While the

previous questions were dominated by exhaustion, invisibility, and structural pressure, this section reveals what participants perceive as sustaining forces within cultural work. Most strikingly, the answers suggest that what "holds" the sector together is not primarily institutional stability or material security, but rather relationships, shared meaning, and emotional connection.

One of the clearest themes emerging from the responses is the central importance of community and human connection. The word *"community"* appears repeatedly, alongside references to *"Wonderful people," "Human connection," "My team," "Community support,"* and *"Good people around me."* Participants frequently described other people as the primary source of resilience, motivation, and emotional continuity. The responses suggest that cultural work becomes sustainable not necessarily because conditions are stable, but because relationships create spaces of trust, solidarity, recognition, and shared purpose. Particularly meaningful were references to colleagues, engaged collaborators, and audiences, indicating that the relational dimension of cultural work remains one of its strongest sustaining forces.

Another important theme concerns meaning, values, and belief in the significance of cultural work itself. Participants referred to passion, creativity, hope, and the conviction that their work contributes to something larger than themselves. Responses such as *"Helping to make change," "Seeing the bigger goal," "Trust that it makes sense,"* and *"that im following my values"* suggest that continuity is often sustained by a moral or existential sense of purpose rather than by external rewards alone. At the same time, one participant added *"My team and passion (unfortunately),"* which introduces an important ambivalence. Passion appears simultaneously as a sustaining force and as something that may contribute to self-exploitation or difficulty setting boundaries.

The responses also reveal the importance of moments of distance, rest, and life outside institutional productivity. Participants referred to *"Time away," "Time away from work,"* spending time at the beach, working with clay, or engaging in creative and playful activities unrelated to immediate professional outcomes. These responses suggest that resilience is connected not only to commitment and collective purpose, but also to the possibility of temporary withdrawal, regeneration, and reconnecting with oneself outside the logic of constant work. Particularly significant is the way participants describe ordinary pleasures, nature, humour, and informal interactions as meaningful forms of support.

At the same time, the responses maintain a subtle awareness of fragility and uncertainty. Hope appears frequently, but often in cautious or tentative forms, as in *"Hope in the process"* or simply *"Hope."* The sustaining forces described by participants therefore do not erase the pressures identified in earlier questions. Rather, they function as forms of emotional, relational, and existential resistance that make continuation possible despite instability, exhaustion, or institutional difficulty.

Taken together, the responses suggest that what currently "holds" the cultural sector is above all the human dimension of cultural work itself: relationships, shared values, collective meaning, creativity, and moments of genuine connection. While institutional structures are often experienced as exhausting or unsustainable, participants repeatedly locate resilience in communities, collaboration, and the belief that cultural work still matters – both socially and personally.

The responses to the fifth question (***"Something we should protect more carefully is..."***) reveal a significant shift from the language of productivity and institutional expectations toward the language of protection, care, and preservation. Participants repeatedly identified human wellbeing, relationships, and personal sustainability as resources requiring greater attention and safeguarding within the cultural sector. Rather than emphasising projects, outputs, or organisational growth, the responses focused overwhelmingly on people, mental health, time, and the conditions necessary for remaining emotionally and socially functional over time.

One of the strongest themes emerging from the responses concerns the need to protect personal wellbeing and basic human capacities that are often sacrificed under conditions of constant pressure. Participants referred explicitly to *"Sleep," "Mental health," "Our health," "Sanity," "Inner peace,"* and even *"Doing nothing!!"* as things requiring protection. Particularly meaningful is the way rest itself appears in the responses not as a luxury, but as something fragile and increasingly endangered within cultural work. Statements such as *"work life balance lol," "Time to make breaks,"* and *"Our own time"* suggest both awareness of the importance of boundaries and a certain irony or scepticism regarding whether such balance is realistically achievable in the sector.

The responses also strongly emphasise the importance of relationships, collectivity, and social support. Participants referred to *"Team!," "Relationships," "Community spaces," "Family and friends,"* and simply *"people"* or *"Us."* These responses suggest that participants perceive relational structures as both vulnerable and essential. Particularly significant is the repeated movement from abstract institutional language toward intimate and interpersonal categories. What participants wish to protect is not only cultural production itself, but also the human networks that make cultural work emotionally and socially sustainable.

Another visible theme concerns the need to protect openness, vulnerability, and the possibility of experimentation. One participant referred directly to the importance of *"Space to fail,"* while others mentioned *"Creativity and independence"* and the opinions of younger cultural workers. These responses suggest concern that increasing pressure, bureaucracy, precarity, or institutional rigidity may reduce the possibility of risk-taking, innovation, and honest dialogue within the sector. The protection of creativity therefore appears inseparable from the protection of psychological safety and autonomy.

The responses also reveal a broader ethical and intergenerational dimension of care. Participants referred not only to themselves, but also to *"Young people," "Kids," "Parents,"* and *"ones that cannot protect themselves."* This broadening of perspective suggests that cultural work is perceived as deeply connected to questions of responsibility, social continuity, and collective futures. Particularly meaningful in this context are references to *"Future for culture"* and *"Democratic values,"* which indicate that participants experience the current pressures within cultural work not only as professional challenges, but also as issues affecting wider social and political life.

Taken together, the responses suggest that participants increasingly perceive human sustainability as more important than institutional productivity. What requires protection is not only culture itself, but the people, relationships, time, health, and emotional capacities that make cultural work possible in the first place. Particularly striking is the extent to which participants frame protection not in terms of efficiency or performance, but in terms of preserving humanity, dignity, connection, and the possibility of living meaningful lives both within and beyond work.

The responses to the last question (***"A healthier cultural sector would allow people to..."***) reveal a collective desire for a cultural sector organised around human wellbeing, dignity, and sustainability rather than permanent competition, precarity, or market pressure. Participants consistently imagined a "healthier" sector not in terms of greater productivity or efficiency, but as a space that would allow people to live more fully, more safely, and more authentically.

One of the strongest themes emerging from the responses concerns the desire for stability and the possibility of living with dignity rather than constant insecurity. Participants referred repeatedly to financial safety, fair working conditions, and relief from ongoing economic anxiety. Responses such as *"have more money," "Fair working conditions," "Live a financially secure lives,"* and *"Do not desperate about money"* suggest that economic precarity remains one of the central obstacles to wellbeing within the cultural sector. Particularly striking is the simplicity of responses such as *"Live," "Live !,"* and *"Have life,"* which imply that many participants experience current working conditions not as sustainable living, but as continuous survival.

The responses also reveal a strong longing for space, breathing room, and the possibility of development without constant pressure. Participants imagined a healthier sector as one that would allow people to *"Breath," "Breathe," "Develop," "Learn without barriers,"* and even *"Thrive."* These responses suggest that participants do not only seek relief from exhaustion, but also the possibility of growth, curiosity, experimentation, and long-term flourishing. Particularly meaningful is the repeated reference to time itself: time to rest, time outside work, time for learning, and time for life beyond professional obligations. The desire to *"Work less but more efficient"* or simply *"Spend more time outside"* reflects an aspiration toward a slower and more sustainable rhythm of cultural work.

Another important theme concerns authenticity and resistance to excessive marketisation. Several participants explicitly expressed a desire for a sector that would be less self-promotional, less instrumentalised, and less dominated by economic logic. Responses such as *"Not be marketable," "it to be less self-absorbed,"* and *"Work with a care of private life and realize cultural projects without finding financial goals"* suggest frustration with systems that prioritise visibility, branding, competition, or profitability over care, creativity, and social meaning. In this context, a healthier sector is imagined as one that would allow for more cooperation, inclusivity, openness, and collective orientation.

The responses also repeatedly emphasise freedom – not only institutional or artistic freedom, but also emotional and existential freedom. Participants referred to wanting to *"Fail," "Be fearless," "Not to justify or explain,"* and *"Complain."* These responses suggest a strong desire for environments in which vulnerability, experimentation, disagreement, or imperfection would not immediately threaten professional legitimacy or survival. A healthier sector therefore appears not only as a safer workplace, but also as a more psychologically open and humane social space.

At the same time, several responses point toward a desire for stronger collectivity and connection. Participants referred to cooperation, community, meeting new people, and "coming together," suggesting that wellbeing is imagined not as an individual achievement, but as something deeply relational. The vision emerging from the responses is therefore not primarily individualistic. Rather, participants describe a healthier cultural sector as one in which people would have enough security, time, trust, and emotional space to meaningfully connect with others and participate in cultural work without constant exhaustion or self-protection.

Taken together, the responses portray the idea of a "healthier cultural sector" as fundamentally human rather than market-oriented. Participants imagine a sector that would allow people not merely to endure precarious conditions, but to live, rest, develop, connect, create, and flourish. What emerges most strongly is a desire for a cultural environment grounded less in permanent acceleration, competition, and justification, and more in dignity, care, collaboration, and sustainable ways of being together.

Conclusions

The collective reflection conducted during the session *"What is breaking, and what is holding?"* reveals a cultural sector marked by a profound tension between exhaustion and commitment, fragility and resilience, disillusionment and care. Across all responses, participants consistently described cultural work as emotionally demanding, structurally unstable, and increasingly difficult to sustain under current conditions. At the

same time, the material also demonstrates a strong persistence of meaning, solidarity, and relational attachment to cultural work despite these pressures.

One of the clearest conclusions emerging from the responses is that exhaustion within the cultural sector is no longer experienced as exceptional. Burnout, overload, emotional strain, financial insecurity, and blurred boundaries appear throughout the material not as isolated experiences, but as normalised conditions of everyday work. Participants repeatedly referred to invisibility, silent suffering, endless responsibilities, administrative burden, and the expectation of constant availability. Particularly striking is the extent to which many participants perceive themselves as functioning professionally while simultaneously experiencing emotional depletion, loss of meaning, or internal withdrawal.

At the same time, the responses strongly suggest that the greatest sustaining force within cultural work remains the human dimension of the sector itself. Participants repeatedly identified community, relationships, collaboration, trust, creativity, shared values, and small moments of connection or rest as what currently allows them to continue. What "holds" the sector together appears to be far less institutional stability than networks of mutual recognition, care, and collective meaning-making.

The material also reveals a growing awareness that sustainability within cultural work cannot be understood exclusively through the language of productivity, efficiency, or resilience understood as individual endurance. Participants consistently articulated the need for structural conditions that would allow people not merely to survive professionally, but to live with dignity, stability, and emotional safety. The vision of a healthier cultural sector emerging from the responses is therefore fundamentally human-centred: one grounded in fair working conditions, protected personal boundaries, time for rest and development, openness to vulnerability, and stronger forms of cooperation and solidarity.

An important tension running throughout the material concerns the ambivalent role of passion. While passion, creativity, and belief in the importance of culture remain powerful sources of motivation, participants also repeatedly indicated that these same values are often used – institutionally or internally – to justify overwork, insecurity, and self-sacrifice. This suggests that the cultural sector increasingly faces not only organisational or financial challenges, but also ethical questions concerning care, responsibility, and the sustainability of the ways in which cultural work is currently organised.

Perhaps most importantly, the responses demonstrate a strong collective need for spaces in which such experiences can be articulated openly. The anonymity of the exercise appears to have enabled forms of honesty that are often difficult to achieve within institutional or professional settings. Many responses suggest that workers in the cultural sector frequently carry experiences of exhaustion, uncertainty, frustration, or vulnerability individually, despite these experiences being widely shared.

Taken together, the material collected during the session suggests that the future sustainability of the cultural sector depends not only on financial support or institutional reform, but also on the ability to rebuild cultural work as a space of human connection, mutual care, trust, and collective responsibility. What emerges from the responses is therefore not only a diagnosis of crisis, but also an implicit call for a cultural sector that is more relational, more humane, and more capable of sustaining the people who sustain culture itself.

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