

Artists Listening to the Living: How to Act from within the Circus?

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About Hand to hand

Hand to Hand is a cooperation project and a circus-based exploration (2023 -2025) across Europe. It is composed of experiments, learning spaces, and encounters with various professional sectors to collectively question the concept of social ecology.

Le Palc, National Center of circus of Châlons-en-Champagne (FR) has led the project in partnership with **Bússola** (Portugal), **Helsingør Teater** (Denmark), and **ROOM 100** (Croatia) over a period of two and a half years.

Through a journey of four exploration times and immersion residencies, Hand to hand had offered experimentation spaces through a cross-sectoral collaboration. The project brought together cultural and creative industries, researchers in ecology and art, mentors, as well as private firms that reflect the unique character of local territories in each of the four European countries. These research phases have enabled eight selected artists to explore new artistic approaches in public space while integrating ecological thinking into their practices.

Each of these eight artists collaborated with a private firm during an immersive ten-day residency, engaging with and observing the daily activities of workers at sites including: the Joseph Perrier Champagne House and the Fila Arches fine art paper mill in France; the salt marshes of Ston in Croatia; a maritime wooden boat restoration workshop and a professional fisherman, a boat building education in Helsingør, Denmark; and a cod processing plant at the port of Ílhavo, Portugal.

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Introduction

Disclaimer: This article is based on an extended version to be published in an academic journal.

This paper analyses how the Hand to hand program—bringing circus artists into conversation with issues of ecology, public space and labour—has enabled artists to experiment and create performances starting from the observation of situated practices. It examines the support devoted to transforming circus practices through environmental aesthetics, studying artists' engagement from program implementation to festival presentations (Helsingør 2024 to Châlons-en-Champagne 2025).

Several questions guide this analysis: What imaginaries do these artistic creations bring forth? Does the framework transform artistic practices? What forms of engagement emerge through the artists' bodies and sensibilities? What kind of support can foster such engagement? We hypothesise here that both structural and relational forms of support are central levers for fostering individual and collective engagement, within a perspective of political ecology.

This article is structured in three parts: the first outlines the theoretical foundations of environmental aesthetics and describes the organisation of *Hand to hand* as a space for a laboratory for artistic research, accompanied by academic work.

The second part develops a typology of forms of engagement based on the prototypes created in Helsingør, with a focus on how environmental transformation and ecological crisis are addressed through the lens of environmental aesthetics.

The term *environment* here refers to the physical and social context in which the artists evolve, while *ecology* relates to the systemic crisis affecting ecosystems. The third part examines the issues raised by this typology: individual trajectories in their ecological and political dimensions; the processes of circus creation (circus writing, time frame, production conditions, and kind of support required).



Theoretical and methodological choices

1. Environmental aesthetics: theoretical elements

Environmental aesthetics aims to develop a shared aesthetic of the environment by focusing on how expressions of a collective sensibility toward ecological issues are formed. It emphasizes senses, sensitivity, and emotions, mobilizing the arts in response to the ecological crisis. In doing so, it proposes a break from naturalist objectivity, asserting singular forms of appropriation and engagement capacities.

This aesthetic seeks to open a field of socio-ecological transformation by reclaiming sensory experience as a lever for collective debate and social change. It challenges the ability of scientific approaches alone to grasp the complexity of ecological problems. From this perspective, we propose to reframe the intersection of the arts and environmental sciences by articulating cognition and sensitivity.

The term environment, inherently polysemic, refers to what surrounds us in both its social and natural dimensions. It is constructed with human/non-human collectives, including through intra-agential processes (Barad). The environment is

both a given (a product of intra-actions) and an agent, capable of acting.

Environmental aesthetics considers humans as living beings in terrestrial ecosystems, together with their cultures (Schaeffer). Within this framework, contemporary circus is called upon to develop artistic practices that respond to ecological challenges: how can we create circus performances that are both sustainable and ecologically engaged? **What kinds of circus writing can raise ecological awareness and encourage behavioural changes?**

Implies new artistic capacities, nourished by collaborative approaches between the arts and sciences, beyond technical foundations often prioritised in amateur practices and initial training programmes. A deep ecological connection also requires concrete attention to the tools of sustainable development (such as the carbon footprint monitoring carried out in the Hand to Hand programme) and redefining habitation public space, territories, and the public sphere from a social ecology perspective.



2. Hand to hand, a support mechanism for transformation

The Hand to Hand project, initiated by several cultural operators – Le Palc (France), Room 100 (Croatia), Bússola (Portugal), and Helsingør Theatre (Denmark) – and co-funded by the European Union through the Creative Europe programme, aims to support the transformation of the practices of eight circus artists. These artists are invited to explore issues related to ecology (both social and environmental), productive workspaces, and public space, envisioned as a field for artistic experimentation. Each partner proposed, for both the exploration and immersion residencies, visits to production sites analysed through the lens of ecology and economic dynamics. The artists conducted in situ observations in order to renew their artistic writing through immersion in reality and a politicisation of their practices. Sixteen artists were initially pre-selected by an interdisciplinary committee.

An introductory workshop, held in Châlons-en-Champagne from July 3 to 6, brought together 30 participants: the 16 pre-selected artists (of whom 8 were eventually chosen, plus a 9th who

joined later in the project), the project partners, an artistic mentor (Delphine Lanson), a sustainability mentor, representatives from the CNAC, the Institut Français, researchers, and associated or private partners (Joseph Perrier, Fila Arches). This workshop enabled the artists to share their intentions and reflect on the companies they had chosen as anchors for their work.

The sites visited were diverse:

- France: Joseph Perrier Champagne House, Fila Arches fine art paper mill;
- Portugal: codfish processing factory in Ílhavo;
- Denmark: wooden boat restoration workshop, professional fisherman;
- Croatia: salt marshes in Ston/Split.

This article focuses on two main questions: What narratives of ecological transition were developed by the artists? What aesthetic forms did they create in connection with the social, economic, and natural environments of the sites they visited?

The programme combined theoretical sessions (lectures, exchanges with researchers), sensitive

explorations (improvisations, field exercises), and encounters with workers at production sites. Two researchers were involved over the long term: Magali Sizorn, socio-anthropologist, focused on work-related gestures, the anthropology of senses, and cultural embodiment. Nathalie Blanc, geographer, contributed insights into artistic approaches to sustainability and ways of inhabiting the world.

Workshops included lectures on planetary boundaries, biodiversity, and art-ecology relations, along with body-place interaction exercises. For example, in Ílhavo, one session addressed the psychological effects of environmental destruction (vertigo, loss), while in Ston, at the salt marshes, artists used photography to “see-describe-narrate” the site.

The researchers carried out various actions: providing content (on ecology and body-based practices), leading exploratory exercises, and collecting ethnographic data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 artists, 1 mentor, 4 partners, and the project coordinator, following a framework designed to explore the following themes: participation in Hand to hand, personal experience, political engagement, artistic commitment, collective

work, embodiment, techniques, and creative forms.

Data was collected at different stages of the project: during the introductory workshop, throughout the four exploration times (each lasting 4 to 5 days), and partially during the immersion residencies (10 days).

The analysis is structured around two main components: first, the study of the seven artistic prototypes presented in Helsingør (July 2024), which were then shared in adapted formats at other partner festivals (Leme in Portugal, Peculiar Families Festival in Croatia, and Furies in France by June 2025); second, an analysis of interviews aimed at understanding how the artists integrated ecological issues into their approaches and how they constructed their narratives of engagement. These processes are examined through the lens of “ecology through performance” (Kershaw, 2007; Sermon), with a focus on the narrative, visual, and sonic forms used to express the sense of ecological crisis and the diminishing habitability of the Earth. Public space is approached as a site of encounter between artists and audiences, while productive activities are critically examined in relation to their environmental impact.



Clara Cortés Soler - Baby don't hurt me - Furies festival ©Philippe Cibille



Darya Efrat et Mathilde Roy - Pores - Furies festival ©Philippe Cibille

Results: Towards a typology

Contemporary circus historically spectacularised modernity and human mastery and the staging of human domination over nature. Within the framework of the Hand to hand project, performances in public space— a creative constraint imposed by the partner organisations— was conceived as a catalyst for artistic renewal. Shifting artists from conventional circus spaces (ring, stage), there was potential to bypass the traditional anthropocentric narratives of the circus. In this sense, the project echoes Eliane Beaufils' critique of the "Anthropocene for the Anthropocene," by calling for a transformation of imaginaries around the living world.

This article analyses how the artistic prototypes developed within the project integrate environmental aesthetics, understood as an approach that repositions human perception within terrestrial ecosystems. Our central

hypothesis is that the project encourages artists to move beyond the self-referentiality of circus arts and their traditional techniques, in order to establish new aesthetic and sensorial relationships with the environment—whether material, social, or economic.

The typology we propose is structured around bodily and sensory grounding within the terrestrial ecosystem, in line with the key themes of the project initiated in Helsingør (ecology, labour, public space). It unfolds through three main orientations:

1. Documenting
2. Challenging / Questioning
3. Absorbing - Digesting - Processing - Internalising

1. Documenting

Mathilde Roy (FR) & Darya Efrat (DE/IL) with *Porøs* started an early morning on the pier for a 2-hour journey (port to beach). Each spectator received a handmade bag produced with the U/NORD boatbuilding school, containing a notebook, a sweet, and a pair of earplugs—objects designed to support focus and sensory attention.

Participants walked in single file, holding hands, carefully attuned to objects and atmospheres in the public space. The procession paused at several sites: a dried-up fountain, where signs reading “To be / Or not to be” evoked Hamlet and Helsingør’s literary heritage; and the wooden boat renovation workshop (site of the artists’ residency), where the audience, wearing gloves, was invited to touch old boats. Inside, Mathilde Roy lay naked on a workbench, her body held in place by clamps. The sound of a saw echoed. When the clamps were released, she slowly rose—suggesting labour, bodily constraint, and a quiet rebirth.

The walk continued along the moats of Kronborg Castle, accompanied by music inspired by Hamlet, and ended at the harbour, where spectators, lying near the water, listened to a woman recount her experience in shipbuilding while sketching.

The performance activated all the senses: shifting textures of ground (grass, stone, sand), soundscapes, changing light, and the tempo of walking. While ecological issues were not addressed directly, the experience invited a reconnection to place, manual labour, and a poetic engagement with the landscape. Materials created during the residency (interviews, handmade objects) extended this sensory immersion, touching on intimate themes such as migration, temporality, and the idea of “doing less” in performance.

Juana Ortega Kippes (ES/AR), with her project *Amphibian Matter*, explored a different mode of documentation—one grounded in ecological and professional memory. Her performance opened with a simple gesture: placing her blue-painted hand on a white door. Her face also painted blue and her body clad in a shiny grey suit, she

evoked both the aquatic world and industrial environments.

The audience sat beneath a fishing net adorned with photographs of cod fishermen—a direct evocation of the collective memory of a profession under threat, as cod fishing faces both climate change and resource depletion. Bathed in red and blue light, Juana engaged in a series of bodily metamorphoses: twisting, dancing, gradually undressing, transforming from a fisherwoman into a silver fish—a poetic yet critical figure. Her performance questioned the layered tensions between traditional, industrial, and heritage-based labour in Portugal. By combining objects, archival materials, symbolic gestures, contortion, and bodily transformation, she embodied the ambiguities of the relationship between humans, nature, and work.

With *Baby, don't hurt me*, Clara Cortés Soler (ES) offered a geolocated audio performance, guided by a map and smartphone—an invitation to listen to the voices of biodiversity, sea workers, and even the beach itself. The walk culminated in a poetic and poignant scene: the artist, covered in flowers, cradled by the waves. The audience was led from contemplation to a melancholic celebration—an emotional love letter to a dying sea, ending in a deceptively cheerful karaoke rendition of Bonnie Tyler’s *Total Eclipse of the Heart*.

Each of the artists who documented a place adopted a distinct approach: Darya Efrat and Mathilde Roy used urban walking to explore the sensory and social layers of the territory. Juana Ortega Kippes created a surreal stage world blending archives and bodily transformation. Clara Cortés Soler turned attention to immediate, often overlooked spaces—revealed through voice, presence, and movement.



2. Challenging/Questioning

This second category brings together performances that directly confront ecological, social, or political issues, often navigating a tension between serious engagement and irony, between denunciation and detachment. Amir Guetta (FR/IL), with *Sar-Tan*—meaning “cancer” in Hebrew and referencing the codfish factories in Portugal—delivered an hybrid performance combining acrobatics, hand balancing, DJing, and spoken word on the irreversible damage inflicted on the planet. Surrounded by the audience, he presented his message in an atmosphere of gravity, disrupted by the absurd humor of an Otamatone (a Japanese sound toy) that introduced a deliberate dissonance. He concluded with a metaphor on planetary balance, echoing his own balancing act.

His performance also incorporated reptilian gestures—rolling on the ground, circular movements—that expressed bodily and planetary exhaustion. His testimonial about the codfish factory was unflinching: “The first thing... inside, it was the Holocaust... a slaughterhouse... a sick energy... yet the workers were all very kind... they just live like this... it makes me think that we are all slaves in this system.” This tension

between working conditions, the normalization of destruction, and ecological awareness lies at the heart of his interrogation.

Perrine Budan (FR), who stepped in and later collaborated with Mariana De Sanctis (IT), who was pregnant during part of the project, presented the performance *Slow Down* in Helsingør; inspired by the salt workers she encountered during the Croatian residency. As a clown covered in chalk, wearing a skirt, carrying a bucket and a shovel, she blended absurd humor, offbeat gestures, and unpredictable physical interventions: playing with a chair, getting frustrated with a hula hoop, shouting to the audience (“Bring me my shovel!”, “Life is unfair!”). When she covered herself in mud, she mocked the harshness and repetitiveness of labour in public space.

Though not explicitly about ecology, her performance drew attention to the realities of manual workers, the physical toll of their tasks, and the need to slow down. Where Amir offered a direct critique of systemic violence, Perrine subverted it through clowning and playful disruption.



Mille Lundt - Cellars Joseph Perrier - Châlons-en-Champagne ©Sébastien Rousseau

3. Imbuing-digesting/Absorbing-transforming

This final category brings together performances that cultivated a more diffuse, slow, and sensitive relationship to the environment—often through metaphor or poetic transpositions, resonating with the experiences lived during the residencies.

Lucia Heege Torres (ES), with *Petralaions*, began her work at the Fila Arches fine art paper factory (Vosges, France), where she painted watercolour portraits of workers, accompanied by audio recordings of their testimonies. Some accounts, considered sensitive, were censored by the factory's management. Lucia then transformed these stories into a fictional narrative—that of an ink stain on a blank sheet of paper.

In Helsingør, her performance unfolded between two trees. Suspended portraits fluttered in the wind; industrial sounds echoed, interwoven with fragments of voices. Lucia danced with a large sheet of paper on the beach, then abandoned it, covered her face with black ink, and sang about pollution. She invited the audience to dance, blending workers' voices with whale songs. While ecology was not the central theme at the outset, it gradually emerged through the project's transformation—ultimately weaving together the

three axes of Hand to hand: labour, ecology, and the body.

Mille Lundt (DK), with *Structures*, crafted a poetic transposition between two distinct worlds: the champagne cellars of France and the beach of Helsingør, Denmark. Her first public presentation, set in a dark cellar, evoked the gestation of wine as an organic process of transformation: "giving a voice to the cellar.. the cellar's pregnancy.. a story of birth," she shared in June 2024.

In Helsingør, she directed three amateur dancers in a slow choreography facing the sea. They immersed themselves in the waves, dancing in the foam. Meanwhile, the audience heard, in Danish, the voices of champagne workers. The metaphor of the foam—champagne or sea?—blurred the boundaries between the natural and the industrial, between festive surface and productive depth.

The ecological approach is subtly evoked, carried by the sensitivity of the choreography rather than through direct critique. Here, Mille draws on her political background to craft an aesthetics of connection—discreet, yet powerful.

Discussion

The typology of the prototypes presented in Hand to hand highlights the diverse forms of ecological engagement embraced by the artists, as well as the tensions between documenting, denouncing, and transforming. This framework reflects varying relationships to aesthetics, ecology, and politics, and reveals how contemporary circus artists are gradually moving away from the anthropocentric traditions of their art form.

Historically, circus has accompanied the rise of modernity: taming nature, testing the limits of the body, celebrating performance and optimization. Contemporary circus, in part, deconstructs this logic—for instance, the question of animality has shifted from domination to human-animal relationality (Dray). Within this context, proposes a shift: to integrate non-anthropocentric ecological perspectives rooted in global, multi-species concerns.

Type 1 prototypes adopt a posture of attentive observation and sensitive restitution. They draw on tools akin to documentary research—sketchbooks, testimonies, sound recordings, objects, and site-specific performances. However, this emphasis on rigour can at times constrain creativity, by imposing strict – and sometimes burdensome – methodologies. Striking a balance between sensitive documentation and artistic creation thus becomes a challenge: how can one transmit without freezing, feel without enclosing?

Type 2 prototypes aim to provoke an emotional or political response by activating the audience's intellect, humor, or indignation. Amir Guetta adopts a confrontational stance, delivering an explicit critique of the damages caused by capitalism and industry. In contrast, Perrine Budan and Marianna De Sanctis embrace more playful or offbeat registers—yet no less critical—by drawing on gestures of labor, the materiality of bodies, or the absurdity of production conditions. These performances are rooted in public space, subvert the codes of traditional circus, and rekindle a capacity for collective questioning.

In the type 3 prototypes, the relationship to ecology or labour is less direct. The engagement is more subtle, poetic, even oblique: Lucia Heege Torres evokes the unsustainability of paper, pollution, and workers' voices – but through metaphors, dance, and partially fictionalised narratives. Mille Lundt, an experienced artist, offers a sensory and metaphorical choreography rooted in the body, the sea, and the wine cellar. Yet her work is also more autonomous artistically, at times detached from the specific site or any overt ecological message. These performances absorb the lived experience of the residencies and transform it into aesthetic material – often at the cost of distancing themselves from the initial intent.



1. Trajectories of engagement and embodied ecology

Ecological commitment is not monolithic. It does not solely manifest as visible militant activism; it can also emerge as a gradual, sensorial relationship with the world, or as a politics of the everyday (Ion, Carrel, Eliasoph). This is precisely what the notion of trajectory of engagement (Traïni) highlights: a situated, progressive process that reshapes the relationships between individuals, bodies, living environments, and representations.

Mille Lundt's journey illustrates this dynamic. Her ecological commitment is rooted in an alternative, politicised upbringing (Copenhagen, squats, activism, ecology). She describes her life as a search for balance: "Ecology isn't about extremes. It's a more balanced life. Not too much, not too giving. Taking time."

Her artistic practice is hybrid and mobile, in dialogue with spaces, people, and objects: "I'm a circus mover... I work on the encounter between

the body and scenography, nature, architecture." She strives to connect daily life and artistic creation—avoiding overconsumption, favouring short supply chains, inhabiting space differently. Yet this vision can be difficult to embody within codified artistic formats: "Friday: 20-minute presentation, timed, cold in the cellars." Her experience in organic vineyards and dialogue with workers reveal a deep sensitivity to place. However, her final performance - though powerful and evocative - sometimes appears aesthetically autonomous, less tied to the site's specific issues and more aligned with her own choreographic language (contemporary dance, poetic scenography).



Juana Ortega Kippes - Amphibian Matter - Furies Festival ©Vincent Muleau

2. Aesthetics of circus writing

The times and spaces devoted to circus writing—understood as processes of creation, dramaturgy, and staging—play a central role in the recognition, legitimation, and assertion of artistic authority in contemporary circus (Guyez). This writing is largely based on the valorisation of originality, singularity, and innovation.

In response to contemporary realities and crises, circus opens itself to new aesthetic perspectives. Environmental aesthetics, in particular, brings forth:

- A renewed relationship with the site (the location is no longer merely a backdrop, but a partner in play),
- The integration of local modes of production (craft, industry, traditional trades),
- And the staging of materials or external elements, such as the photographs of fishermen used by Juana Ortega Kippes.

It is still too early to draw definitive conclusions, but it is clear that the integration of ecological

concerns into the works often depends on: the artists' personal sensibilities, their ability to translate field encounters into artistic material, and their capacity to incorporate material and ecological realities into circus techniques.

However, the temporalities associated with these different domains intersect without always being questioned: ecological temporalities (linked to urgency, collapse, irreversibility – “Blanc”), industrial or productive temporalities (efficiency, linearity, standardisation), and circus temporalities (the time of physical gesture, bodily engagement, authorial creation, and iterative rehearsal).

These frictions between lived, performed, and represented temporalities call for deeper examination, as they significantly shape both the form and substance of the artistic creations.



3. Supporting circus engagement

One of the main objectives of the *Hand to hand* programme, supported by Creative Europe and other structuring national frameworks, is to strengthen the agency of circus artists—politically, artistically, and collectively.

This means linking empowerment with learning (Bacqué, Biewener), building individual trajectories within shared frameworks of engagement, and connecting artistic practices with contemporary sociopolitical and ecological issues. In the context of a global ecological crisis, bridging different worlds, cultures, and temporalities—artistic, economic, and environmental—requires both creativity and adaptability.

The project's politicization is grounded in a framework of social ecology, which calls for "Rethinking our ways of living, our carbon footprint, our relationship to the places we inhabit, and transforming our connections to the living and to the Other." *Hand to hand* is built on

the assumption that art can foster new alliances between humans, environments, and non-human actors; support an ecological transition within the cultural sector; and reshape both artistic and methodological practices in contemporary circus.

However, the research-creation ecosystem shaped by the project also reveals structural tensions: institutional expectations (concrete outcomes, deliverables, visibility); ecological contradictions (such as air travel for residencies); and the challenge of politicizing cultural spaces that are still only marginally engaged with ecological concerns.



Amir Gueita - Immersion time Ilhovo © Jaco Vriesveld

Conclusion

The aesthetic typologies explored and the analytical avenues opened by *Hand to hand* highlight the complexity of articulating ecological engagement, artistic practice, and institutional support.

The works created gave rise to sensitive, critical, or poetic forms that speak to our era—often under challenging conditions. They expose deep tensions between the personal histories of the artists, the constraints of the cultural sector, and the desire for political and ecological transformation.

As the programme draws to a close, *Hand to hand* reveals not only a collection of singular artistic responses but also the collective fractures that persist in the face of ecological catastrophe. These fractures cut across the social body—and *through the body of circus itself*.

Biography

Magali Sizorn

Magali Sizorn is a senior lecturer in STAPS (Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sports Activities) at the University of Rouen Normandy. Since her doctoral research (2002–2006), published in 2013 (*Trapézistes: Ethnosociology of a Circus in Motion*, PURH), she has conducted research on the circus, cultural practices, and the intersections between art and sport. Her analyses lie at the intersection of anthropology, interpretive sociology, and pragmatic sociology, and currently focus on artists at work (particularly the relationship between performers and directors in the circus), one artistic creation in relation to ecology, as well on cultural practices, the production of major events.

Nathalie Blanc

Nathalie Blanc is a Research Director at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and is the Managing Director of the Center for Earth Politics at the University of Paris Cité. A pioneer of ecocriticism in France, she has published and coordinated research programs on areas including habitability, environmental aesthetics, literature & environment and nature in the city. A founding member of the French Environmental Humanities Portal, her books are: *Towards an ordinary environmentalism* (in French, éditions Au Bord de l'eau), *Art and sustainable farming* (in English, Routledge). N. Blanc animates and coordinates a project of LABArtSciences devoted successively to urban soils SOIL FICTIONS (2016) and sustainable food THE TABLE AND THE TERRITORY (2019-2022)

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