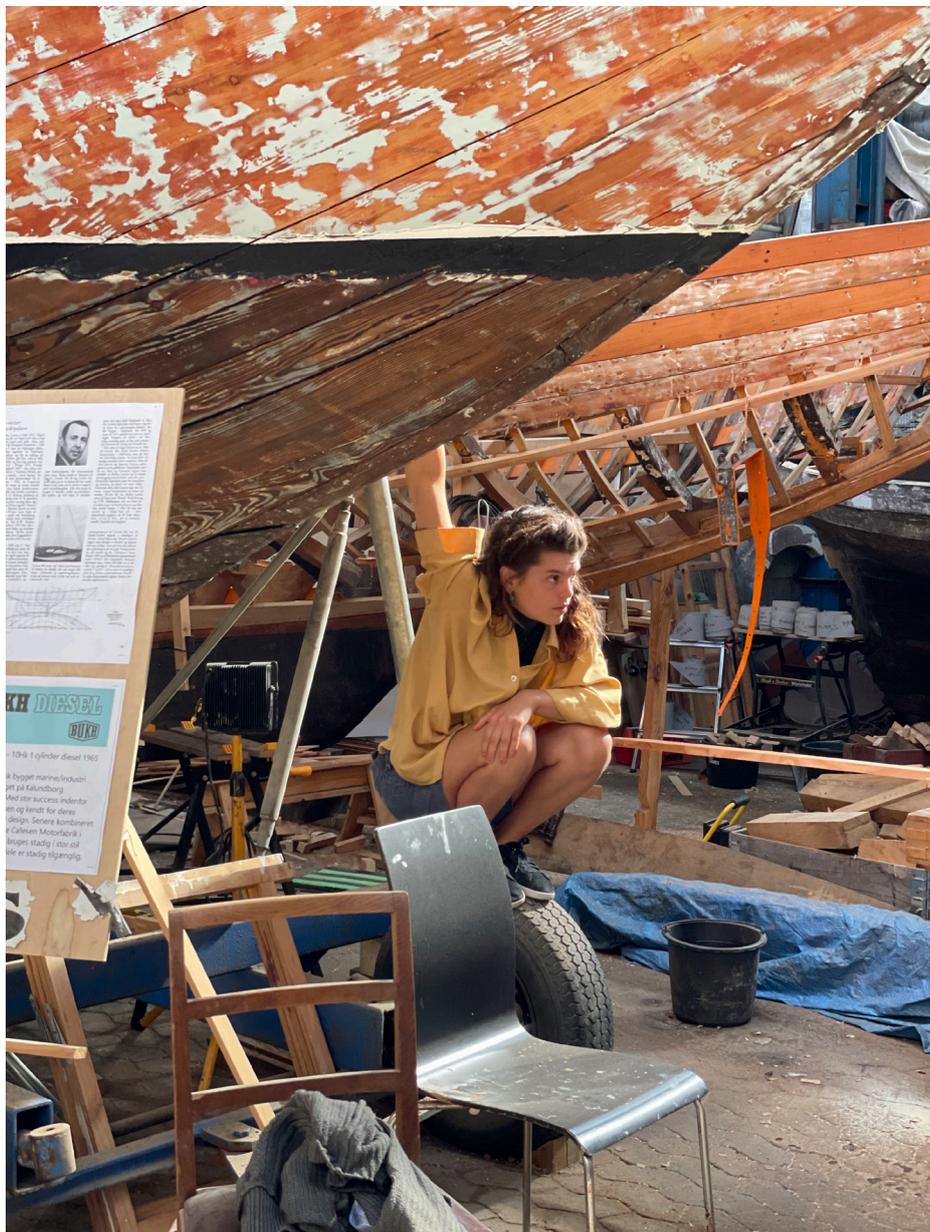


## Circus artists in sites of production: questioning a productivist world through bodies at work

Nathalie Blanc & Magali Sizorn

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## About Hand to hand

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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

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Since the 1970s, circus arts have undergone profound aesthetic and structural transformations. Having broken away from the codes of traditional circus, contemporary circus is being called upon today to reinvent itself, driven by its own practitioners.

A variety of initiatives are encouraging this renewal, and it is within this context that the Hand to hand project has arisen. Instigated by cultural operators working in contemporary circus and in the arts in public space (Le Palc in France, ROOM 100 in Croatia, Bússola in Portugal, and Helsingør Teater in Denmark) and co-financed by the European Union's Creative Europe programme (2023-2025), Hand to hand is a program for European cooperation and artistic experimentation. Its aim is to support the transformation of eight circus artists' practices in light of their encounter with issues of ecology and the productive realities of the workplace. The program culminates in the creation of a piece intended for public space. The matter of politicisation and an engagement with politics (addressed from the vantage point of a reflection on social ecology) is at the heart of the project and was explicitly formulated in the description of the programme.

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The project title, Hand to hand, plays on a double entendre. While, drawing from the working language of circus, "Hand to hand" echoes the discipline of acrobatic lifts, the title also connotes the idea of proceeding hand in hand with other labourers and lines of work, doing so by grounding the initiative in site-specific explorations and immersions.

This article has drawn its analysis from a set of periods of encounter between bodies at work (artists, workers, artisans): what places are given to bodies in an encounter, what time frames limit them, or on the contrary, compel them to act? How have artists drawn from the possibilities of their know-how or from an embodied encounter? It examines the relationship of artists to their fields and the paradoxical effects of the experimental apparatus.

The Hand to hand project unexplicitly integrates a variety of timescales: ecological emergency (Blanc, 2017), the rhythms of industry (criticised by political ecology), circus temporalities (skilled gestures, writing). The project's own ecosystem reveals tensions between an expectation to produce work and a desire for politicisation. What circus aesthetic is suited for the present day?

# 1. Common grounds: explorations, immersions, investigations

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It was during the "introductory workshop" in July 2023 that we, Nathalie Blanc and Magali Sizorn, joined Hand to Hand. After this first four-day period together, 8 artists were selected to follow the remainder of the program amidst the 16 artists present at Châlons-en-Champagne. The selected artists went on to benefit from four periods of explorations scheduled between 2023 and 2024. Each exploration took place over four days inviting the project participants to work sites identified by the platform's partners (a paper mill, champagne cellars and vineyards in France; a cod packaging and processing plant in Portugal, boat production and restoration workshops in Denmark; salt marshes in Croatia).

The project coordinator, Fanny Bordier, explains how the research residencies were organised: "we devised them in such a way as to have a shared collective experience [among artists, partners and mentors]. [...] I found it important to devote space to a knowledge form that could complement the places of experimentation and alterity, to complement them with moments of pure knowledge about the environment and sustainable development, so that this puzzle of knowledge, of skillsets and experiments might offer a more thorough overview than if we had just focused the work on social ecology. The idea was to give as many layers as possible to artists and partners so that everyone might learn from the project."

Regarding Magali Sizorn, beyond theoretical contributions (anthropology of the body, the senses and of techniques) observational exercises were proposed. These contributed, along with the tools of ethnography, to the artistic exploration of visited sites. Nathalie Blanc led a series of conferences on the habitability of Earth (Blanc et al., 2022) and exercises pertaining to a sensory comprehension of environmental

issues, thus operating from within a tradition of research-creation in process since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Blanc, Legrand, 2019).

Subsequently, each artist returned to the field of their choice for a 10-day "writing in immersion residency". During this time, a researcher and an artistic mentor were present for a few days. This residency culminated in a first presentation of the "prototypes" in July 2024 in Helsingør, Denmark, during Passage festival, followed by a variety of partnering festivals during the 2024-2025 season.

This article draws upon all of the materials gathered during the two-year project: observation in the field during residencies and the presentations of prototypes during festivals, as well as during semi-structured interviews (9 artists, 1 mentor, 4 partners, the project manager). The aim of the interviews was to delve further into four main topics: 1. Participation in the Hand to hand project 2. The experience of the Hand to hand project in the long run (and during its downtimes) 3. The political dimension 4. The engagement from or by Hand to hand by way of politicisation, collective endeavour, the body and its techniques, and each of the artistic proposals.

The article focuses more specifically on the comparative encounter of the spheres of circus arts with productive labour; a comparison offering an occasion to investigate the professional practices of the world of circus.



## 2. The residency as a “feat”

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The immersive residencies can be likened to a “feat” (Martuccelli, 2015), confronting artists to negotiate their space, amidst companies’ indifference and constraints. So as to find the right distance and establish a bond of trust and reciprocity, the artists devised a variety of strategies. Lucia Heege Torres (ES), for instance, in residency at the Arches paper mill, shared a number of moments in the lives of female factory workers: the work periods in which every gesture counts (and to a certain degree, is counted), cigarette breaks and mealtimes in the shared kitchen. She devoted attention to the songs they listened to (she used one of these songs in her prototype) as well as to ordinary conversation. Lucia also painted portraits in watercolour, in situ as they worked. She recorded the sounds of the workshop (other artists from the project used this form of atmosphere collection), and led a few interviews (which she could not use without alteration to preserve trade secrets).

The anthropologist Thierry Pillon studied the bodies of factory workers in depth, drawing especially from workers’ writings, stories and autobiographies from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among the

characteristic elements of workers’ bodies, he reveals their strength, their dexterity, their virilism (having the effect of “playing down the physical work performed by women”), the fatigue and scars (accidents, illnesses...) (Pillon, 2014). Lucia observed this carefully. She also observed how mill workers felt the grain of the paper with their hands, detecting defects and blotches, mastering the precise gestures of folding and cutting large sheets of paper by hand. Lucia’s presence, both in the place where the work takes place, as well as in the sharing of non-productive times, was undoubtedly the longest and most in depth out of the group of artists, though she could not entirely render it in her first prototype.

Faced with the productivist world of industry, artists devised arrangements allowing them to respond as best they could to the demands of the project—and the axes of the project were manifold. Thus, it was possible to articulate a critical outlook on a productivist world in an encounter with regular workers and to be resilient in the face of the flood of emotions that some were confronted with.



Perrine Budan and Clara Cortés Soler  
Salt marshes in Ston, Croatia ©Glorija Lizde

### 3. Reseeding circus through the observation of worlds beyond

The spirit of the project consisted in involving artists in an experimental artistic process enriched by academic research, from the perspective of social ecology. Its aim was also to renew and politicise circus arts from the vantage point of an immersion into the world of productive labour and the observation of the gestures of work.

The ambition of the project was confronted with several difficulties in its implementation, so much so that the body ended up getting scarce treatment. A few factors might explain this: the multiple residency sites, the few number of days on site, the diverse modes of writing and artistic expressions and the difficulty to reconcile times dedicated to productive work with those devoted to creative research.

Both Perrine Budan (FR)—first replacing, then working alongside Mariana De Sanctis (IT), who was pregnant for a part of the program—and Clara Cortés Soler (ES)—who pursued an immersion in the salt marshes in Ston, Croatia—did experience the workers' activities by way of their own bodies. They harvested salt with the workers, from 6 to 8am, while it was not yet too hot to do so in July; Mathilde Roy (FR) and Darya Efrat (DE/IL) made bags out of sailcloth in Denmark. Yet these gestures of labour—or the quality of these gestures—ended up getting limited treatment, if only in the form of at times impressionistic mentions, transpiring in certain artistic proposals. Mille Lundt (DK), who spent her immersion in a Champagne house in

Châlons-en-Champagne, spoke of her frustration with gestures of labour, having not been genuinely able to understand them for lack of time. The sharing of gestures rather embodied a form of mediation (like Lucia's watercolors), in a gift and counter-gift dynamic as described by Marcel Mauss (1925). Perrine Budan thus spoke of her encounter with Ston's salt farmers, during her immersive residency with Clara Cortés Soler in Croatia: "They would prepare the salt harvest. You have to remove the mud so that the water can flow, it is hot already (...). At first, they didn't want us to touch anything. Eventually, one of them told me: "go ahead, try". And that is how we met, we proved we could get mixed up in the mud. We asked them questions, we drank beer with them at 9am after work. We were accepted, in a sense."

Without specifically examining workers' embodied customs, the artists also applied themselves to the flipside of the productivist culture through slowness as a possibility of an eco-political critique of movement, with Mathilde Roy and Darya Efrat (Bardet, Clavel, Ginot, 2019; Bigé, 2023): "we also thought that technology is in some way tied to masculinity and we really didn't want to do that (...). At the beginning of my project with Darya, I was thinking a lot about ecofeminism. I wanted to bring care, slowness, and not be in something productive" (Mathilde); Others worked on exhaustion or on the deformation of virtuosic bodies through metamorphosis (becoming amphibian or plankton, like Juana O. Kippes).



Amir Guetta - Sar-Tan - Public test Denmark ©Caroline Perjest

## 4. Signifying the encounter

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The prototypes semiotised the worlds of work they explored. Amir Guetta (FR/IL) performed in a wood boat in Helsingør, where he spun a tale of catastrophe. In his place of residency in Ilhavo, he approached cod fishermen to address subjects of labour, and especially of ecology and Earth in danger.

In *Amphibian Matter*, Juana Ortega Kippes strung together timescales in a performance that immersed audiences. She spread out a net unto which photographs of the factory were attached, adding pictures shot in situ with audience members. The net represents the memory of a threatened line of work: fishing has become problematic with climate change and the overexploitation of the seas. Both labour (past and present) and ecology (fish, the sea...) are present in a performance at the threshold of circus arts, theatre and dance. The performance bears plenty of evidence of the residency in Ilhavo and of the cod fishermen's livelihoods. The body itself emerged as the site of the commons, opening the way to the aestheticisation of a possible bond, despite social and cultural differences. In a way, the celebration is performed, in an aestheticisation of gathering (despite the unfortunate absence

of workers invited to presentations in festivals), in a form of ambivalence (the party's over, let's coax it in a last dance). Lucia Heege Torres made us dance to some Dalida, Clara Cortés Soler invited us to karaoke to a falsely joyful song for a romantic date with a dying sea, Mathilde Roy and Darya Efrat, after a slow walk at the break of day, offered coffee from the sea, as they often shared coffee breaks in the boatbuilding and renovation workshops.

## 5. What the project has to say about artistic work

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The Hand to hand project was conceived as a political project to contribute to research on the necessary transformation of the imaginaries and professional practices of the performing arts. For us, it marked an occasion to examine the labour of art in itself, often organised on a project basis, characterised by precariousness and flexibility (Menger, 2002, 2005).

The constraints of the project—requiring travel and limiting time spent on site—coupled with the ambition to generate observations, encounters and scientific contributions placed the actors of the project under time pressure. “Our time is too short to manage to do what we would like to do.” (Fanny Bordier, European Manager of the project). Lucia Heege Torres, a contortionist, said in an interview : “The matter of time, of speed, of production, was at work for us.” ; “circus arts need time, and this is a project without time, you have to start up the machine (...). I didn't feel that something developed particularly on a physical level. I worked with what I had in my baggage, putting it in service of the concepts, rather than the concepts enhancing my physical language.”

The lack of time on site and the constraint of having something to show resulted in the artists “picking” from their routines, their habitual ways of making, writing, moving. This induced a wariness of indulging in a form of decorative activism (the project's budget being too tight to generate new writings, and the rapport with the companies' management making it difficult to channel criticism voiced directly toward the places that hosted and supported the projects). The word “prototype”, borrowed from the world of industry, aimed to offer the possibility to share “tests”, experiments, works-in-progress. Nevertheless, despite initial intentions, showing these short forms in festivals required a preparation of forms presentable to ordinary spectators, as well as potential programmers.

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Between residencies, participants were often shifting between different activities (performances, residencies, other projects, etc.). Yet, counterbalancing the perception of a lack of time, the project was also experienced and spoken of by artists as exceptionally “long” (2,5 years, from the first residency to the festival-seminar rendition in June 2025). Whereas contemporary circus was historically built on the idea of the collective (collective creation and writing, etc.), the project demanded individual creations. Only two artists in the same site in Denmark made up a duo (Mathilde Roy and Darya Efrat), and at some point Mille Lundt imagined inviting the other artists to participate in her prototype, so as to regain the collective. She gave up on the idea (for reasons of feasibility), instead experimenting with the participation of amateur dancers in the first festival in Denmark. Ultimately, the European project was able to structure a collective in the long run.



Danyo, Erich and Mathilde Roy - Poésie Publice / Festival de la Poésie / © Nicolai Perjesi

## Conclusion

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The multiple temporalities rolled out by Hand to hand invoke three timescales of production: artistic (unpredictable, short-term), social/industrial (repetitive), natural (ecosystems). The project embodies an apparatus with which to critique these times. We observed a recontextualisation, and a distanced, and at times ironic, reading, of productive gestures. We also witnessed a despairing vision of the breakdown of nature. The confrontation of critical times with artistic production is a structuring force.

At the hour of project assessment, its contradictions were underlined by its instigators and artists alike, and each endeavoured to seek meaning in it. It is paradoxical that platforms such as Hand to hand that support artistic experimentation—namely in the organisation of work (Salamero and Julhe, 2019)—shed light on this offset between the project's execution and promoted objectives of social ecology. The same can be said in regard to the confrontation of artistic production with ecological events.

In this light, the question of in situ performance is raised squarely: what is its value, its performative force on an ecological scale? What are we looking at: the artist, the place, or are we trying to discern which productive gestures are engaging the circus artists' bodies? The practice and writing of circus arts today seek to take part in the critique of current upheavals (social, ecological, economic, political), in the face of the collapse of the idea of progress and the rejection of finitude.

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## Biography

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### 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 as 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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