

## Socio-ecological challenges of transforming performing arts

International Conference 10, 11 and 12 of April 2025

Salle Athéna - Maison de la Recherche, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris)

### Background

Following the Club of Rome's publication of *The Limits to Growth* in 1972, the IPCC reports have refined our knowledge of climate disruption directly linked to the acceleration of greenhouse gas emissions since 1990.

The trajectory for decarbonising the economy to mitigate climate change is the subject of debate between technological strategies that are presumed to be compatible with maintaining 'green growth' (World Economic Forum, 2018; Tordjman, 2023) and a shift towards production methods that respect ecosystems (Huet, 2024). The short-term trade-offs required by this approach face political resistance from the liberal right and the far-right parties against 'punitive ecology', while a small but significant proportion of global public opinion denies the human origin of climate change (Obs'COP-EDF/IPSOS, 2024; Zerki, 2023). Carbon dioxide emissions and the financial damage they cause are very unevenly distributed (Chancel et al., 2023). Equity in the drastic reduction of carbon footprints required by the Paris Agreement (2015), therefore, implies a concentration of efforts on people with high incomes, which raises a major socio-political issue.

The pursuit of economic efficiency through performance optimisation has been criticised for impacting ecosystem degradation, widening income inequalities and unpredictability. In contrast, living systems offer a robustness model thanks to their adaptability in coping with fluctuations and the circularity of their interactions, which promotes recycling (Hamant, 2023). The resulting preference for cooperation over competition (Servigne & Chapelle, 2019; FEDELIMA, 2016) calls into question the organisational principles that favour their sustainability (Helly & De Gaspero, 2023; Henry, 2023) and the relationship between works of art and the cultural diversity of the population (Anselme et al., 2022).

The cultural section of the plan to transform the French economy (2021), presented by the think tank The Shift Project, identifies the mobility of audiences, works and artistic teams as the leading cause of the performing arts' carbon footprint. Several green initiatives have been proposed, focusing on relocating activities to new areas, slowing down the production and distribution of shows, reducing the size of events, eco-designing works and abandoning particularly energy-intensive practices such as territorial exclusivity. Training in ecological issues must be extended, starting with managing structures.

The imbalances in the value chain of the performing arts, with very marked inequalities in the valuation of artistic work according to the level of reputation (Menger, 2002; Urrutiaguér,

2014), the concentration of public support on creations and the recognition of aesthetic value centred on the appreciation of new shows constitute powerful systemic obstacles to these dynamics in a context of deteriorating production conditions (Urrutiaguer, 2023).

Initiatives have been proposed to commit performing arts professionals to eco-responsibility. Several international standards (ISO 21121; ISO 26000) publicise management efforts in favour of sustainability in the design and implementation of actions, while the 2019 PACTE law requires companies to consider the social and environmental challenges of their activities.

Several declarations were published following the European “Where to Land Forum” (Engelhardt, 2022). The Syndeac Manifesto (2023) sets out the commitments of its members to create, travel and work 'better and differently' in the context of an ecological transformation while stressing the need for public authorities to be involved in improving transport infrastructures and financing the costs of ecological transformations. La Scène indépendante (2023) also looked at how public authorities could support the environmentally responsible practices of private theatres while preserving their economic vitality. Arviva then coordinated an agreement between 14 performing arts unions, federations and associations on an action plan for the ecological transformation of the performing arts (2024) regarding training, eco-responsibility criteria, information monitoring, work organisation and cultural mobility. In France, the Ministry of Culture has proposed to allocate 9 million euros to a 'better production, better distribution' plan, the intentions of which are being questioned by professionals in the performing arts.

This conference aims to examine the transformation of professional practices in the performing arts towards greater eco-responsibility, how they are conceived and put into practice, the conditions for their success, and the obstacles encountered. It will be held in the context of the logic of public service action, constrained by the recent budgetary disengagement of the State and intertwined with the logic of the market and fame. Contributions from academics and professionals can be proposed around five axes.

## **Axis 1 – The production and distribution networks**

The current period is characterised by a reduction in the margins available from operating grants to finance artistic expenditure, exacerbated by inflation in energy costs and the recent cancellation of grants from the Ministry of Culture's Creation Programme. Contributions to co-productions are more fragmented and volatile, while minimising risk-taking to fill capacity is detrimental to the programming of shows created by little-known teams. Companies report a significant reduction in shows for the 2024-2025 season (Lapas-Synavi-Syndeac, 2024).

What conditions are needed to encourage a more significant commitment from co-producers and to increase the length of shows to rebalance the relationship between the production and distribution of shows? What economic and systemic obstacles can be overcome to facilitate links between venues and companies? What measures are being tried to extend companies' life cycle, particularly by supporting young companies' career development, and what are the limitations?

Is the rejection of territorial exclusivity, announced in the Syndeac commitments, having any effect, particularly in the case of festivals with an international reach or in all label-certified structures? What are the reasons for the reluctance to abandon this form of protectionism in programming?

Cooperation between cultural institutions in neighbouring regions is encouraged to pool company tours and extend their stay in each region by limiting the transport of crews and sets. What are the results of coordination platforms such as "CooProg", supported by the Office of

National Artistic Distribution, which has introduced this eco-conditionality clause to distribute its deficit guarantees? What progress and tensions have been observed in the coordination efforts between cultural institutions?

80% of performing arts organisations in France choose association status. Do cooperative societies offer more attractive statutes for developing internal cooperation on an egalitarian basis? How viable are they?

Through the interplay of emotions, artistic imaginaries will likely awaken or consolidate spectators' or workshop participants' ecological awareness. We can question the types of artistic content and forms that have benefited from recognising an aesthetic value in subsidised or private circuits and the systems to support young artistic teams.

## **Axis 2 – The dynamics of territorial cooperation**

The relocation of activities to complement the slower pace of creation is part of limiting mobility through territorial anchoring, which can be consolidated through social embedding and a lasting footprint on the territory (Michel, 2023). Developing links between artistic teams and the diversity of the local population means seeking out and securing partnership relationships with schools, social institutions and associations to get in touch with the inhabitants. Case studies can analyse these partnership agreements to define a common goal, the conditions for cooperation that are perceived to be balanced, and the obstacles that arise from divergent central objectives. Does the long duration of artists' residencies allow for a better balance in articulating creation, dissemination and audience relations (Payn, Deniau, 2016; Urrutiaguer, 2014b)?

The relationship with the state and local authorities must be questioned on two levels. On the one hand, what contribution do they make to the financial costs of facilities provided by structures or festivals and the development of transport infrastructure to reduce the carbon footprint of audience travel? On the other hand, debates on the eco-conditionality of public subsidies raise a fundamental question about the risk of exacerbating inequalities in the promotion of shows to the detriment of less recognised artistic teams, who may find it difficult, for example, to refuse an isolated tour date. The way in which the environmental contributions of performing arts organisations are assessed could be the subject of a balanced interprofessional collaboration or a strengthening of the power of the main structures.

Is the decentralisation of performance spaces in each area, by moving them away from cultural institutions, either to non-dedicated venues (Dubois, 2011; Chevalier et al., 2018) or to open-air spaces (Gonon, 2011), likely to prolong the presence of the programmed artists and bring them closer to the cultural diversity of the local population? What are the conditions for success and the obstacles to appropriating off-site artistic experiences by the population of working-class neighbourhoods? Circus and street art offer experimental frameworks that can be explored.

## **Axis 3 – Eco-design**

Eco-design is an eco-responsible approach recommended by the *Shift Project* report (2021). It is part of a circular economy approach aimed at 'producing goods and services sustainably by limiting the consumption and wastage of resources and the production of waste' (Ministry for Ecological Transition and Territorial Cohesion). For sets and accessories, this means giving preference to suppliers who use reusable or biodegradable materials, recycling elements stored in recycling centres, rejecting toxic components, and seeking to minimise water

consumption and the volume of sets to be transported (Fohr, 2021). A similar approach is used in the choice of fibers, the reuse of parts, and local manufacture, which applies to the production of costumes.

The papers may ask about the setting up and conditions for funding and running recycling centres and digital platforms to list and publicise the set elements or costume pieces available for re-use.

The survey by the Union of Scenographers (2021) shows a gap in openness to the eco-design of sets and costumes between workshop staff, with technical management mostly in favour and those in charge of production who are more often reluctant. What are the obstacles and conditions to accepting the reuse of materials in the aesthetic vision of show designers?

## **Axis 4 – Inclusivity**

The conviviality with which the audience is received is a dimension that the venues carefully consider since the conviviality of the outing may influence the degree of satisfaction of the spectators and the development of a feeling of familiarity with the structure. We can question the importance of reducing the differences in the socio-demographic composition of artistic casts and audiences and their impact. What are the objectives and resources used to welcome physically different people?

On the initiative of media libraries in particular, the Third-Place model (Oldenburg, 1999) leads to a degree of activity reorganisation in welcoming users for activities other than attending performances. One of the aims is to help consolidate a sense of community among people who do not meet spontaneously in urban spaces. What experiments have been carried out to create a living space, and what conclusions about the social mix can be drawn? What are the discrepancies between the way the different spaces are designed to be used and the way the users appropriate them? What improvements could be made, or what disappointments have been experienced?

The relationship between professionals and amateurs, historically built on a vertical scale of valuing artistic requirements and an acculturation approach, has become more flexible, sometimes in seeking egalitarian relationships based on respect for the dignity of different cultures (Urrutiaguer, 2014). What are the implications of revising amateur status and including respect for cultural rights in the 2016 French law on freedom of creation, architecture and heritage? Contributions can focus on the experience of co-constructing shows with non-professionals under the supervision of artists, the power relations within this creative process, and the reception by audiences, artists and administrators. What objectives are set by the management of cultural establishments, and what conclusions can be drawn from them?

## **Axis 5 – Jobs transformation and training**

There is a need to develop the transmission of knowledge and know-how related to ecological issues in general and artistic education and lifelong learning programmes to encourage the adoption of more ecologically responsible professional attitudes. Several student manifestos make demands, while the meaning to be given to one's work keeps young people away from professions or companies that contribute to environmental degradation. Communication can focus on implementing socio-ecological training programmes, their content, funding arrangements and their impact on the skills of those who have taken them.

New green professions, such as eco-advisers, will be developed. The joint action plan for the ecological transformation of the performing arts industry calls for the creation of technical

posts linked to the environmental transition, the definition of ways of pooling these posts and the budgetary implications for the organisations involved. For example, the Théâtre de l'Aquarium (Paris) has recruited a project manager for its recycling centre as part of its technical team. What initiatives have been taken in this direction, and what are the positive and negative prospects for developing these posts?

The greening of professions to change the organisation of work in line with socio-environmental issues implies a change in skills in terms of the job descriptions used for recruitment and assignments, sometimes moving away from the traditional core of the professions. Resistance to change, contrasted with enthusiastic support for new tasks that are more respectful of the environment and the cultural diversity of the population, poses potential problems of cohesion within the workforce and challenges for human resources management that can be addressed through communication.

## Expected formats

### Papers

Papers should address a topic related to one or more of the conference project's themes. They will be 20-minute sessions followed by 10 minutes of questions.

Paper proposals must include an abstract and 5,000 text characters, excluding the bibliography and a brief biobibliographical presentation.

### Panels

Panels are round tables of three to five professionals in the performing arts or academia who meet for an hour and a half to discuss a topic included in the Colloquium's axes.

Proposals for panels should include a list of panellists and a summary of the planned exchanges with a text of 4,000 characters.

**Submissions in English or French should be sent to  
socioecologyconference2025@gmail.com**

## Timetable

**27 September 2024:** Publication of the Call for Papers

**20 December 2024:** Deadline for submission of paper or panel proposals

**24 January 2025:** Notification of acceptances and rejections

**10, 11 and 12 April 2025:** Conference

## Organisation Committee:

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