

## ECOLOGIES OF CHANGE

### HOW ART EXPLORES THE PATHWAYS FOR A JUST TRANSITION

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Paris, June 2015: the whole world is watching as the “conference of the parties” unfolds, commonly referred to as: COP21. While the parties meet, eat and negotiate, the clock is ticking. At the Place du Pantheon, twelve giant chunks of glacial ice are placed in a circle. The artist Ólafur Eliásson took them from Greenland’s Nuuk Fjord, and shipped them to Paris. There, they are slowly melting in the summer sun, as the world turns, and the time is ticking away. People are attracted, touching the ice, tasting its water. *“I hope this work of art can actually bridge the gap between the data, the scientists, the politicians and heads of state and how normal people feel”*, as Eliásson stated.

And yes, this is exactly what art can do. It provides a direct access to complexity, without reducing it. It makes slow, creeping processes visible and audible. It brings urgency and activism. It is able to connect the individual experience to “hyperobjects” like climate change, extinction of species, and growing global inequality. It provokes debate, and it’s itself subject to it as well. Ólafur Eliásson was heavily criticized for the carbon impact of his artwork, shipping glacial ice in air-conditioned circumstances all the way from Greenland to Paris, only to melt away there.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, we’re 7 years later now, and “Paris” and “1.5°C” have become keystones, leading up to many policy initiatives.

<sup>1</sup> Julie’s Bicycle produced a report on the Carbon Footprint of the “Ice Watch” installation by Ólafur Eliásson, which is available in the press section of the [icewatch.london](http://icewatch.london) website.

## ART, CLIMATE, TRANSITION: ACT

In this transition towards a sustainable future, art and artists have many different roles, positions, entanglements. Globally operating artists like Eliásson are able to bring urgency and invite a wide audience to engage in the artwork and the issues it addresses. But it is also locally, in smaller scales and peripheral territories that we witness the everyday contribution of artists and cultural organisations to a just transition. We operate under the name ACT, Art Climate Transition, as a network of 10 European cultural organisations, venues, NGO’s and festivals. A diversity of contexts and perspectives brings us together in critically engaging on a reflection of what it means to program activists and to produce artworks that are committed to ecology and to a fairer social transition. Co-financed by the Creative Europe programme of the EU we have been working on the cutting edge of performing and visual arts that relate to the issues of climate change and ecology. Under the name *Imagine2020*, the previous collaboration projects focused on exploring the future under new ecological conditions. ACT started as a project in 2019, maintaining a focus on arts, ecology and climate change, and we connect this to the interlinked issues of inequality, climate justice and urban ecologies.

Finding ourselves in the Anthropocene era, we seek to include the agency and voicing of the non-human and other voices. Recent uprisings and protests in our cities support our agenda to address via the arts the networks of dependency, inequality and power that define our (in)ability for collective action. It is not just transition, it is a just transition which is urgently needed: a transition that is based on our ethical awareness and ecological understanding of interaction between species, humans and their political and natural environments. This understanding of ecology is not just “the issue”, it also shapes the way we see the world and our own contribution to it. In this article we will highlight some of our works and projects to illustrate this idea of ecology.





Fikos' Marseille Mural unveiled at IUCN congress, September 5th 2021.

## CONNECTING CONTEXTS

September 2021 was finally the moment when Marseille hosted the IUCN World Conservation Congress – the global summit on biodiversity, after being postponed several times due to COVID-19 constrictions. Participants who descended the stairs from Saint-Charles train station couldn't miss a huge mural with birds, painted by the Greek artist Fikos. The birds depicted are migratory species, which find a habitat in the surroundings of Marseille during a part of the season. The depicted birds are under threat: their habitats are reduced, either by climate change or by man-induced developments. The mural was commissioned by ACT-partner COAL, bringing the

American "Audubon Mural Project" to Europe. But the project didn't stop there. As a sequel, the other ACT partners are organising a reverberation of the initiative in their local territories by commissioning a bird mural locally. The murals are following the same principle: a beautiful depiction of migratory birds from the region that are under threat of extinction. Not only rare species, also mundane birds are disappearing. These projects include the engagement of local communities, be it schools, a workers union or an elderly home, and inviting the knowledge of local ecologists. The conversations that emerge around each mural deepen the understanding and sense of responsibility. It also connects across Europe each of these murals, and each of these communities. A "Roodborstje" (Robin)

at the Roodborststraat in Rotterdam, a Grey Vulture (at the primary school Goce Dolchev) in Skopje, North Macedonia - and soon more bird murals will follow.

## AN ECOLOGY OF RELATIONS

Now let's dig a little deeper. Because we are convinced that this "contextualizing" approach to ecology and arts allows also a deep connection with the issue of a just transition. Many of the artists we work with are convinced that ecological and climate justice cannot be imagined without social justice. Perceiving the world as an interconnected web of things and people - and also sharply aware of the institutionally embedded inequalities and dependencies. As a cooperation project, we foster this approach and we invite artists to explore it and to learn from each other's artistic trajectories in summer labs and residencies. This artistic orientation is not aiming for the global stage, but rather seeks its impact in the roots and rhizomes of everyday life in urban and rural communities.

To create and disseminate an ecology of relations is the underlying statement of the Collection Europe project, developed within ACT. Here, an ensemble of four artists and collectives were selected to develop artistic trajectories across European territories. The Portuguese collective Berru created an unprecedented installation on the energetic issues of the Ocean, which will be performed in Clermont-Ferrand and Lisbon. Their works tend to combine living and non-living structures and speculate about their potential collaborations in creating sustainable systems.

With The Apocalypse Reading Room, Ama Josephine Budge creates an on-site library in the face of environmental and social transformation. In this installation, the London-based artist gathers all the books that we might need to change the end of the world. The installation is also activated by other artists who are invited to develop a residency programme around it, and requires the holding of a community space. It opens conversations and connections, on loss and grief, but also on resistance and strategies for solidarity.

As such, both projects invite the voices of others that are not heard or understood, or are not given the stage to be listened to. For the Belgian artist Sarah Vanhee, this is the heart of her cultural practice. As Sarah says

about her project BOK - Bodies of Knowledge: *"What develops, is an ecology of relations, also very literally. Something happens beyond the blindness of the white middleclass to which I also belong. We wonder why the ecological movement remains so white?! Of course it's because the topics that are at the table are completely out of reach for people from more precarious classes. But at the same time, a lot of ecological solutions come already from them! For instance we had someone in the tent who spoke about 'how to get by with very little money?'- and then you realize a lot of these solutions are deeply ecological, but she just doesn't call them that way."*

## EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

So, the end of the Theatre with a capital T? The work that ACT is producing and presenting redefines the position of the theatre and the art institutions. But this doesn't equal with a departure from the theatres and formal stages. These are used intensely and in innovative ways as well. The intricate and delicate unwritten contract between audience and performers, limited in time and space, remains of great value in exploring the new ecological condition. In post-pandemic times also the means to develop such implicit protocols have been widened. The triad nature – audience – performers becomes a source of inspiration for many artists. They activate the audience as a "collective body", which can be an ecological awareness per excellence.

We see this in diverse forms: some very fragile and intimate, others resulting in mass-choreographies where the audience transforms into a swarm. Very intimate is *Immersion*, by Selina Thompson (UK), which explored the sacredness of breath by inviting an intergenerational mix of women to record their breath. These recordings became part of a soundscape, shared as a form of activism, which signals our inability to breathe freely, whether due to Covid, racism or air pollution. The Chilean choreographer Jose Vidal creates mass choreographies such as *Emergenz*, a dance performance that explored the process in which a collective, a social body emerges from the movement of single bodies. Swarms of birds and fishes, the wind through the leaves of the forest, fractal patterns that repeat and sustain themselves. Vidal offers a structure, a framework, in which the dancers play and improvise.





Jose Vidal, *Emergenz* (Hamburg, 2019).

*Emergenz* brings 100 performers on stage. Professional dancers, but an equal amount of citizens from all walks of life. Architects, designers, teachers, bank-employees: they rehearse with Vidal and his team. No words, just movements and invitations to interact. As a result, 100 performers act as one ecosystem in itself. The result is mesmerizing to see - and an unforgettable experience for those who participate in the process of creating it.

## AN ARTISTIC COMPASS FOR UNKNOWN TERRITORIES

What is the role and contribution of art and creation in the vast and urgent transition towards a just and sustainable society? With ACT we work from an ecological understanding of this question - not a mechanic or a linear one. We are assured that artistic work has impact - but that this impact is organized

in ways that require an ecological understanding. The merging of art and activism can be found in many of the projects we connect with and support. And they're desperately needed in our collective attempts to find new ways to inhabit Earth together with all other lifeforms. Or to be more precise, to inhabit a Critical Zone, as the French philosopher Bruno Latour calls it, a thin shell of only a few kilometres thick, where everything happens. *"Is it inhabitable? 'Depends on your chosen science'. Will I survive down there? 'Depends on your politics'".* It's time to land, and learn to navigate.