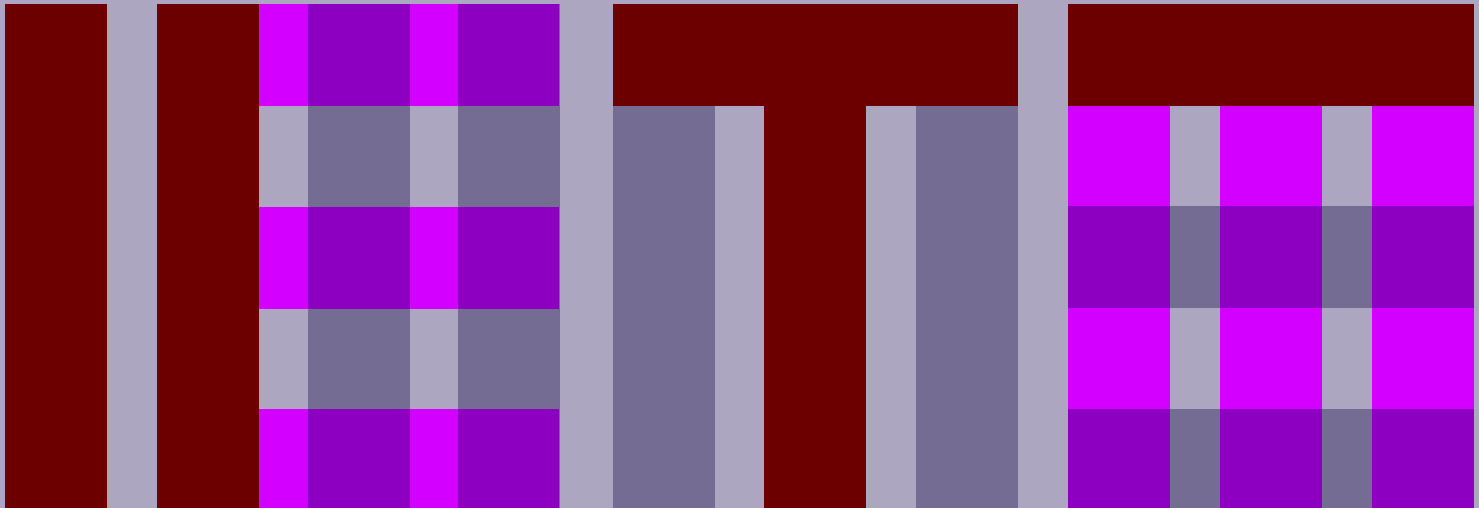




Report

Sensing Earth Workshop

From the IETM Sofia Plenary Meeting by Tina Hofman



**IETM Report:
Sensing Earth Workshop**

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**Report from the
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Summary

The session ‘Sensing Earth Workshop’ at the IETM Sofia Plenary Meeting 2024 took place on 13 June at Hall 2 at Toplocentrala, Sofia.

The session was led by Pascal Gielen, Philippe Dietachmair - authors/editors of the book Sensing Earth (Gielen et al., 2023) - and Rodrigo Arenas - a freelance artist from California born in Chile.



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Introduction

The workshop was introduced through setting the main questions it looked to address:

Aesthetics

How can we create arts with a greater connection to Earth?

Organisations

How can we constitute ecologically sustainable arts institutions?

Politics

How can we encourage decision making that serves people and the planet

The aim of the workshop was to gather tangible ideas and proposals on how to take the conversation further through collating the experience in the room, dealing with three main dimensions of Sensing Earth mentioned above (Gielen, P. et al., 2023): Aesthetics (Green Transitions), Organisations and (Cultural) Politics. The workshop was attended by 50 participants who were divided into six smaller groups. Each dimension was tackled by two smaller groups through the following provocations:

Artists/Aesthetics:

- What could be artistic key dimensions of the new and autonomous 'Eco-Aesthetics'
- What do we need for creating art in an environmentally friendlier way without producing meaningless 'climate-proof' art?

Organisations:

- How can we self-organise to become greener and more resilient organisations (without depending on state and creative industries)?
- What could be specific contributions of performing arts sector organisations to make the world of arts institutions and communities around them more ecologically sustainable?

Politics:

- Are Arts & Culture progressing in making citizens more ecologically aware and how are we performing as creative companions of political climate transition ambitions
- What could be key dimensions of 'ecological' cultural policies that respect art & nature and serve people & planet



This report responds to the nonhomogeneous format and structure of the workshop: encouraging existing knowledge and a wide variety of ideas, conversations and suggestions were brought forwards. Key themes and responses reflecting on the above provocations are collated below. As a reporter, the author was advised to keep moving amongst the groups, aiming to collate the overarching themes and directions of the workshop. It is worth pointing out that neither the workshop, nor this report, are focused on offering recommendations. Collectively, the participants explored the potential the cultural sector has in mitigating the green policy-making around making other industries greener - nature and culture brought together where the 'human' is one part of the system.

The author starts by reflecting on the conversation within two artists' groups who interrogated new and autonomous Eco-Aesthetics - the 'how' and the 'what'. Rodrigo Arenas invited the group to consider Eco-Aesthetics as the idea of being embedded in the environment rather than outside it, stressing the need to renegotiate our relationship with our environment. There is no separation between a human body and the ecosystem. Rodrigo offered the idea of the 'Colonial Debt'. Eco-Aesthetics is also a part of Intergenerational Justice - we do not know those yet who are coming to us, but nevertheless are accountable towards both our predecessors and to those that are coming after us. The conversation was gently facilitated, but largely allowed for the free-flow dynamic. Therefore some departure from the questions was made into other loosely related themes.

Artists - Group 1

This group robustly interrogated the variety of artistic practices, approaches and relations which respond to climate emergency and injustices - how can we create a more sustainable art?

Some reflections included:

- Ways of working without killing or buying stuff. How can we preserve what we make sustainably? By using a certain materials, you are increasing your respect towards that material you utilise in your work - reflecting on the Vibrant Matter by Jane Bennet (2010);
- Relational art which becomes relevant (for more on 'Relational Aesthetics/Art' see e.g. Downey, A., 2007 or Almenberg, G., 2013);
- Interconnectedness with nature demonstrated through acknowledging the intangible heritage in the relationship between humans and forests;
- Remote and virtual ways of making work - creatives in different locations, brought together virtually. New formats of touring without travel, but producing multiple incarnations of the work in different locations;
- Seeing artists as mediators, a connective tissue. Artists could assist and support in terms of facing the realities of climate change within a locality - 'Can we make the disintegration of our world into something new more digestible?';
- Rethinking the energy consumption of a show, for example, more site-specific work using natural light or going back to the origins of theatres employing more ecologically viable theatrical tools.

The group reflected on the wisdom of marginalised and indigenous communities as well as on the sensitive dynamics of working with(in) those communities. Sustainability issues will be prioritised differently within every community: the relationship to climate emergency is connected to witnessing it in one's own environment. The group reflected on varied practices of working through systems of recycling and littering issues found within places such as refugee camps of Western Sahara, or within the numerous Bulgarian Roma communities. Based on both examples, the group acknowledged the point of view on these issues based in the dominant (White/Western European) culture, and continued to elaborate issues of marginalisation, representation, equal opportunities and coloniality. Herein, several members identified that despite a significant presence of Roma culture in Bulgaria, they remained under-represented within the local independent arts scene introduced at this Plenary. No sufficient information or evidence is gathered to be able to elaborate on this further. This observation resulted from a conversation about the correlation between having no voice and no feeling of belonging with(in) one's own environment and the low engagement with issues of recycling and sustainability.

The group concluded that more rigour is needed in understanding the climate (in)justices. We talk about recycling and rubbish and teach disenfranchised communities about not littering and recycling, but do not address the problem of exploitation, exclusion and social injustice. They also referred to the conundrum with the lithium in the (car) batteries and the problem of depositing it, while the electric cars become more and more a strategy towards Green policy.



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Artists - Group 2

Overall, this group moved away from the posed questions and opened towards other discussions. Their conversation assumed a free-flow of ideas and suggestions, but also reflections. A strong common theme emerged of the need to organise and share physical and human resources, and operate through cooperatives made up of smaller, independent companies and artists, as well as the possibility to share bought resources and to have stronger, more transparent networks with the inventory of the stuff that could be shared. Funding or support in-kind could be encouraged to support those individuals who could be the 'linchpin', the connective tissue between these indie entities. However, we need to make this job post attractive and valued, as (freelance) producers can often feel exploited.

Relating to this, observation was made on the resources often going towards the arts administration (both within the organisations which consider themselves mainstream or independent, irrespectively of the sources of funding) 'fetishising' the object of the institution. How can we better share the actual 'problem solving' and resources, particularly the administrative ones?

The group identified a pressure to keep producing (and programming) new work, instead of a tendency to nurture a long-term relationship with artists. This overproduction leads to both a burn-out as well as producing large waste in terms of resources. The group mentioned a challenge of very expensive slow travel, identifying that the travel grants that are often offered remain suitable solely for the low cost flights. A proposal was made to better utilise IETM's forum to advertise and discuss joint, slow travel to IETM meetings.

The group briefly mentioned the coloniality and 'Eurocentricity' of Europe's 'green policies' - when working with many non European/ international/migrant/refugee artists within a Western European.



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Organisations

Similarly to the second 'Artist' group, the discussion in this group took a different turn from the questions initially set. The conversation was initiated with Pascal Gielen's reflection on the notion of 'Commons' - strategies of self-organisation without relying on government subsidy or dependency on a market system (Gielen offers an example of Wikipedia as a well-known 'commons' - a self organised and not government subsidised resource. Commons is always focusing on the 'need', and as a result, lots of ecology organisations are 'Commons'.) Connecting this to the main aim the group set to tackle, the question can be posed on how the notion of 'commons' can be applied to the organisation one runs to become more sustainable.

The group continued to address many aspects of running an organisation, ranging from the very fabric of a physical building (i.e. renovating an old stone building vs. building a new purpose built space, or erecting a green wall to make it more attractive for the community to visit) through to the content within the building, specifically the selection of artistic programmes. Also when renovating, emphasising the re-use of materials which would otherwise need to be taken to landfill, as well as selecting the suppliers from local businesses and food producers.

The group also touched upon the awareness of 'greenwashing' - i.e. tokenistic ecological signposting for marketing purposes. A practice is mentioned whereby big companies advertise ecological slogans such as 'Green and Lean', not because they have achieved it, but because this is their vision for the future.

The group acknowledged that the same solution won't work with every venue, but the circle of knowledge might. Just like the Artists' group, the organisations likewise identify a need for the system of sharing the knowledge and resources, but also peer and evaluation support. Sharing is often done with apprehension because of recognising the 'greenwashing' as a capitalist strategy.

A challenge is proposed for the mainstream institutions to look into the resourcefulness of the independent sector, identifying arts and culture as largely immaterial goods. Hereby the group identified several bad practices where the organisation/creative team insists on extreme lavishness in terms of production values. Similarly, good practices by the mainstream institutions were identified, such as an established practice of reusing old sets to make new scenography, as well as educating the in-house set-builders in this practice.

This group identified the fashion industry as an example where the market poses a demand on the industry to become more green. Being more green means being more competitive.

Participants considered different models of assigning an environmental role within an organisation. Should one person within an institution be responsible for the implementation of green policy, or should this responsibility be distributed?

Should an institution have one 'green' ambassador or should each department have a 'green lead'? Is there a danger in the 'lead' individual being singled out or being made to take over the accountability?

A discussion was had around the possibility of department-specific green training strategies, much like they exist within the implementation of EDI policies. The conversation challenged the implementation of green policy as dependent on the current party political temperature. Participants interrogated how to get people to align with green issues irrespectively of their political stance.

Touring and programming was also considered: in what way could the work be made, or modified, to fit multiple spaces (from theatres to non-theatre spaces, such as schools and community centres)? Programmers tend to go for the 'safe' programming options, which influences what the artists think will sell. This demonstrated a strong impact of programmers on the artistic (over)production. Also, programming departments tend to underestimate the appetite of the wider public by indulging in popular options. Some venues noticed that post-Covid increased the demand for small festivals, interactivity, and small audience experiences. In conclusion, the difficult role of the programmers and their very limited capacity has been acknowledged.

Politics

Both groups addressing the Politics interrogated the correlation between Green action and Left politics. The problem of 'disappearing knowledge' is identified whereby, when the leadership (of a cultural organisation as well as the political party) changes, the Green policy and focus on it changes as well. Amongst other reasons, the resistance comes from communities who feel disenfranchised (the same moment giving rise to the hard Right). This presents an opportunity to explore commonalities - in which way can the conversation about the green issues become a common relevance? Cross sectoral collaboration on creating impactful action is necessary - arts alone are seen as a 'Left project'. A connection between arts and businesses should be improved allowing a deeper influence and collaboration with one another.

How does one foster and procure these collaborations? Could IETM be a broker of this intersectional and cross-sectoral/cross-practice relationships? Perhaps similar to the matchmaking for Perform Europe open call - a similar platform allowing businesses, entrepreneurs, political organisations and artists to start a conversation and form teams?

An element of helplessness momentarily prevailed within both groups, asking: 'How to lobby when politicians say that people whom they represent, do not care?'

In response to the feeling of helplessness, several suggestions emerged:

- Collaborations with cross-practice scholars and experts culminating in evidence around the positive impact of arts to addressing issues of identity, democracy, social cohesion, civic action and wellbeing. This evidence is used to lobby the governments about the creative power in engaging the citizens;
- A more radical approach - avoiding policy meetings and data! Bypassing governments! Acknowledge the unhelpful administrative and bureaucratic procedures and utilise artistic freedom and the privilege of freedom of speech wherever possible. Action on the grassroot level, speak to people on the streets and create independent action hyper-locally;
- Engage people to consider 'health', whereby planetary health and individual health entirely co-exist. This is a chance to contradict the views of the arts or green issues in isolation to other industries;
- Utilise people's connection and attachment to their local environment: regional (agri)culture, landmarks and natural values of the landscape - a fruitful ground for finding commonalities;
- When seeking to collaborate with the government, think laterally e.g. approaching the Ministry for Agriculture, developing new formats of creative collaboration;
- Use the power of artistic thinking and facilitation to reimagine the value of 'sharing' as a means of redistribution of goods and wealth.

The session could have easily lasted much longer, and would yield even more constructive thinking and reflections. Observation was made that little attention was given to the dynamic between decolonisation/ decoloniality, Eurocentricity and climate action. Some participants noticed how beneficial it would be to allow more time for these sessions to explore the strategies which could be area specific. In the final ten minutes of the workshops, Philippe Dietachmair invited the participants to reflect individually and in silence on the next eight tangible ideas for oneself, one's community, IETM as a network, or an organisation. These ideas were noted through a low-tech method called 'Crazy 8' - an A4 paper folder eight ways and filling each 'box' with an idea¹.

With this, the workshop concluded.

¹ IETM has collated these responses following the workshop.

