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# Environmental Sustainability in Contemporary Dance: Emerging Issues, Practices and Recommendations



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Environmental Sustainability in Contemporary Dance:  
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#### About the author

**Jordi Baltà Portolés** works as a consultant and researcher at Trànsit Projectes, a cultural management company based in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Barcelona. He has particular interest in local cultural policies, the relations between culture and sustainable development, cultural diversity, cultural rights, and the governance of culture. He is also an advisor on culture and sustainable cities at the Committee on Culture of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and a member of the UNESCO Expert Facility for the implementation of the 2005 Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. He teaches at the Degree in International Relations of Blanquerna – Universitat Ramon Llull (URL) as well as several postgraduate courses. He is a PhD candidate at the universities of Girona and Melbourne.



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# Introduction

In 2012, Modul Dance, a Creative Europe project administered under the umbrella of European Dancehouse Network, held a conference titled 'Ethics in Aesthetics? For an ecology of both the environment and the body'.<sup>1</sup> This initiative drew on a growing ethical consciousness within the artistic dance community – one that considers the ethical choices inherent within artistic production and distribution, and how choices made there reflect on the creative dialogue artists hold with wider society in a time of change. The conference also underlined how artistic practices are equally important to other forms of more academic research.

10 years on, the increasing evidence of the climate crisis has had a huge impact on how we think about artistic production and presentation. There is a need not only to learn from how artists are dealing with these challenges, but also to articulate a change in structural behaviour through the power of policymakers, cultural institutions, and organisations in the arts. Artistic narratives are a powerful and important tool for changing minds. They have the ability to present new conceptions of what the good life is – of what is desirable in life. However, the sustainability of artistic practices

and new possibilities of engaging with audiences need to be supported through an adaptation of existing structures.

During 2022, EDN has facilitated a number of activities co-organised with network members, artists, researchers, and professionals in the dance field. Each workshop, lecture, seminar and professional encounter provided a framework for the participants to exchange with one another and to investigate how to make European contemporary dance environmentally sustainable. Evidence and testimonials drawn from these activities informed this publication's overview of emerging issues and best practices, prepared by researcher and cultural policy consultant Jordi Baltà Portolés (Trànsit Projectes) and including recommendations for public authorities and the dance sector on how to move forward.<sup>2</sup>

We hope you have an inspiring read. And don't forget to pause and listen to your embodied knowledge. We might find that everything we are looking for is already there.

**Eva Broberg**, EDN Network Manager

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- 1 3rd Modul Dance Conference: 'Ethics in Aesthetics? For an ecology of both the environment and the body'. Curated by Guy Cools. Co-organised by European Dancehouse Network, Danshuis Station Zuid, and Fontys School of Fine and Performing Arts, Tilburg, 2012. The conference was followed with a book, *The Ethics of Art: Ecological Turns in the Performing Arts*. Cools, Guy, and Gielen, Pascal (2014). [http://www.modul-dance.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/MD-Conference\\_2012\\_Tilburg\\_Ethics-is-Aesthetics.pdf](http://www.modul-dance.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/MD-Conference_2012_Tilburg_Ethics-is-Aesthetics.pdf)
  - 2 In connection with the release of this publication, European Dancehouse Network hosted an online conference, 'How Can We Move? Ecological Perspectives on Contemporary Dance', on 14 November 2022. <https://www.ednetwork.eu/activities/edn-conference2022>

# Executive Summary

This report examines the relationship between environmental sustainability and contemporary dance, with a particular focus on the role of dance production centres. It has been produced under EDNNext 2022-2024, a European Dancehouse Network (EDN) project that aims to contribute to a more sustainable and inclusive European dance sector by addressing themes such as environmental sustainability, equity and well-being. The report was written between April and September 2022, and is based on an analysis of literature as well as discussions and contributions made at different EDNNext activities.

Across Europe, dance organisations and the wider arts are engaging more and more with environmental sustainability. Indeed, there has been a marked 'mental shift', driven by a variety of ethical, educational, financial, legal, operational, personal and reputational reasons. The broader policy context, including the European Green Deal and its widespread impact, has also been an important catalyst. However, measures encouraging environmental sustainability are still often isolated and short-term, rather than structural, and some within the dance sector doubt whether they should even be a core priority.

Where does dance intersect with environmental sustainability, and what measures can be adopted? Chapter 3 of this report identifies six central thematic areas:

- **Sustainability narratives and themes in contemporary dance:** many artists use their work to address themes such as the damage done to nature or the impact of mass production and consumption on society and the planet. Centres for dance production and presentation can, and in many cases already do, support this work by programming it, by providing funding, residences, and opportunities to present work in outdoor spaces, and by offering tailored support.
- **Approaches to creation, production and presentation:** working for sustainability means challenging our 'obsession with the new', and looking for greater balance between producing new works and touring and presenting existing ones. It also means measuring things differently: relying less on quantitative measures and the production of new works; rethinking timeframes and giving more space to education, community work and participation; adopting 'circular' approaches; or exploring the potential of technology.
- **Mobility:** there is increasing awareness that cross-border mobility needs to be rethought. A new approach should address the environmental impact of current mobility patterns, but also

seek the right balance between sustainability, professional development, and social justice. It would involve acknowledging the diverse circumstances of different dance professionals and applying principles of 'climate justice'. Bearing this in mind, this report proposes a set of 10 guiding principles to be applied while rethinking approaches to international mobility.

- **Transforming organisations to respond to environmental sustainability:** there are lots of resources that provide guidance for arts organisations adapting themselves for greater environmental sustainability. These cover areas such as buildings and energy, purchases and supplies, transport, communication and awareness-raising, and internal monitoring. However, it is not always easy for organisations to know where to start, or to make the work a priority. Factors that can catalyse an internal change include: creating a culture of positive and realistic change, involving external consultants or activating internal knowledge, and establishing dedicated teams.
- **Partnerships and community relations:** making sustainability a core principle for organisations involves developing a range of new partnerships – both with stakeholders from outside of culture (from environment, technology, transport, education, etc.), and with other arts organisations (in the form of networks, platforms, etc.). It also means strengthening ties with local communities.
- **Policies and support:** adaptation for environmental sustainability should not rely only on knowledge and internal will, but also be catalysed by a supportive environment which fosters change and effective action. Public authorities and other funders and support organisations can play their part by adopting policies and legislation; providing funding, awareness-raising activities, training and advice; recognising and sharing good practices; and providing monitoring and a knowledge base.

The report also gives some references and examples for each of these areas to help readers explore the themes further.

Building on the evidence presented in earlier chapters, the report closes with a set of actions to be undertaken by EDN, some general guidelines for EDN members and other dance organisations, and a number of recommendations for public authorities and related bodies at EU, national, regional and local levels. The aim is to ensure that the findings of the report join with the existing energy and desire for change within the sector – and lead to effective action.



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