



Report

# *Art and Activism II Transforming culture through artistic influence*

from the IETM Aarhus Plenary Meeting

By Peter Koch Gehlshøj



**IETM Report: Art and Activism II** Transforming culture through artistic influence

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## Summary

The panel discussion 'Art and Activism II – Transforming culture through artistic influence' explored the arts' potential to challenge mainstream narratives and highlighted the power of art as a catalyst for cultural and societal change. It emphasised the urgency of addressing climate change, colonisation, capitalism and indigenous rights through artistic expression and collective action. Furthermore, it was discussed whether artists, by acknowledging and nurturing caring relationships with the human and the non-human and more-than-human world, can inspire positive change and contribute to shaping better futures.

**Facilitator**

[Thiago Jesus](#), People's Palace Projects, United Kingdom

**Speakers**

[Angela Rawlings](#), Artist and Researcher, Iceland  
[Christine Fentz](#), Secret Hotel / Earthwise Residency, Denmark  
[Reneltta Arluk](#), Akpik Theatre, Canada



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# Art and Activism II

## Transforming culture through artistic influence

### Introduction

The second Art and Activism session focussed on the potential for arts and artists to engage in narratives that shape our shared futures. The panellists delved into the role that the arts can play in advocating for positive change within both the cultural sector and society at large. The main focus fell on how art can contribute to renegotiating discourses concerning climate change, primarily in relation to the rights, knowledge and practices of indigenous communities.

The panel discussion revolved around the artistic practices and personal experiences of the three speakers as well as the moderator. Each of them shared their unique perspectives on the transformative power of art; a force that can bring both performers and audiences to reevaluate archetypical worldviews and societal structures and begin to acknowledge the interconnectedness between humans and the non-human and more-than-human realms - the latter encompassing flora, fauna, geology, climate and spirituality.

### Exploring the transformative power of the arts:

**Thiago Jesus**, the facilitator of the session, is a creative producer and researcher leading international projects in arts and transformation. He focuses his work on the protection of indigenous communities and cultural practices in the Brazilian Amazon Forest that are threatened by deforestation and climate catastrophe. Furthermore, Jesus is conducting doctoral research on how arts organisations address climate change.

As he opened the session, Jesus positioned a jar of black oil paint in the middle of the circle of participants as a token of offering. This specific paint, made from ashes of rainforest fires, is instrumental in Jesus' efforts to raise awareness of the ongoing struggles of the indigenous communities. In his practice, he invites artists to create pieces with the black paint that are then auctioned off to raise money to support the displaced communities.

In his presentation, Jesus underscored the deliberate and thus criminal nature of most rainforest fires; arson aimed at vacating the protected indigenous territories so that they can be claimed for plantations. He stressed that **creative industries worldwide must take action by elevating and amplifying the anti-capitalist narratives and struggles of indigenous communities, highlighting the pressing issues of deforestation, hydroelectric projects, mining, soy production and climate change.**

**Dr. Angela Rawlings** is a Canadian interdisciplinary artist-researcher based in Iceland. They employ as primary medium in their artistic practice the sensorial and material qualities of language and the power of words to reshape perceptions of the world. Rawlings delves into the intricate connections between bodies, human and non-human alike. With a rich background in solo and group performances, exhibitions and international collaborations, Rawlings' work has resonated across continents and venues, bridging cultures and landscapes.

During the session, Rawlings presented their work, including a book combining butterfly research, sleep and dreams which was passed around the circle, as well as a project consisting in renaming colours to draw attention to the climate crisis. They exemplified this by pointing to their toenails, which they had painted 'Climate Change Orange'. Rawlings' deep connection with the environment and what they referred to as 'the climate breakdown' became evident in disconcerting accounts of their observations of Iceland's melting glaciers and disappearing landscapes. Intertwining these experiences with a personal confrontation with serious illness, **they recounted how rituals and performative acts, amalgamating spoken, material, visual and gestural elements can serve to engage with nature, and navigate personal transformation.**



**Reneltha Arluk**, who spoke after Rawlings, has been involved in Indigenous Theatre across Canada and overseas for over twenty years and has founded **Akpiq Theatre**, a professional Indigenous Theatre company in the Northwest Territories. She is the Director of Indigenous Arts at **Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity**, where she designs Indigenous Arts programming and supports initiatives for Indigenous artists. Furthermore, she is a published poet and is the first Inuk and Indigenous woman to direct at **The Stratford Festival**.

Arluk, drawing on her indigenous heritage and experiences, shed light on the importance of preserving cultural practices and reclaiming indigenous identity, threatened by colonialist violence and capitalist exploitation of nature. Through her personal anecdotes and family history, **she emphasised the significance of intergenerational knowledge transfer and the profound healing power of the land.** Presenting the participants with an embroidered pouch that her mother had made from moose hide, Arluk recounted her mother's journey of healing from the trauma of being raised in residential schools. These boarding schools, financed by the Canadian government and administered by various Christian churches, were aimed at erasing indigenous languages and cultures by assimilating indigenous children to Western culture<sup>1</sup>. As an adult, Arluk's mother had found consolation in the power of indigenous practices through learning the art of traditional beadwork, of which the pouch that Arluk had brought to the session was an example.

The last speaker was **Christine Fentz**, artistic director of the performing arts company **Secret Hotel**. As the only local Danish panellist, she had opened her session with an unconventional land acknowledgement, which can be found in the annex below.

In her personal presentation, Fentz shared her experiences as an artist engaging with pre-Christian belief systems and the importance of listening to the spirits of the land. In her work, she interweaves artistic practice with animism, emphasising care and respect for the more-than-human world. For example, Secret Hotel's performance *Walking Lecture on Ants*<sup>2</sup> is not just about ants but created with them, and Fentz always gives the anthill some sweet food in exchange for the ants that she harvests for a performance.

In addition, Fentz oversees **Earthwise Residency**. Located in a Danish national park, this residency centre provides a space for artists and researchers to explore the intersections between art, science and the natural world. Fentz' offering to our circle was a jar of honey from her beehives, which pointed to the importance - in an effort to connect deeper with the living world - of respecting and nurturing the age-old reciprocal bonds of domestication between humans and animals.

- 1 See further information here: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Canadian-Indian-residential-school-system>
- 2 SECRET HOTEL'S *Walking Lecture on Ants* focuses on the life of ants and how their social structures operate compared to ours, in a blend of performing arts, walking and lecturing elements.

## Artivism and questions of care:

As the session continued participants were invited into the conversation, the concept of *artivism*, which to some extent had been a pink elephant in the room, was brought up straightaway. This neologism, combining the words art and activism, has been gaining and losing popularity recurrently ever since it was coined in the late 20th century. The term was brought to the fore in a discussion that highlighted the transformative potential of art in fostering community and challenging societal divisions as well as the importance of art and belief systems in shaping relationships, bridging cultural gaps and facilitating dialogue.

Subsequently, a participant asked how it was possible to prioritise self-care when engaging in artistic projects with a strong focus on societal injustices such as colonialist oppression of indigenous communities and capitalist exploitation of natural resources. In reply, the panellists shared their perspectives on the importance of self-care, rootedness in place, and establishing trust within communities. They discussed the balance between caring for oneself and taking risks to fight for change, and Fentz coined a humorous rule of thumb, with a reference to pre-flight safety announcements: “You have to take care of yourself first, and for me that is rooted in how you relate to place. [...] How can I create little rituals that ground me and nourish hope in dark times?”

Rawlings had a somewhat more sensuous take on the notion of intermingling self-care with what they referred to as the practice of *geo-sexuality*: “Attached to care is pleasure; to think about how I am turned on by my engagement with what I see, what I am smelling, what is present, how it is charging or coming into my body. It is a kind of goofy idea at the outset but if you do this practice for a while then you start noticing what is happening in your body, when smelling the leaves of the young birch ...”

## Conclusions and further perspectives:

As the session came to an end, the panellists shared their final thoughts, encapsulating their strong confidence in the profound impact of art in propelling cultural change. Arluk emphasised the transformative power of inspiration and healing from the land and its stories, highlighting the importance of connecting with our roots. Rawlings distributed performance score postcards, encouraging participants to listen for what cannot be heard, inviting a deeper engagement with the subtle aspects of our surroundings. Fentz emphasised the integration of care and self-care in artistic production and challenged the participants to analyse their relationship with the living world and the origins of the materials around them, and experiment with the embodiment of distance, e.g. through lengthy train travels.

The Art and Activism II panel discussion accentuated **the potential of the arts to challenge existing narratives and inspire positive change**. It illuminated the transformative power of art as a catalyst for cultural transformation and stressed the urgency of addressing climate change, decolonisation, and indigenous rights through artistic expression and collective action. The panellists argued that by acknowledging and nurturing relationships with the natural world, artists can come to play a vital role in inspiring positive change and shaping futures that embrace sustainability, social justice and interconnectedness.

## Annex:

*Land Acknowledgement – by Christine Fentz for IETM Aarhus Plenary, Panel “Art & Activism II”, 2023*

*Participants of the panel: Thiago Jesus, Renelita Arluk, Angela Rawlings and Christine Fentz. The panel was held at Godsbanen – the Freight Station – now a cultural centre.*

*“A land acknowledgement for land of a coloniser-nation”*

*A land acknowledgement on these lands must be different from what the White Western world has learned in recent years from Indigenous peoples*



IETM Aarhus Plenary Meeting, Photo: Gorm Brandrup

*on land, where colonisation has disrupted the relation between humans and land.*

*So, I – a local (I have even lived 18y once in the street next to here) – a white woman of privilege – will give it a try. It will last somewhat three min.*

*I will begin by acknowledging the severe drought that the land – and therefore also we – suffer this spring and summer 2023.*

*Personally, I can of course enjoy the warmth. But if I hear anyone celebrate these weeks and months as ‘good weather’, I know that they probably have lost connection with how food is made – for humans and for animals.*

*We are on land which in prehistoric times was a riverbed. The green elastic clay from dinosaur times deep below us still gives challenges to modern construction work. This river later shrank into the Stream of Aarhus – 200 metres to the North. It meets the bay around a kilometre to the east. The abundance here made it possible for the town of Aros to emerge – later named Aarhus.*

*This land has experienced two different worldviews of humans, as far as we know: Various versions of polytheist worldviews, and Monotheist, Christian worldview. During the polytheist, Pagan or pre-Christian times people from these lands sailed out to trade and to plunder.*

*Later, during Christian times, people of these lands – we – colonised land of other peoples. Plenty, and across the globe; following the Papal Doctrine of Discovery from 1593. Stating that as Christians we had the privilege to take the land of others...*

*This brings us back to where we are now: On the grounds of the old freight station. There is a rail from the harbour to here. Goods shipped to Aarhus from colonised lands have been taken through customs at the harbour and later here, repacked and distributed further across land. Coffee, cacao, tea, ivory, gold, hardwood, whale blubber, whale ribs...*

*We can also zoom in on the presence of the more-than-human here, for instance these floorboards – most likely from forests in Sweden. The concrete below and around us – Denmark, Aalborg Portland. The metal in the building and the chairs – probably also Sweden – and the heat needed to process the metal came from their forests. The red bricks of the main building across the yard are from Danish clay. And so on and so forth. We can train ourselves to be aware of the materials around us and the repercussions coming from the choices we make.*

*Earlier this year the Vatican revoked the Doctrine of Discovery of 1593. Even if it does not amend the wrongs of the past, it is an important symbolic action.*

*And with the positive disruptions coming from the West slowly acknowledging that we live in Postcolonial times, I invite us all to share a fruitful time here where we can hopefully all learn.*

