

SIMM Research Seminar #12 on Social Arts Practice

University of Luxembourg, 7–9 September 2026

report by Lukas Pairon

From 7 to 9 September 2026, SIMM organised its 12th international research seminar at the University of Luxembourg, devoted to **Social Arts Practice**. The seminar brought together researchers and artist-researchers working across music, education, social work, sociology, community arts and socially engaged artistic practice.

The seminar was co-organised by the **University of Luxembourg**, the **Guildhall School of Music & Drama (London)**, the **Jonet Chair on Social Action and Music Making of Ghent University**, and **SIMM**.

Rather than working through a sequence of formal conference papers, the three-day seminar created an intensive environment for sharing research in progress, comparing methodologies and questioning some of the concepts that have become commonplace in participatory and socially engaged arts practice.

What do we mean by “community” and “participation”?

One of the first discussions questioned the apparently straightforward idea of *community*. Communities are not necessarily homogeneous groups with common interests. They may be chosen, inherited, geographically defined, institutionally imposed or temporarily created. A prison, for example, may be described as a community even though those living within it have not chosen one another. Likewise, people living in the same neighbourhood do not necessarily constitute a community simply because an outsider describes them as one.

This led to a reversal of perspective. Instead of asking only how artists might work **with an existing community**, participants considered how an artistic practice might itself help create the conditions in which a community can emerge.

Three elements repeatedly surfaced in these discussions: **time, space and community**, with **connectedness** at their intersection. Connectedness cannot simply be declared as an objective. It may develop through repeated encounters, shared experiences and the gradual emergence of a sense of belonging.

The group also questioned the assumption that participation is automatically positive. Participation can take very different forms and intensities, and not everybody is immediately ready to enter a collective process. The notion of a *safe space* was therefore critically reconsidered, with the suggestion that it can sometimes be more useful to speak of creating a **safer space**: a setting in which people can approach participation at their own pace.

Learning from textile practice

An important moment came from sociologist and textile artist Chinelo L. Njaka, the only participant whose principal artistic practice is outside music.

Chinelo described different ways in which people may work together around textile-making. Several people may work collectively on the same quilt. Others may each make individual elements that are subsequently assembled into a patchwork. Still others may simply be present in the atelier: children may come and go, some people may observe rather than stitch, and yet they remain part of the social space in which the work is taking shape.

For the many music researchers in the group, this became a particularly productive analogy. Participatory music-making does not necessarily mean that everybody must sing, play or compose at the same time or with equal intensity. Listening, observing, entering and leaving, contributing an individual element or simply sharing a space can also form part of a participatory ecology.

The exchange demonstrated the value of bringing different artistic disciplines into dialogue. As one participant remarked, artists and researchers in music still have much to learn from approaches developed in visual and material arts.

The role of the artist: expertise, responsibility and curation

A substantial part of the seminar focused on the role of professional artists in participatory settings.

Participants challenged the idea that participatory work requires the artist to suppress or deny expertise. **Equality does not mean sameness of roles or skills.** An artist may bring years of specialised artistic experience while another participant contributes knowledge of a community, a life experience or another form of expertise.

The central question therefore became not whether artistic leadership exists, but **how it is exercised.**

One formulation that emerged was that a composer does not only compose sounds: a composer can also **compose spaces, workshops and processes.** From there, participants introduced the idea of the artist as a **curator of conditions**—someone capable of listening, framing, provoking, connecting, enabling and responding.

The discussions identified listening, flexibility, empathy, negotiation, trust and what one participant termed **response-ability** as crucial capacities for artists working in social contexts. Artists need to be able to respond to what participants bring rather than interpreting every deviation from an initial artistic plan as a limitation.

At the same time, the seminar discussed problematic practices in which the language of inclusion or participation is used primarily to obtain funding or enhance institutional visibility. Participants used the notion of “**SIMM-washing**”, by analogy with greenwashing,

to describe projects in which people are presented as evidence of social engagement without being meaningfully involved in artistic decisions or processes.

This raised fundamental questions about motivation, responsibility and sustainability: What remains for participants once a project ends? Who benefits from the collaboration? And is the social dimension integral to the artistic work or merely an attractive label?

Process, performance and artistic quality

The seminar also challenged an assumed opposition between **artistic quality** and **social impact**.

Participants argued that socially engaged artistic work need not accept lower artistic ambitions. At the same time, the conventional artistic model in which everything leads towards a final performance may be inappropriate for some participatory projects.

In some contexts, making music together, building relationships and allowing artistic material to evolve may be more important than producing frequent public performances. A performance can be valuable, but it should not automatically become the measure of the project's success.

This distinction between **process and product** also has consequences for professional training. The artist working in participatory settings requires competences that are rarely central to traditional conservatoire education: facilitation, communication, listening, negotiation, social awareness and the capacity to work creatively with uncertainty.

The seminar therefore connected questions of practice with a broader challenge for higher arts education: **how should future artists be prepared for a professional landscape in which socially engaged and participatory work is increasingly significant?**

Preparing artists for participatory work

This question was explored in much greater depth during a subsequent session devoted specifically to the preparation and ongoing support of artists working in participatory contexts.

One issue was whether this work requires separate specialist programmes or whether the relevant capacities should become part of the general education of artists. Participants discussed research into what were described as **artistic-pedagogical strategies**: the often tacit ways in which experienced facilitators collaborate, improvise, arrange material in the moment, rethink conventional artistic parameters and respond to what a group brings. Video-stimulated recall was mentioned as one way of helping experienced practitioners articulate skills they often use without consciously naming them.

The discussion also challenged the description of listening, empathy, collaboration, adaptability and problem-solving as merely “soft skills”. In participatory work, these may in fact be **core professional skills**. The freedom to participate was furthermore paired with an equally important freedom **not** to participate: people should not be forced into visible contribution simply because a project describes itself as participatory.

Concrete experiences shared by participants showed how demanding this can be in practice. Facilitators may need to abandon preconceived ideas about what counts as correct participation, musical competence or even successful behaviour. One striking example concerned a student who appeared not to be following a movement exercise, but who was in fact engaging imaginatively with the music in his own way. Such moments require the artist or teacher to question their own assumptions rather than immediately correcting the participant.

Participants therefore argued that preparation for this work needs more than a toolbox of exercises. It should combine **practice, theoretical understanding, interdisciplinary perspectives, reflection, exposure to different social contexts, and mentorship by experienced practitioners**. Real-life experience was considered indispensable: internships, observation and supervised work in actual projects allow practitioners to develop forms of judgement that cannot be acquired from theory alone.

A related proposal concerned the creation of stronger **communities of practice**. Artists engaged in this work often operate as freelancers and may have little opportunity to discuss complex experiences with peers. Regular meetings could allow practitioners to share not only successful projects but also difficulties and failures. The willingness to discuss what went wrong was seen as particularly important for a field that wishes to develop critically rather than merely promote positive success stories.

Researching social arts practice

The final major strand of the seminar concerned research methodology.

Participants compared **action research, participatory action research, ethnography, arts-based research, practice-based research, design-based research, evaluation and quantitative approaches**. Rather than treating these as mutually exclusive territories, the discussion emphasised the importance of selecting methodologies and methods according to the research question.

One particularly useful principle emerged:

“It is your research project that decides the methodology. It is not the methodology that decides the research project.”

The seminar also made an important distinction between **participation in an artistic process** and **participation in the research about that process**. Someone may be deeply involved in making music, contributing ideas and shaping an artistic project without necessarily being a co-researcher. Research becomes participatory in a stronger sense when participants also influence research questions, data collection, interpretation or dissemination.

Experiments with participant-generated data were discussed, for example allowing people involved in a project to decide themselves what to record with phones or tablets rather than relying exclusively on cameras placed by researchers. This changes not only who gathers the data but also **whose perspective determines what is considered significant enough to document**.

Different perspectives, mixed methods and research rigour

The final methodological session developed these questions further by looking closely at **how researchers actually produce and interpret knowledge** in socially engaged arts settings.

Participants discussed the value of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches rather than placing them in opposition. Models such as **PERMA**, used to conceptualise wellbeing, and research into **flow** were presented as examples of how psychological constructs and quantitative scales can contribute to research on artistic experience. At the same time, qualitative approaches such as based on grounded theory and thematic analysis make it possible to explore experiences and meanings that cannot be reduced to numerical measures.

A particularly useful distinction concerned **first-, second- and third-person perspectives**. Interviews and self-report measures can provide first-person accounts; external observation can offer a third-person perspective; while methods such as video-stimulated recall can create a second-person perspective in which researcher and participant revisit an event together and try to understand what was happening at a particular moment. This was seen as especially valuable for uncovering tacit, embodied knowledge in artistic practice.

The discussion also emphasised research rigour. Whether using thematic analysis, grounded theory, quantitative measurement or artistic methods, researchers need to make clear **how they moved from their material to their interpretation**. A striking quotation or anecdote should not become a “theme” simply because it fits an attractive story. Participants stressed the importance of transparency about the steps through which findings are produced.

Quantitative research was also discussed as potentially useful precisely because it may reveal patterns that contradict practitioners’ assumptions. One example concerned research on improvisation in which novice musicians appeared to experience greater flow and self-regulation under relatively free conditions than under highly scaffolded ones. Such findings do not provide a final truth, but they can generate new questions for practice and stimulate further research.

At the same time, participants warned against **speculating beyond the data**. Quantitative findings may show that two groups differ without explaining why. The appropriate response may then be to undertake further qualitative or ethnographic inquiry rather than immediately constructing an explanation. In this sense, different methodologies can form part of an ongoing cycle of questioning.

The seminar also explored ways in which artistic forms themselves might become part of research analysis or dissemination. Examples included performances, dance, poetry, improvised music and performative forms of evaluation developed from research material. This raised the possibility that different audiences may require different forms of knowledge-sharing, without abandoning methodological clarity or research rigour.

Research must return

The methodological discussions eventually led to an ethical question that became one of the strongest concluding concerns of the seminar:

Who benefits from research?

Participants reflected on research traditions in which academics enter communities, collect stories and experiences, transform these into publications and take the resulting knowledge away from the people who made the research possible.

Questions inspired partly by decolonial research approaches included: Who owns the research? Whose interests does it serve? Who determines the questions? Who interprets its findings? Who writes them? And how will the knowledge be shared?

For research into socially engaged arts practice, dissemination therefore cannot be regarded as a final academic formality. Research findings need to become accessible to practitioners, musicians, social workers, cultural organisations and the people whose experiences contributed to the research.

Podcasts, accessible publications, public presentations, artistic outcomes and other forms of knowledge-sharing can complement academic articles and make research useful beyond academia.

As was strongly expressed during the seminar: **why undertake research into practice if the knowledge does not somehow return to practice?**

The methodological discussions also generated a possible future initiative for SIMM: the idea of organising an intensive **research summer school** in which researchers and practitioners could work through an entire research process together—from formulating questions and choosing appropriate methods to collecting and analysing material and finding ways to communicate the results. The idea was inspired by previous intensive research-school models and was envisaged not only for music but potentially across the arts.

Participants

The nine invited researcher-participants represented a wide range of disciplinary, artistic and geographical perspectives.

- **Tormod Wallem Anundsen** — University of Agder, **Norway**. His contribution concerned the development of the international *Music in Action in Contemporary Society (MUSACT)* Joint Master's programme and the idea of musicians as socially engaged actors.
- **Giullia Assmann Knothe** — São Paulo State University (UNESP), **Brazil**. Her doctoral research examines mental health, gender and inequality among music students.
- **Shannon Burns** — Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, **Ireland**. She brought research on intergenerational learning and teaching in community band practice.

- **Federica Felli** — Conservatorio “Santa Cecilia” and CPIA 3 Rome, **Italy**. Her action research investigates music, migrant identity, language learning and intercultural dialogue.
- **Chinelo L. Njaka** — independent sociologist and textile/fibre artist, affiliated with Peckham Rights! in London and the WARC School, **United Kingdom / international**. Her *Visual Storywork* research explores Black textile practice as visual narrative, cultural memory and knowledge production.
- **Günsu Özkarar** — Maltepe University Conservatory, Istanbul, **Turkey**. Her work examines early-childhood music-making, family participation and the *Music Together* approach.
- **Karin Elinor Sauer** — Cooperative State University Baden-Württemberg, Faculty of Social Work, **Germany**. Her research concerns community music, social work, artistic activism and participatory action research.
- **Sandra Sinsch-Gouffi** — Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, **Germany**. Her research develops *Transformative Enabling Didactics* for musical learning and participation in forensic psychiatry.
- **Maia Steinberg** — independent researcher and director of VoCreation, **Uruguay / Netherlands**. Her interdisciplinary participatory work explores voice, personal narratives, activism and social transformation.

Facilitators

The seminar was facilitated by:

- **Prof. Sean Gregory** — Guildhall School of Music & Drama, London, **United Kingdom**
- **Prof. Luc Nijs** — Institute for Musicology and the Arts, University of Luxembourg, and Chair Jonet, **Luxembourg / Belgium**
- **Prof. Potheini Vaiouli** — Department of Education and Social Work, University of Luxembourg, **Luxembourg**
- **Filip Verneert** — Chair Jonet, Ghent University, **Belgium**
- **Prof. Dr Lukas Pairen** — SIMM and Chair Jonet, Ghent University, **Belgium**

Co-organisers

SIMM Research Seminar #12 was jointly organised by:

University of Luxembourg (Institute for Musicology and the Arts)
Guildhall School of Music & Drama, London
Chair Jonet – Ghent University
and SIMM

The seminar once again demonstrated the value of the SIMM research seminar format: a small international group, sufficient time for researchers to expose work in progress, and an emphasis not on presenting finished answers but on allowing concepts, assumptions and methods to be questioned collectively.