

Call for Papers

Figurations and Fantasies of Freedom in the Performing Arts

International Conference
18–20 February 2027

Center for Contemporary Dance (CCD), Cologne University of Music and Dance

Freedom is under considerable pressure. In Europe and other liberal democracies, where artistic freedom has long been treated as relatively secure, it has once again moved to the centre of political, cultural and societal debates and polarization. In the face of authoritarian and nationalist politics, wars and geopolitical conflicts, ecological crises, technological transformations, and increasing economic pressures on cultural institutions, what once appeared certain can no longer be taken for granted. Yet, freedom and artistic freedom in particular have never been evenly distributed, neither geographically nor historically. Its promises have always coexisted with exclusions, dependencies and different conditions of access. What, then, do we mean when we speak of “freedom”, “freedom of and in the arts” today?

We propose that the performing arts offer a particularly productive field in which to discuss these tensions, especially since bodies in movement are central to conceptualize the potentials and restraints of (global) activism and mobilization. Across different historical moments, they have negotiated what it might mean to move, speak, appear, act or refuse freely and who is permitted to do so.

With **Figurations and Fantasies of Freedom**, we want to bring two intertwined perspectives into this dialogue. *Figurations* refer to the embodied, aesthetic, social and institutional forms through which freedom takes shape and becomes tangible. *Fantasies* point to the speculative, fictional and imaginative dimensions through which alternative political and social realities can take shape. Together, they invite us to approach freedom not simply as a political concept or philosophical ideal, but as a cultural and aesthetic practice that is repeatedly embodied and imagined, performed and contested, remembered and reinvented.

As such we like to ponder: How does freedom become tangible through performance? What becomes visible when different experiences of freedom and unfreedom are brought into relation? How is freedom negotiated through bodies, institutions, movements, images, narratives and aesthetic practices? What kinds of freedom can be imagined through art? How have the performing arts shaped and transformed imaginaries of freedom across different historical periods? Which forgotten genealogies and marginalized histories need to be made visible in this discussion?

This conference wants to bring together international scholars, artists, curators, dramaturgs, archivists and cultural practitioners from dance studies, performance studies, visual culture, philosophy, political theory, history, media studies and related disciplines to imagine and practice, jointly or antagonistically, the (im)possibilities of freedom – in the arts and beyond. Alongside conventional discussions and panels, we welcome experimental formats and workshops. We invite contributions engaging with, but not limited to, the following themes and questions:

Performing Freedom: How do bodies, choreographies and performances produce, embody or contest ideas of freedom? What are the potentials and also limits of thinking freedom through performance and performance through freedom?

Histories, Genealogies and Narratives of Freedom: How have concepts and narratives of freedom been shaped throughout the histories of dance, theatre and performance? Which artistic practices have shaped imaginaries of freedom, and how might these histories be re-read through feminist, queer, decolonial or transnational perspectives?

Refiguring Institutions: How can cultural and academic institutions become sites for democratic transformation? Which institutional structures enable or restrict artistic and intellectual freedom? How do curatorial, dramaturgical and educational practices negotiate tensions between autonomy, participation, inclusion, care and responsibility?

Archives and Imaginaries of Freedom: How can archival materials and embodied practices be reactivated to unsettle inherited narratives of freedom and reconsider what freedom might mean under changing historical and political conditions?

Freedom, Technology and Ecological Futures: How are technological and ecological transformations reshaping ideas of freedom, agency and autonomy? How do AI and digital technologies change artistic practices, authorship and conditions of production? How might performance challenge anthropocentric notions of freedom and imagine more interdependent or more-than-human forms of coexistence?

Freedom, Conflict and Public Space: Does artistic freedom require friction? How are censorship, dissent, protest and civil disobedience negotiated through performance? What happens when competing claims to freedom clash in artistic and public spaces?

We welcome proposals for:

- individual papers (20 minutes)
- co-curated panels
- lecture-performances
- artistic interventions and provocations
- workshops
- practice research presentations

Please submit:

- an abstract (maximum 300 words)
- a short biography (maximum 150 words)
- an indication of your preferred presentation format

The conference language is **English**.

We also encourage submissions from early-career researchers, artist-researchers and practitioners, as well as interdisciplinary contributions that bring historical, theoretical and artistic perspectives into dialogue.

Submission deadline: October 25th 2026

Notification of acceptance: by November 15th 2026

Please send proposals to:

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Organizing Team

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