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## Map ethics!

### A method for identifying and addressing ethical dimensions of artistic research projects

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The method is a part of a contribution from the University of Bergen, Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design to the Erasmus+ project "Advancing Supervision for Artistic Research Doctorates".<sup>1</sup> It has been developed with valuable input from Ass. Prof. Christine Hansen, Ass. Prof. Synnøve Bendixsen, researcher Geir Harald Samuelsen, and the faculty's PhD candidates.

## 1. Introduction

The objective of this text is to propose a method for identifying and addressing ethical dimensions of artistic research projects. The method uses perspectives from Actor-Network Theory, encouraging the reader to map the networks of relations between human and non-human actors in her research project and consider the ethical dimensions of these relations. The process will hopefully open spaces for discussion and reflection. The target group of the method is primarily artistic PhD candidates and their supervisors, but it can be useful to any researcher.

## 2. Premises

This method relies on three premises:

Premise 1: All research projects have significant ethical dimensions.

There are significant ethical dimensions to all research projects. It is a matter of viewing the project through an "ethics lens" or an "ethics filter" to discover the ethical implications and ramifications of one's activities. One might be *unaware* of ethics in the same way as one might be unaware of one's use of methods, theories or technologies. In any case, unawareness in research is most likely disadvantageous, and in any case it is an irresponsible starting point.

Premise 2: Research projects are *continuously developing ethical relations* with the world.

Ethics is about how we relate to the world and which impact we have on the world. Researchers, consciously or unconsciously, invite, accept, and create a vast number of relations. These relations are not stable, but in continuous development. They influence and change projects, and so also the artistic outcomes. Ethical considerations can help investigate relations and their mutual impact, and thus guide the research. In other words, ethics is a question of methodology. Ethics can, in the words of Walead Beshty, "function as a methodological approach which can address the aesthetic conditions of an artwork in light of the effects it produces on the social field of which it is a part".<sup>2</sup> As the project unfolds and develops, so do its relations with the world around it. Researchers need to reflect continuously upon the ethical dimensions of these relations,<sup>3</sup> and from this follows the third premise.

Premise 3: The researcher *herself* must map and reflect upon the ethical dimensions of her project. She needs to claim responsibility and consider ethics from the start to the end of the research process. All researchers must know and relate to the standards of research ethics and codes of conduct in academia and in their respective fields.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, art questions, tests

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<sup>1</sup> <https://advancingsupervision.eu>

<sup>2</sup> Beshty, "Toward an Aesthetics of Ethics", 22.

<sup>3</sup> Mick Wilson shares a similar starting point for the research at GradCAM, Dublin, seeing research as an ethical relation with the world: «Rather than using the tired model of research ethics, as an exercise in form-filling and box-ticking (what is usually pejoratively called 'arse-covering'), we decided to see what might happen if we approached research as an ethical relationship with the world - more properly, as an ethos in itself.» Wilson, "Discipline Problems and the Ethos of Research", 214.

<sup>4</sup> There are many such general guidelines, published for different contexts and by different institutions. See e.g. «Ethics for researchers», published by the European Commission in connection with the 7th Framework Programme, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/fp7/89888/ethics-for-researchers\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/fp7/89888/ethics-for-researchers_en.pdf). For the 8th Framework Programme, better known as "Horizon 2020", the European Commission refers to "The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity", published by All European Academies and available at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/european-code-of-conduct-for-research-integrity\\_horizon\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/european-code-of-conduct-for-research-integrity_horizon_en.pdf). Researchers in Norway can refer to the general guidelines of the National Research Ethics

and moves boundaries, standards, or norms. Art evokes, provokes, allures, engages, tricks, fools, impresses, expresses, reveals, astonishes, is subjective, intimate, emotional, impersonal, distanced, cold, and brings us out of, or to our, senses. Artists interact with and engage audiences and participants continuously. Often the interaction is experimental or is meant to provoke reactions. The artistic researcher must therefore undertake particularly thorough ethical considerations. Consequently, mapping and reflecting upon ethical dimensions of our research cannot wait until the researcher has accumulated a significant bibliography on ethics. The task cannot be outsourced, nor can it be limited to consulting advisory boards, as important and qualified as these institutions are. The responsibility lies with the artist, from the beginning to the end.

### 3. A Relational Approach

We propose to see the research projects as networks of relations. Our main inspiration for this way of thinking comes from sociology, and more specifically from Actor-Network-Theory (ANT).<sup>5</sup> ANT understands societies not as pre-existing, stable social structures or forces, but as a vast number of ever-changing relationships between a vast number of human and non-human actors. All actors (humans, plants, viruses, objects, concepts) are connected to a number of other actors, and both human and non-human actors can have agency, i.e. they can interact in the networks of relations: they can *make someone do something*.<sup>6</sup> For ANT, intentionality is not necessarily involved in agency: humans, scallops, microbes, trees, tools, tapestries, all can make other actors do something. The work of the sociologists of ANT is to follow the actors and see how they form associations.

The idea of mapping the networks is central to the method. Drawing maps of networks of actors has several advantages: Firstly, a map allows one to see and consider many relations simultaneously, or in any order and direction. Secondly, drawing maps allows one to discover the singular topography of a research project. Thirdly, a visual map of the human and non-human actors in the research might contribute to dismantling the anthropocentric perspective that dominates western culture. Rather than understanding places (e.g. the park through which one walks to the work space), materials (the colour pigments for ceramics or wood for musical instruments), or viruses (we know what they can do by now) as backdrops to human actions, one can consider how all actors – human and non-human – form associations and make each other do things.<sup>7</sup> Through mapping the relations in research projects, we can develop a sensitivity to how we interact with and can care for a multitude of actors. We can start to discover how these interactions might be shaped or influenced by other actors in other places and from other times, already in place before our work commences.<sup>8</sup>

It is not possible to choose or control all relations in a project, but it is possible to become sensitive to bias, to the conditions of choices and interactions, to understand how the relations in the research project are initiated and maintained, and to address the ethical dimensions of the interactions. The method we propose is a hands-on approach with which any researcher, whether she is well-equipped with theory on ethics or not, can start this process. We invite the researcher to carefully consider as many relations as possible in the networks that constitute her project: *How does this particular relation influence my work, and vice versa? What impact do I have on this specific relation? Which relations are, or should be, out of my control? Which relations do I need to accept?* There are many more questions to be asked that the researcher can find herself. The most important question is as follows: What are the ethical implications of my answer to these questions?

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Committees, available at <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/general-guidelines/>. See also footnote 15. A good research practice involves knowing the ethical guidelines of the institution where the research takes place, as well as those of collaborating institutions.

<sup>5</sup> We base this introduction on Actor-Network-Theory as presented in Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). We are indebted to Prof. Ellen Røed for introducing the idea of mapping research projects as relational networks.

<sup>6</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 107.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the problem with an anthropocentric (and more generally monocentric) view, see Mueller, *Being Salmon, Being Human* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017), esp. 104-112.

<sup>8</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 193-194.

## 4. Four main perspectives

A map can be read and investigated in many ways. We propose approaching the investigation through four overlapping perspectives: delimitation, contextualisation, sources, and power.

### 4.1. Delimitation

Delimitation is about defining or creating an inside and an outside. A project is delimited in many ways. People, places, tools, technologies, materials, methods, in short, human and non-human actors are somehow involved in (or excluded from) the research through a variety of processes. It is not possible to avoid delimitations. It happens continuously, so an important task is to identify how the delimitations happen. We can make three general observations:

Firstly, delimitation processes are not entirely controllable. Whether conscious or unconscious, choices and actions are “overflowed by many ingredients already in place that come from other times, other spaces and other agents.”<sup>9</sup> Latour shows how we are framed by agencies that can be remote in time and place. He uses the term “structuring templates” to denote materials, tools, intellectual techniques and technologies that structure our interactions. He takes the lecture hall as an example, designed and built to facilitate a certain kind of interaction (lecture) between a certain group of people (students and lecturers).<sup>10</sup> When making a map of the networks of relationships that constitute a research project, it is important to remember that all of the actors in the networks are influenced by agencies from other places and other times. It is relevant to ask what these relations do to the project. Within which structural templates do our interactions take place?

Secondly, many delimitations happen unconsciously and/or are not intended. From the point of view of the project owner they might be collateral or coincidental. Indeed, they are quite probably *out of view*. Out of view does not mean ethically irrelevant, quite the contrary. For this reason, mapping the network of relations and discovering the mechanisms and actions through which delimitations occur is indispensable.

Thirdly, *some* delimitations happen consciously and are intended. Describing conscious delimitations is to describe *the borders of intent* of the project, what the project explicitly is supposed to do.

### 4.2. Contextualisation

Delimitation overlaps with processes of contextualisation. (Indeed, contextualisation is a process of delimitation, but delimitation is not only a process of contextualisation.) Contextualisation should be a conscious exercise. Artistic researchers are used to situating research relative to academic and artistic contexts, but perhaps less so to social ones.

PhD candidates are always asked to contextualise their research, but less often they are asked to elaborate or justify how the contextualisation came to be. Having done the delimitation exercise above, there might be tensions between the different motivations one has for situating the project. Rather than *mapping the context*, with the risk that the map suits a specific understanding of what an academic, artistic or social context looks like, our advice is to first map the networks of relations between the many actors in the research project, and *then* ask how the actors form different possible contexts.

### 4.3. Sources

Contextualisation has very much to do with recognising and acknowledging the sources of our research. Researchers are used to giving accounts of research sources in the sense of references, an important part of the contextualisation. However, there are many more ways of understanding what a source is. If again one starts with mapping the networks of the research project, one can ask how the many actors function as sources. One might find sources of funding, sources of energy, sources of knowledge, concepts, materials, expression and so on. In fact, any actor can be considered as a source. The task of the researcher is to recognise them as such and ask how she relates to and uses them, how she lets them act in, and on, the research.

Our research projects serve as sources for others. For which actors is our research a source? For which actors does the research care? For whom does the research matter?

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<sup>9</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 194-196.

#### 4.4. Power

To consider the ethics of power in research projects is to consider how different kinds of power are distributed between the different actors – human and non-human. The powers to act can be very dissimilar and unequally distributed. Even when they seem equally divided between actors, the relations are *always asymmetrical* in some way. The task is to identify how the relations are established, who (or what) has which powers to act, and how these powers are modified and reinforced.

The candidate and the supervisor will hopefully have met with the term “asymmetrical relation” when reading the institution’s ethical guidelines for relations between supervisors and PhD candidates.<sup>11</sup> The many cases of misconduct that have come to light over the last few years show that there is much to do in making staff and students more conscious about their different roles, their different levels of power to act, and the importance of following the guidelines.

Asymmetry is not only about who has the most power, but also who has which kind of power to act. Besides the candidates and supervisors, all participants, audiences, readers, indeed anyone with whom the project intervenes, will have different kinds of powers. Some powers are warranted through institutional or societal laws, rules and regulations. Artistic researchers will find that the rules and regulations of the research institution are different from those governing the different actors in the art field. There are other differences in power that are not regulated and depend on relationships between actors. Although they are difficult to spot, one can identify and address them by making the same kind of map as for the previous chapters. By mapping as many relevant actors as one can think of, both human and non-human, one can consider how they make each other do something. Rather than making a map of formal power structures in a project, with the risk of making a map that corresponds to a given view on the distribution of powers, we propose to make a map of the actor-network first, and *then* ask how each actor has power to act.<sup>12</sup>

We follow Latour in understanding power as a result of processes, rather than some pre-existing and stable force or stock.<sup>13</sup> The relations in our research might start before or during the project and continue developing through and beyond its duration. Since the relations change continuously, so do the different powers to act. Our research processes are part of these developments. Do the research processes correspond to ethical conduct? How does the research care for each actor’s power to act? If the processes are ethically flawed, what about the results?<sup>14</sup>

Our four main perspectives – delimitation, contextualisation, sources, power – are overlapping. They also show how different actions influence each other: The way a research project is delimited has consequences for its possible contexts, which will have an influence on which actors can act as sources and who the project can be a source for, which again is decisive for the kinds of powers that can develop, and their distribution. One can also start at the other end, and consider how power influences the sources one accepts, and how this in turn leads to specific processes of delimitation and contextualisation. One can in fact start with any one of the perspectives and see how decisions or conditions within one influence all other. This interdependency can be visualised with the following table, which can be read in any direction:

	Delimitation	Contextualisation	Sources	Power
Delimitation				
Contextualisation				

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. the guidelines for the University of Bergen: [https://regler.app.uib.no/regler\\_en/Part-2-Research-Education-Dissemination/2.2-Education/2.2.5.-Kvalitetssikring-akkreditering-grader-med-videre/Ethical-guidelines-for-relations-between-supervisors-and-students-or-candidates-at-the-University-of-Bergen](https://regler.app.uib.no/regler_en/Part-2-Research-Education-Dissemination/2.2-Education/2.2.5.-Kvalitetssikring-akkreditering-grader-med-videre/Ethical-guidelines-for-relations-between-supervisors-and-students-or-candidates-at-the-University-of-Bergen)

<sup>12</sup> ANT generally avoids the word structure to describe the interactions between actors, as the idea of a structured society limits the study of interactions to pre-defined structures. Latour distinguishes between “underlying hidden structures” (which according to ANT don’t exist) and “structuring templates” that materialise e.g. as intellectual technologies. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 196.

<sup>13</sup> “...power, like society, is the final result of a process and not a reservoir, a stock, or a capital that will automatically provide an explanation. Power and domination have to be produced, made up, composed.” Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the relation between aesthetics and morality, see e.g. Mullin, “Evaluating Art: Morally Significant Imagining versus Moral Soundness.”

Sources				
Power				

The proposed perspectives are certainly debatable. The reader might think of other terms or perspectives. Our main goal is to have a method for identifying the human and non-human actors in our research projects, by which processes we enter into relations with the actors, and how these different actors have agency. The results of our research, the knowledge, insights or experiences we contribute with, grow out of the networks that we are a part of, of our relationships with the world. If these relationships can be considered as ethical, so can the results of our research.

## 5. Some examples

In order to demonstrate how the mapping can work, we will in the following paragraphs provide some observations concerning two kinds of actors - persons and tools - from the four main perspectives. We will keep the discussions as short as possible, leaving it to the researcher to identify more actors and trace their relationships.

### 5.1 Delimitations

Our first examples of considerations relate to the delimitation of persons. As a PhD candidate, one might be led to think that the project is a “solo-project” and that, consequently, issues concerning the composition of the research team are irrelevant. There is no such thing as a solo-project. Even if the candidate is formally individually responsible for the results, she is surrounded by people in the entire process: supervisors, advisors, experts, participants or partners, institutional leaders, administration, students, not to forget her references, readers, and audiences, those for whom she makes the research available. They might all have agency in the research project.

The fact that a research project cannot include everyone is an ethical dilemma: Who can the research afford to exclude? Who can afford to be excluded from the research? How does the research contribute to reinforcing ethically problematic practices, like the obvious social inequality in academia?

There can be many reasons for working with one person rather than another, or publishing for one group of readers rather than another. Which considerations have priority when the researcher opens the research for someone rather than someone else? In short, why does she interact with the persons she interacts with, and what are the ethical consequences of this delimitation?

Answers to these questions can lead to considerations of other categories of actors. Our example will be tools: How does the composition of the people involved in the research project affect the research tools? Choices of tools have consequences that can be assessed ethically. They always come from somewhere and carry with them contexts and values. Just as choice of persons can include or exclude certain tools, tools can contribute to including and excluding people. Tools can affirm or challenge the market hegemony of a producer, as well as oblige a researcher or an institution to stay in an ethically problematic relation with a commercial actor, which again might oblige audiences or readers to subscribe to or master tools to gain access to research. What kind of interaction do the research tools foster? (Here we are already approaching the perspective of sources and power.) In short, how does the researcher choose her research tools, how do they affect the research, and what are the ethical consequences of this delimitation?

### 5.2 Contextualisation

How do the persons with whom a researcher interacts affect her movements between different contexts? What does she perceive or intend to be her artistic and academic context? What are the contexts of her supervisors, project partners or participants? Are they the same? If not, which contexts does she consider the most relevant for the project? Do the answers to this question affect the composition of the involved persons?

Did she opt for a supervisor on the other side of the continent or a collaboration with an artist in the opposite hemisphere because the context of her research required it? What ethical

dilemmas arise from situating the work in contexts that require extended or long distance travelling?

Tools can have a strong connection to a specific context. Changing the tools can in some cases have profound effects, making the researcher irrelevant within one context and relevant in another. A researcher might have a more or less conscious relation to her tools. She might be using the default tools of her field without much reflection, missing out on an opportunity to question what those tools do. Tools can reflect and direct the world-view, values, and practices of a field. Choice of tools is therefore ethically significant, as we comply with or challenge a field's values and practices.

### 5.3 Sources

When referring to a published artwork, a book, a film, the researcher can identify the persons behind the reference, and in this way give a fair account of how the research is based on the work of others. However, looking at the map of relations again, she will probably see that many of the persons with whom she interacts have not published anything that she is likely to refer to. Still, they might be important sources for the research.

Many artistic researchers collaborate directly with other artists in the course of their projects, for example a composer working with a musician, a director working with an actor, a choreographer working with a dancer (or in all cases, vice versa). Inviting a person into a project is the same as including into a project a complex reservoir of ideas, concepts, experience, know-how, expression, skills, values, and networks. How is the importance of these sources to the research acknowledged and made visible? How does the researcher's conception of a person's contribution to the project correspond to that person's own understanding of her role? These questions are important for PhD candidates as much as for anyone, since the formal reward of the totality of the research is bestowed on the candidate alone.

Taking a step away from the colleagues, artists also depend on public participants. (This has become particularly clear under the restrictions following the Covid-19 pandemic.) Any artwork, from a concert to intervention art, involves the public as sources in an interactive exchange. How does the researcher care for these participants? To which degree does her research depend on their intervention? If she wishes to document and disseminate the interaction, has she informed them, and secured their consent, without any coercion? Do they understand what they are involved in? Do they have the right to withdraw?<sup>15</sup>

Ethos<sup>16</sup> always plays a role in art and in artistic research. Besides the ethos of the persons directly involved, the ethos of institutions, communities or cultures, present or historical, might be activated in a project, consciously or unconsciously. Their ethos becomes a part of the project. The question is not whether but how this happens. Are there any ethical dilemmas in how other persons, or cultures, appear in the research? It does not take a big leap of the imagination to see that one might make (consciously or unconsciously) a person, an institution or a community appear in a setting which is in conflict with its values or ideals, or that somehow creates a relation with which it would rather not be identified. We are here approaching questions concerning cultural appropriation.

What kind of impact does the researcher wish that her project has? Ideally, the research should be a source to others. Which tools she uses becomes ethically interesting: Some tools might be expensive, or otherwise exclusive, to the extent that very few will be able to interact with the work or build on it. Is there a risk that the project opens possibilities primarily for the researcher? Tools for presentation and dissemination of results are also relevant in this respect. How do they contribute to provide access to the work and make it a source of insight, experience or knowledge for others?

### 5.4 Power

One can start evaluating the power of the actors in a map of networks by asking simple questions such as: Who defines the research topic and the research questions? Who decides over or has access to the research material? Who has access to the places of the research? (Who has quite

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<sup>15</sup> A list of principles for ethical research involving humans is offered in Vanclay Frank, Baines James .T. and Taylor C. Nicholas. "Principles for ethical research involving humans: ethical professional practice in impact assessment, Part I". See also the General Data Protection Regulation's definition of personal data and consent: <https://gdpr-info.eu/issues/personal-data/> and <https://gdpr-info.eu/issues/consent/>

<sup>16</sup> We use the term in the sense of the distinguishing character of a person, a group, an institution (c.f. Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

literally a key to buildings?) Who masters the tools? Who is at home in the research context? Who decides over the funding and time at disposal for the research phases? Who can fire and hire? Who can safely withdraw from the project, and who cannot? Based on the answers to such questions, one might get a clearer notion of what is at stake for the involved persons.

No sole person has the power to decide over all the actors and their relations. How the powers to act continuously are re-distributed is of significant ethical importance. The researcher needs to be conscious about which powers her participants have – and empower them. This does not mean to try to give equal rights to all, but to acknowledge and allow their power to act. There needs to be a correspondence between the power a participant has and the tasks she is asked to fulfil.

Tools can play a significant part in the development of power. Who chooses the tools, and who masters them? Mastering a tool can mean increased power to act and increased control and ownership over the results, and vice versa. Assessing the character of the relation between tools and persons in a research project can be very informative for understanding power relations between the participants.

It is important to communicate clearly the function a participant has: Is she a co-researcher, researching *with* the candidate and sharing the results, or does she do research *for* the candidate, on the outside of the project, delivering results that are of service to the research? Or is she indeed someone researched *on*, with no defining power concerning the interest of the researcher?<sup>17</sup>

Moving beyond the closest circle around the research project, we can ask how the project acknowledges and fosters the agency of other actors. Whatever our answers to such larger questions, it is clear that conditions and choices met in the processes of delimitation and contextualisation and the use and disposition of sources have an impact on the power in the research project and between the research project and its contexts. The opposite is also true.

## 6. Final remarks

The question of which priority came first in a research project – the research topic, the tool, the research partner, job possibility, the move to a new place, the research material – is nearly impossible to answer with any certainty. Research is not a clear, chronologically structured process. Even if we remember where we started, our priorities change with our changing networks of relations, forcing us to rethink our starting point. The same is true for ethical challenges. What looked ethically sound and clear at one point might have different implications when relations change or when viewed from a different perspective. Making a map – or several maps – is helpful in the process of reviewing our starting points.

In this text we have proposed a method for making such maps and given a few examples of questions one might ask to address ethical challenges. We now leave it to the researcher to identify the actors and networks of her research, find the right questions and address the ethical dimensions of the relations that constitute her project.

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<sup>17</sup> The categories are from Griffiths, "Research and the Self", 181-182.

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