

WHAT'S ART GOT TO DO WITH IT? REFLECTING ON BIOART AND ETHICS FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF THE *TRUST ME, I'M AN ARTIST PROJECT*

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Abstract

Bioart and biomedical art is a blossoming field with a whole new generation of artists, the DIYbio movement enabling more people to get involved, and discoveries in bioscience bringing in new challenges. Supported by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union, *Trust Me, I'm an Artist* is a project initiated by artist Anna Dumitriu and ethicist Bobbie Farsides to provide a platform for discussing bioart and ethics, for sharing knowledge and building capacity. This article reflects upon my journey through the different art projects and how foregrounding ethics challenged my usual art critic approach.

Keywords: Ethics, Bioscience, Biomedicine, BioArt

Among the reasons that brought me into the *Trust Me, I'm an Artist* project [1], one was to dig into the many and complex issues of ethics and bioart with the hope of better embracing all the questions raised by benefiting from the knowledge of the various people involved.

A second reason was that, in only a few years, from 2010 on to give a loose timeframe, I witnessed the development of a more cautious and restrictive approach and attitude to what could or could not be done or exhibited as art with biotechnologies. Simultaneously, the field blew up with a whole new generation of artists pushing the boundaries, the DIYbio movement enabling more people to get involved, and discoveries in bioscience and biomedicine bringing in new challenges.

Trust Me, I'm an Artist was initiated and led by artist Anna Dumitriu and ethicist Bobbie Farsides in 2011 [2]. It consisted of the organization of public events where an artist proposed a bioart work to an ethical committee composed, as much as possible, on the same basis of such a committee in a scientific context of the country where it takes place. Obviously, this set up includes *de facto* a performance/staged element. In 2015, with funding from the Creative Europe program of the European Union, the project developed and expanded under the lead organization of the Amsterdam-based Waag Society with a focus on art and biomedicine and an expressed goal to help build capacity and shared knowledge for artists, scientists and cultural players (Fig. 1) wanting to engage in those areas and types of collaborations.

In the first edition of *Trust Me, I'm an Artist*, I co-organized with Anna Dumitriu the hearing in Paris of Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin from Art Orienté Objet about *Que le panda vive en moi* [3], a project that could have followed their famous *Que le cheval vive en moi!* ("May The Horse Live in Me!"). In the second round, to which I am reflecting here, I attended the different projects as the director of Leonardo/Olats and in my capacity of art critic, producing a series of podcasts [4] with both the artists and the curators and writing a diary [5] throughout.

In this article, I would like to reflect upon and come back to some of the points that have been significant for me, either by providing a conceptual framework, by opening up new questions, or by highlighting unanswered issues that require further debate by society at large.

Practical ethics in biotech and biomedicine research laboratories as well as legislation form a blurry landscape with varied rules and regulation [6] that seem to be in constant flux, with-

out a shared homogeneity among the EU countries. Here and there the weight of local history, sometimes tied to medical scandals, can be witnessed [7], not to mention the moral and mental scars left by the Second World War. But, more importantly, it is our conception and beliefs about Life and the Living that is currently shaken and has become unstable: that is the very issue of the redefinition of ethics as the ground basis to our attitude toward and relations to our fellow humans and other living creatures with whom we are sharing the planet; analyses sometimes resembling programmatic discourses and *vice versa*.

What's art got to do with it?

Where does bioart stand in this landscape? Different positions can be stated, that are not mutually exclusive.

The first one is that bioart should comply with the current agreed ethics of the environment where it is created. This being particularly true when the creation is done in scientific facilities and in (official) collaboration with researchers. Here comes the first obstacle: in science, you are not allowed to experiment on yourself, which is at the basis of art from immemorial time up to current body art and performance. This question, 'can I be third party to myself,' was raised by Howard Boland with his *Cellular Propeller* project [8] in which he wanted to use his own sperm cells for a synthetic biology artwork. The second difficulty is that what is acceptable for research, especially in medicine, is not necessarily considered so for art. Ethical rules in research and medicine is a delicate balance between risks (for humans) or abuse of, pain or fatal damage to the creatures used (non human and human) in regard to the potential (usually health and well-being) benefits (for humans). Could "aesthetic interest" be considered a criterium for a "reasonable risk or damage-necessity"? We do judge art projects daily for grants and programs of all sorts and it seems to me no less or no more (irrational or subjective than the criteria used in science and medicine.

In contemporary western societies, being provocative and breaking boundaries is considered one of the roles of art. By asking to do for art what is allowed for science, by asking to do what is allowed in labs outside of the labs (security provided), by asking to do in labs what is (generally) allowed in art, bioart is breaking boundaries. By exhibiting our very contradictions—that under certain circumstances you are allowed to do what is otherwise considered immoral—art is not only questioning the ethics of (bio)science but contributing to the larger debate of redefining where we put the limits of what is acceptable or not and setting the new crossed hybrid hierarchies among the Living that we are collectively elaborating. Our consideration toward animals but also plants and even potential non carbon based "creatures" is shifting and is the site of strong debates [9]. This was at the heart of Špela Petri's *Confronting Vegetal Otherness: Skotopoiesis* [10] and Ivor Diosi's *Molding the Signifier* [11]. By casting her shadow upon growing cress, Petri does not break any ethical rules but brings in our unconscious hierarchies and, after *zoe*, asks for a new perspective on *phyto*. On a more speculative side, Diosi is addressing the unanswered question of our attitude toward artificial intelligence, the ultimate Other.

Power and Responsibility

Ultimately, ethics is a dual issue of power and responsibility. Disentangling the power of who upon whom and the responsibility of who toward whom as expressed in and by the art projects where several layers of responsibility and recipient are

intertwined has been for me one of the nurturing component of *Trust Me, I'm an Artist*. The responsibility is, of course, in the hands of the artist as the one at the initiative of the artwork but it is shared with the curator, the producer, the scientist and their respective institutions. The first recipient toward whom this responsibility is targeted is naturally the "Other," the "subject-object," the living creature which is used or part of which is used for the work. It is interesting to see the increase in concern about the use of human body parts or waste that is reaching nowadays the cells themselves. If there are some grounds for this due to some misuses on the one hand and to the evolution in bio-research that could allow for a potential control or abuse on the person on the other, it expresses a deeper crisis. This reveals the tension regarding what defines identity, the ambivalent fear (attraction-repulsion) of the commodification of the human body and the disintegration of the idea of ownership of oneself not to mention belief systems and deep archaic engrams. Gina Czamecki is confronting those issues and beliefs, the hopes and threats of personalized medicine in *Heirloom*. In this piece, she creates a "living portrait" of her young teenage daughters by growing their skin cells onto glass casts. High resolution 3D scans of the girls' heads (3D printed) that capture their face structure have been produced and are exhibited next to the incubator in the gallery. This work has been one of the most challenging for me. Building upon one of the most ancient form of art, namely the portrait, and pushing it aesthetically further, not only does it embody the complex mesh of biotechmedical components (positive and negative) together with our conflicting fantasies and dreams but it also reveals, symbolically, the structure of power: the everyday banal power of parents over their children and the more intricate medical power. It is Gina Czamecki who signed the consent form for the research laboratory to sample her children cells that would become the material for her own artwork. Even based (or because based) on a symbolic level, this was for me, a critical knot of ethics.

Less discussed when dealing about ethics, the artist and the audience are other recipients toward whom responsibility is exercised. This came up with Martin O'Brien durational performance *Taste of Flesh / Bite Me I'm Yours* [12]. Can we let an artist take risks that bring him/her "beyond the red line"? Tricky question indeed. Who is "we"? Only the curator and the producer-organizer? Or can the audience have a say during the performance? But who would dare to interrupt a performance that is explicitly "at the edge"? Isn't the artist responsible for him/herself? Where is the line drawn? As long as it is "made public," isn't an artwork considered "safe" both for the performer and his/her audience?

There is an acceptance that sport can kill the players and a sort of tolerance that it can also kill the audience. The "Paris-Dakar" rally has never been stopped when people were killed or injured along the road, nor has the "Tour de France". No one would talk about ethics in these cases but about regulation and safety to minimize the risks. By, unconsciously, placing art in the representational or metaphorical realm, in the "humanities side of life," we think that it is, and must remain, harmless. But art can be (is?) also "for real" and therefore may include risks. In 1993, in *Delusions of Self-Immolation* [13], Erik Hobijn was setting fire to voluntary spectators protected by a thin fireproof gel before extinguishing the flames. The people would sign a release form. The same procedure has been used by many other artists. No one refers to ethics in those cases, only about safety and legal regulations. Why is it becoming ethics when applied to bioart? Could those release

forms be considered the equivalent of the medical consent forms that I have always seen as a legal way to cover the doctors and health institutions rather than truly being a protection for the patients?

Trust Me, I'm an Artist put on the table the delicate and intricate boundaries between what is legal, moral and ethical. Approaching art from an ethical perspective first has been both interesting and a critical point for me. As an art critic, I deal with aesthetic first. Obviously, during the course of the project, I tended to approach the bioart works that I was encountering, within and outside of the project, with "ethical lenses" at the forefront. But the interest and power of an artwork, very much like in science, is where its aesthetical strength confronts its ethical challenges. Reaching the end of the project, my temporary conclusion would be that ethics might be a collective agreement about how immoral we allow ourselves to be.



Fig. 1. Trust Me, I'm An Artist workshop at the Medical Museion in Copenhagen
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References and Notes

1. *Trust Me, I'm an Artist: Developing Ethical Frameworks for Artists, Cultural Institutions and Audiences Engaged in the Challenges of Creating and Experiencing New Art Forms in Biotechnology and Biomedicine in Europe* is supported by funding from Creative Europe and is a collaboration between Waag Society, Brighton and Sussex Medical School, Arts Catalyst, CIANT, Kapelica Gallery, Medical Museion, Capsula and Leonardo/Olats. The lead artist on the project is Anna Dumitriu, and the lead ethicist is Professor Bobbie Farsides. More about the project can be found at <<http://trustmeianartist.eu/>>.
2. <<http://artsienceethics.tumblr.com/>>.
3. <<http://artsienceethics.tumblr.com/DuChevalAuPanda>>.
4. <<http://olats.org/trustme/podcasts.php>>.
5. <<http://olats.org/trustme/journal.php>>.
6. Anna Dumitriu, "Trust Me, I'm An Artist: Building Opportunities for Art & Science Collaboration through an Understanding of Ethics," in *Leonardo* 51, no. 1, 2018 (forthcoming).
7. Gina Czamecki and John Hunt, "Heirloom: Living Portrait of and for the Artist's Daughters Created Out of Their Own Cultured Cell," in *Leonardo* 50, no. 1, 2017.
8. <<http://trustmeianartist.eu/projects/cellular-propeller-howard-boland-project/>>.
9. Carried by theoreticians and philosophers such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Michael Marder, Monika Bakke (in English) and Dominique Lestel, Vinciane Despret (in French).
10. Spela Petri, "The Conundrum of Plant Life," in *Leonardo* 49, no. 3, 2016.
11. Ivor Diosi, "Molding the Signifier: Codesculpting the Possible Shapes of a Future Consciousness," in *Leonardo* 50, no. 1, 2017.
12. Martin O'Brien, "Flesh-Eaters: Notes toward a Zombie Methodology," in *Leonardo* 49, no. 3, 2016.
13. Erik Hobijn <http://v2.nl/archive/works/delusions-of-self-immolation>.