



Consent in action: Learning from artistic research within an institutional review context

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how artistic research practices challenge and reconfigure institutional approaches to research ethics. Focusing on the case of *Performing Working*—a doctoral project in the arts that was the first to undergo ethical review at the University of the Arts Utrecht—it investigates how forms of consent, researcher roles, and institutional responsibility are negotiated when research is processual, embodied, and collaboratively developed.

The article draws on a collaborative autoethnographic reflection involving the artist-researcher, a research participant, and members of the ethics committee. Care ethics is used as a conceptual lens to analyse the ethical dimensions of the case, foregrounding relationality, vulnerability, and attention to power. Rather than treating ethical approval as a one-off procedural hurdle, the analysis highlights ethics as an ongoing, situated practice that unfolds through dialogue, friction, and mutual attunement.

Artistic research is presented here as a 'hard case' that reveals structural frictions in existing review systems. At the same time, it offers alternative imaginaries and practices for dealing with complexity, uncertainty, and co-responsibility in research. While grounded in an artistic context, the article speaks to broader concerns in qualitative research methodology, particularly in fields that engage with lived experience, reflexivity, and shared authority. Ethics is reframed not merely as compliance, but as integral to how research is shaped, shared, and held accountable across diverse domains.

1. Introduction

What does it mean to assess ethics when research is not only about producing knowledge, but about creating relationships, sharing vulnerability, and navigating differences? In recent years, ethical review procedures have become an increasingly prominent feature in the landscape of qualitative and practice-based research. While these frameworks offer important safeguards for participants and institutions alike, they often presuppose a model of research that is linear, bounded, and individualised. This article starts from a different position: one grounded in the lived complexities of artistic research.

Our point of departure is the doctoral artistic research project *Performing Working* by artistic researcher Philippine Hoegen, currently conducted at the University of the Arts Utrecht. The project investigates the performativity of work, challenging conventional ideas of value,

contribution, and inclusion. It draws on performance art as both method and epistemology, using collaborative scores, undisciplinary co-creative practices, and collective reflection as ways of exploring the embodied labour of illness. These methods bring to the fore questions of participation, shifting roles, and shared authorship. From its very start, *Performing Working* treated ethics not as a background requirement but as a central concern of the research process.

The present article, however, is not an analysis of the project, its methods or outcomes. Rather, it focuses on the *ethical review of Performing Working*. The project was the first to undergo formal ethical review by the newly established research ethics committee (*ethische commissie onderzoek*, ECO) at the University of the Arts Utrecht. As such, the case became a testing ground—not only for the researcher, but for the institution itself too, surfacing frictions between artistic research practices and institutional frameworks for ethical review.

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Artistic research—particularly when it employs participatory and co-creative research methods – frequently unfolds in relational and open-ended ways (Bolt, 2016; Crispin, 2019). Rather than applying predefined methods to external objects of study, these practices develop methods along the way, in conversation with collaborators, materials, and contexts. Ethical questions, then, are not preliminary hurdles to be cleared, but ongoing concerns entangled with the research process itself (Hübner, 2024). This is precisely what makes artistic research a hard case for institutional review (Borgdorff, 2012; Hannula et al., 2014; Schwab, 2018). At the same time, the tensions that arise at this interface are generative: they show how artistic research not only challenges, but also provides tools and imaginaries for rethinking ethics in academia. The question therefore is not whether ethics apply for artistic research, but how: how can ethical review frameworks attend to qualitative forms of research that are processual, collective, embodied, and affective?

The current article emerges from a collaborative autoethnographic reflection on this process. It is co-authored by three members of the research ethics committee, the artistic researcher, and a participant in her research. Together, we examine how the demand for ethical review reshaped the research process, and how, in turn, the project challenged existing institutional understandings of consent, responsibility, and researcher positionality. Our aim is not to present a model or a solution, but to offer a situated account of how ethics can be practiced and reimagined in the context of artistic research—an approach that may also enrich qualitative social science by foregrounding relationality and ongoing ethical negotiation as integral to the research process.

Our central research question is: How can artistic research practices inform and reshape institutional approaches to ethical assessment, particularly with regard to consent, responsibility, and positionality?

To answer this question, we mobilise care ethics as both a theoretical and methodological framework. Care ethics foregrounds relationality, affect, and situatedness, offering a vocabulary for practices that are often invisible to institutional protocols but essential to the ethical fabric of research (Leget et al., 2019; Tronto, 1993; Gilligan, 1982). Through this lens, we reconsider the tensions and possibilities that arise when artistic research meets institutional review.

The article proceeds as follows: first, we situate our inquiry historically and conceptually by tracing the emergence of ethical review procedures in the biomedical sciences and their recent expansion into social and practice-based research. We then turn to care ethics and participatory research traditions as generative frameworks for ethics-in-action. Next, we present the emergence of the University of the Arts Utrecht Ethics Committee and the case of *Performing Working*. Through collaborative autoethnography, we analyse three key themes that emerged from our reflection: (1) forms of consent; (2) institutional responsibilities; and (3) researcher positionality. Each is examined through a care-ethical lens, allowing us to move from personal experience to theoretically informed insight.

Ultimately, we reflect on the implications of this case for broader discussions about research ethics in qualitative research. We argue that artistic research (as a hard case) does not only pose challenges to institutional review structures, but also offers concrete tools and imaginaries for rethinking them. Rather than viewing ethics as a checklist to be completed, we propose understanding it as a shared, situated, and ongoing practice. In this spirit, the article itself is an act of collaborative reflexivity. It is not a retrospective report on a finished process, but a continuation of the conversation that emerged in and through the research. We hope it contributes to a broader reimagining of ethical review as a space of learning, negotiation, and care.

2. Contextualising ethical review: from biomedical norms to situated practices

2.1. The emergence of ethical review in academic research

The development of ethical review committees in academic research

is historically rooted in responses to abuses in medical experimentation, most notoriously during World War II. International guidelines such as the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) emerged from these concerns. In the Netherlands, an early advisory report by the Health Council (Gezondheidsraad, 1955) contributed to these debates, calling for clearer protocols while legitimising human experimentation as essential to medical progress. This marked a shift from a Hippocratic ethic of “do no harm” to a utilitarian logic of scientific advancement (CCMO, 2020).

During the 1970s and 1980s, ethical review became increasingly institutionalised in the Netherlands. The 1971 Health Council report advocated for institutional medical ethics committees, partly to address concerns from general practitioners (Jacobs, 2018). The debate gradually shifted from scientific self-regulation to more societal and governmental oversight. This shift was catalyzed by public controversies. In 1989, the Dutch government established the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO), formalising national oversight. The 1999 Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) further codified ethical review in law, institutionalising public control without direct societal influence. Committees were to act as ethical intermediaries—ensuring transparency and accountability without compromising scientific autonomy (Jacobs, 2018, pp. 277–283).

Since then, ethical review has broadened beyond its biomedical origins. In the Netherlands, this expansion was institutionalised in 2016 (and revisited in 2018) with the Code of Ethics for Research in the Social and Behavioural Sciences Involving Human Participants, published by the DSW, the national council of social science deans (DSW, 2018). This code aimed to harmonize ethical assessment practices across disciplines. Parallel to this, Universities of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands began to position practice-based research alongside teaching, prompting new forms of institutional oversight. The creation of the National Taskforce for Practice-Based Research (SIA) in 2013 catalyzed this development (OCW et al., 2013). Institutions such as HAN and Fontys have since introduced their own ethical review boards (Rothfus, 2018; Van der Sande, 2018).

Despite the growing institutionalisation of ethics in practice-based research, tensions remain. Similar to researchers in the Humanities, researchers engaged in practice-based inquiry frequently question the fit of standardised protocols with the situated, relational character of their work. Concerns have been raised about the bureaucratisation of ethics, and the risk that ethics committees become rigid instruments misaligned with the actual conditions of research (De Jong, 2018). Practice-based researcher Gideon de Jong warns that ethics committees risk becoming rigid, top-down structures detached from the practical realities of research.

To understand how artistic research engages with ethics, it is necessary to begin with the epistemological assumptions that underpin institutional ethical review. These assumptions, rooted in ideals of objectivity and proceduralism, shape how ethical oversight is designed and implemented, and help explain why certain research practices, like those in the arts, may clash with their frame.

2.2. Situated knowledges and ethics-in-practice

The critique of procedural ethics has been articulated forcefully in feminist science and technology studies. Historian of science Lorraine Daston has shown how objectivity emerged as a historically contingent scientific virtue (Daston, 1992). Rather than being a stable or universal criterion, objectivity, as Daston and Galison (2007) further argue, has taken on different forms across history, each tied to specific scientific and cultural values. From “mechanical objectivity” in the 19th century, which prized restraint and standardisation, to “trained judgment” and “structural objectivity” in the 20th, these ideals were never neutral (2007, pp. 253; 309). They were historically constructed responses to moral and epistemic anxieties within science itself. In the context of ethical review, this history reminds us that current procedures and

ideals are not timeless safeguards, but part of a broader genealogy of scientific normativity.

Philosopher of science Donna Haraway offers a sharp critique of these ideals through her concept of “situated knowledges”, rejecting the myth of the neutral observer, proposing instead the idea of partial, embodied, accountable perspectives (Haraway, 1988). Her insistence on positionality and relationality offers an alternative ethical imaginary, one that aligns closely with the daily practices and dilemmas of many practice-based researchers. Haraway’s work therefore not only destabilizes the assumptions behind mainstream ethical review but also challenges the artistic field’s occasional drift into ‘anything goes’ relativism by foregrounding responsibility and reciprocity.

These insights are echoed and extended in Helga Nowotny’s concept of “socially robust knowledge” (2003), which shifts the ethical task of research from internal scientific coherence toward societal resonance. According to Nowotny (2003) “moving from reliable knowledge towards socially robust knowledge may be one step forward in negotiating and bringing about a regime of pluralistic expertise” (pp. 151–152). In her view, expertise is not only about methodological rigor but also about its capacity to “link up with diverse practices, institutions and actors” (p. 151). In this framing, ethics is no longer merely a matter of individual conduct or institutional compliance, but a matter of relational entanglement and collective trust.

These perspectives not only critique existing systems but also point toward a broader rethinking of what it means to do ethical research. Rather than treating ethics as a checklist, they propose ethics-as-practice: a mode of continuous, reflexive engagement with the relational, political, and material dimensions of research. This approach resonates strongly with artistic research, where ethical dilemmas are navigated in response to unfolding collaborations, and where participants are not subjects of research but co-creators of knowledge. In such settings, ethical responsibility becomes a shared and situated practice. For artistic research, which unfolds through dialogue with communities, participants, and publics, this alignment with ethics-as-practice is crucial. Yet it also brings into focus the frictions that emerge when these practices encounter institutional review.

2.3. Artistic research as a site of ethical tension

The call for ethics-as-practice becomes especially pressing in artistic research. As a distinct field within the broader landscape of practice-based research—which also includes domains such as nursing, education, and social work—artistic research is characterised by its reliance on artistic practices as both method and mode of knowledge production (Frayling, 1994; Borgdorff, 2012; Michelkevicius, 2018). While practice-based research in general is defined by its embeddedness in professional contexts and its emphasis on action, and reflection (Vear, 2022), artistic research brings particular attention to embodied, material, affective, and often tacit ways of knowing. It develops methods in situ, through dialogue with collaborators, publics, and materials, rather than applying them in advance.

Henk Borgdorff (2012) has argued that such research produces knowledge embedded in artistic processes and outcomes themselves, rather than being derived solely from external analysis. Barbara Bolt has influentially characterised this orientation as a *performative paradigm*, in which research is validated by what it does in the world: a mode of research “characterised by a productive performativity” (2016, 131; also see 140). This aligns with recent methodological accounts, such as Falk Hübner’s (2024) description of artistic research as iterative, performative, and collaborative—forms of inquiry that heighten questions of representation, responsibility, and care.

Together, these perspectives help explain why artistic research is a productive vantage point for rethinking ethics. Precisely because its processes are performative, iterative, and often collective, they expose the limits of one-size-fits-all review frameworks and foreground the need for situated, relational approaches to ethical assessment. This also

leads to frictions when such practices meet institutionalised procedures. Recently, Hugo Boothby (2024) has shown how national ethics frameworks, such as those in Sweden, enact scientific boundary-work that privileges established disciplines and marginalises artistic research. He suggests that review practices should instead be oriented toward care, emphasising the relational labour of research rather than disciplinary conformity.

Crucially, the specificity of artistic research does not preclude transferability. By attending to how ethics takes shape in this field, we can illuminate challenges that resonate across other practice-based domains, especially those where methods are similarly relational, responsive, and context-dependent. At the same time, recognising its wider relevance should not obscure the fact that artistic research also brings its own ethical risks. Within artistic research it is important not to assume that collaborative or socially engaged methods are inherently ethical. As Claire Bishop has shown in her seminal book *Artificial Hells*, participatory projects can instrumentalise participants, substitute consensus for critique, or reproduce hierarchies under the banner of inclusion (Bishop, 2012). Grant Kester (2011) likewise cautions that dialogical practices may obscure underlying power dynamics when conflict is too quickly resolved. In this light, participation does not automatically ensure ethical robustness. Quite the contrary. As Hoegen and Spronck (2025) argue in their dialogue on performance-based research, the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of collective artistic practice cannot be separated. Participatory work, they suggest, is not automatically inclusive or egalitarian but becomes a site where roles, power dynamics, and shared values must be continually rethought through practices of care and connectivity.

Taken together, this situates artistic research as a hard case for institutional review. On the one hand, it reveals where standardised procedures fall short of capturing the relational, processual, and situated nature of artistic research and its methods. On the other hand, it underscores that researchers themselves must remain critically attentive to the pitfalls of participation, power, and care. It is precisely in this double movement—where ethics is both necessary and complex—that the case of the ethical review of *Performing Working* becomes instructive.

3. The ethical review of *Performing Working* as case-study

3.1. University of the Arts Utrecht’s research ethics committee as a site for ethical learning

The tensions outlined above do not remain abstract. They materialise in the institutional settings where artistic research is conducted and assessed. At the University of the Arts Utrecht, the establishment of an ethics committee offered a concrete site to explore how such tensions could become opportunities for ethical learning.

In the Netherlands, the position of artistic research has long been shaped by the structure of higher education (Borgdorff, 2012). Art academies and universities of the arts, such as the University of the Arts Utrecht, do not have the right to award doctoral degrees. This has meant that artists who wished to pursue doctoral-level research often had to do so abroad or within a collaboration between a university of the arts and another university, where artistic research was accommodated only at the margins. To address this gap, the Professional Doctorate (PD) was recently introduced as a national pilot in universities of applied sciences. The PD is designed as an equivalent to the PhD in scope and depth, but rooted in professional and practice-based domains—including the arts.¹ This development has brought ethical questions into sharper focus. Unlike in the biomedical and social sciences, universities of applied sciences were historically not subject to the Dutch Medical Research

¹ Info about the national Professional Doctorate program: <https://www.verenighogescholen.nl/themas/professional-doctorate> and more about the Arts & Creative Professional Doctorate: <https://pd-arts-creative.nl/>

Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO), and therefore had little infrastructure for formal ethics review. For a long time, research projects were small in scale and rarely involved participants in ways that triggered regulatory oversight. The rise of the PD, alongside increasing volumes of externally funded, socially engaged, and transdisciplinary research in the arts, has changed this landscape. New types of projects—at the intersections of art and healthcare, ecology, and inclusion—raised ethical challenges that existing structures were not equipped to handle.²

In response, the University of the Arts Utrecht established its first research ethics committee (in Dutch: *Ethische Commissie Onderzoek*, ECO) in 2024.³ The committee's remit includes both formal review and awareness-raising around ethics in research within the institution. From the outset, the committee has sought to find a proportional middle ground: one that respects the legal and procedural demands of research integrity, while remaining sensitive to the open-ended, experimental, and often collaborative nature of artistic inquiry.⁴ The experiences of the first PD cohort, including the project *Performing Working*, played an important role in identifying the needs, questions, and tensions that shaped the committee's formation. The collaborative learning process that ensued forms the occasion and context of this article.

The ethics committee found itself negotiating a delicate contradiction from the beginning. On the one hand, it was tasked with safeguarding integrity and meeting external expectations of compliance, including the use of checklists, consent forms, and data management plans. On the other, it was acutely aware that in artistic research such requirements can feel reductive, and even obstructive, given that questions of consent, authorship, and responsibility often shift over time and must be renegotiated in situ. Rather than resolving this tension, the committee's early encounters (especially with the first PD projects) revealed how ethical reflection emerges within research practices themselves. For the committee, this meant learning to read ethics not only in procedural terms, but also in the situated negotiations, vulnerabilities, and forms of care that unfold in collaborative artistic processes. It was precisely this double role, as both regulator and learner, that defined the committee's beginnings and shaped its engagement with *Performing Working*.

3.2. *Performing Working* and its ethical review

The first project to undergo review by ECO was *Performing Working*, which we introduce here not to evaluate its artistic outcomes but to situate the review process that followed. This is an ongoing doctoral project by artistic researcher Philippine Hoegen at the University of the Arts Utrecht. The project explores the performativity of work, with particular attention to undervalued, hidden, and unwaged forms of labour (Weeks, 2011). Hoegen's artistic practice is grounded in performance, approached both as a way of thinking with, through, and from the body (Lepecki, 2006; Camuti, 2025). Methodologically, the project builds on traditions in performance research that treat artistic practice itself as a mode of inquiry, where making, documenting, and reflecting

intertwine (Bolt, 2016). This orientation frames performance not only as a method but also as a field with its own resources for generating and sharing knowledge, and as a discipline with its own creative, infrastructural, and relational tools. One such tool is the score: a notational form for recording and transmitting performative acts, experiences, or embodied skills (Schmidt, 2019). In *Performing Working*, scores are used to render the tacit knowledge of various forms of unwaged work communicable. As a performative method, the use of scores refers to working with instruction, protocol, or description of a gesture, which can take the form of a text, a drawing, a collaged image, or whatever it takes to communicate an action or situation (Hoegen, 2020).

A key case within the project is the long-term collective *Illness ↔ Work*, developed around the shared recognition that living with illness involves continuous, often unacknowledged forms of labour. Collaborating with the University Medical Centre Utrecht, Hoegen invited participants from patient focus groups who were interested in exploring this theme together. Participation is voluntary, and shaped by both the interests of the group and the physical and mental capacities of members at any given time. Over time, the group expanded to include patients, informal carers, healthcare professionals, students, and artists, most members ticking several of these boxes at once. Sessions are held regularly at the University of the Arts Utrecht when possible, or remotely when health requires it. Work takes the form of collective drawing on large rotating sheets of paper, shared writing and storytelling, movement, and conversation (Figures 1 and 2). These co-creative practices create a setting in which knowledge is generated through doing and responding, rather than through predefined protocols (Phillips, 2025). The first collective output was *An Informal Guide to Illness: Skills, Tips and Tricks for and by People Living with Sickness* (Hoegen, 2023), which mapped the tacit skills and strategies involved in “doing the work” of illness.

As the process unfolded, hierarchies collapsed. Participants contribute not only lived experience but also academic and professional expertise, as several group members (including artist-researcher herself) combine living with illness or care responsibilities with artistic, educational or academic activities. These overlaps, plus the fact that the act of researching is not carried out exclusively by Philippine Hoegen but by the whole group, blurred boundaries and the division of roles. The distinction between “researcher” and “participant” became increasingly untenable. This shift led to a collective commitment: co-formulating questions, co-creating outcomes, and collective authorship.

Moving toward a more horizontal structure has been an imperfect but essential process of learning and unlearning, with pitfalls familiar to both relational art and participatory healthcare practices. Within this



Fig. 1. Image 1. Co-creative session from *Illness ↔ Work*, where participants discuss and arrange materials collectively. Photo by Philippine Hoegen, 2024.

² University of the Arts Utrecht's multi-year institutional strategy is centered around care, inclusion, and ecology as main thematic focus areas. Additionally, University of the Arts Utrecht is the principal investigator of the national 8-year consortium research SIA SPRONG-grant Creating Cultures of Care, and has an active institutional collaboration with the University of Humanistic Studies for joint artistic research PhD trajectories in the Meaningful Artistic Research graduate programme: <https://www.hku.nl/en/research-and-innovation/projects-research-and-innovation/meaningful-artistic-research>

³ For more about the ethical committee of the University of the Arts Utrecht, see: <https://www.hku.nl/onderzoek-en-innovatie/onderzoek/visie-op-onderzoek/ethische-commissie-onderzoek>

⁴ Within the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, it has been administratively agreed to introduce the Dutch Code of Scientific Integrity (NGWI, 2018) to all universities of applied sciences.



Fig. 2. Image 2. Collage made during the session, exploring the theme “re-inventing participation.” Photo by Philippine Hoegen, 2024.

process, ethical questions were never peripheral. Fluctuating energy levels, shifting roles, and the affective labour of showing up all raised questions about participation and responsibility. Consent, in particular, emerged as a recurring concern—not only as a formal agreement to take part, but as an ongoing negotiation of needs, desires, and expectations. What does it mean to say yes (or no) in a process that is collective, unfinished, and constantly unfolding? This question came into sharper focus during the formal ethical review by the ethics committee. Like all PD projects, *Performing Working* was required to undergo review after its first year, submitting an ethical checklist, a data management plan, and a consent form. Yet the co-creative, relational nature of the project quickly revealed the limits of these instruments. How can a consent form capture participation that is shifting, diffuse, and relational?

In searching for alternatives, Hoegen drew inspiration from performance, activism, and co-creative communities. Practices from sex-positive and BDSM contexts, for example, treat consent not only as safeguarding but also as a practice of clarity, joy, and shared intention (Dunkley and Brotto, 2019). This perspective inspired the *Illness ↔ Work* collective to begin drafting a pact: an agreement balancing individual needs and collective ambitions, asking what each member requires to participate meaningfully and what they wish to achieve together.⁵

What is emerging from *Performing Working* is not a closed model but an ongoing experiment in ethical inquiry. For the researcher and for ECO, the project highlights the epistemological assumptions embedded in review procedures: assumptions about linearity, stability, and individual responsibility that do not sit easily with co-creative artistic practice. Instead of treating the review as a hurdle, both project and committee engaged in a process of collaborative reflection on how consent, responsibility, and positionality are differently configured in artistic research. This double movement—where an artistic project is both subject to and a co-shaper of institutional review—forms the heart of our analysis and the ground on which our collaborative methodological approach builds.

⁵ This approach is inspired by the Belgian based Post Collective, an autonomous platform of co-creation, co-learning and cultural activism created by and for refugees, asylum seekers, sans papiers and accomplices, and their PAACT, see: <https://www.thepostcollective.be/projects/paact-a-paperless-art-alliance-on-tract/>.

4. Methodological and conceptual framework

4.1. Methodology: collaborative autoethnography

This study employs *collaborative autoethnography*, a qualitative research method that merges personal narrative with ethnographic inquiry. It allows researchers to explore their own lived experiences in relation to broader socio-cultural phenomena, challenging traditional boundaries between researcher and subject, and reshaping dominant forms of knowledge production and dissemination. As such, autoethnography is not only a methodological tool but also a means of amplifying marginalised voices and interrogating normative research paradigms (Camuti and van der Schaar, 2025). In our case, the move from artistic research to collaborative autoethnography reflects the nature of the case study itself: while artistic research foregrounds artistic production and processes, autoethnography’s performative dimension enabled us to interrogate and reflect on our own positions and experiences more directly, thereby engaging the self as both site and medium of inquiry. Moreover, autoethnography’s adaptability makes it particularly suitable for inter- and transdisciplinary research. Our use of a collaborative approach, rather than an individual one, significantly influenced how we collected, analysed, and interpreted data. Tasks were divided according to expertise, and we engaged in both individual and collective reflection throughout the research process (Chang, 2022).

Each team member composed reflexive vignettes detailing their experience in relation to the case. These were then shared, discussed, and subjected to thematic analysis. This dialogical process was key in ensuring both analytical depth and ethical awareness.

Our differing positionalities shaped both the process and the perspectives brought into this study. Philippine Hoegen, as PD researcher, artist, and lecturer, contributed the insider view of initiating and embodying the case study. Truus Teunissen combined her role as participant in *Performing Working* with her research expertise on participation and empowerment in care and practice. Veerle Spronck and Fabiola Camuti, as researchers at the University of the Arts Utrecht and members of the university’s ethics committee, brought expertise in interdisciplinary artistic research, participatory practices, and care pedagogies, which helped situate the case within broader societal and ethical debates. Judith Leest, also a member of the ethics committee and a researcher in care ethics as well as research advisor, contributed a framework for reflecting on institutional oversight. Taken together, these perspectives created a dialogical environment in which artistic, participatory, pedagogical, and ethical expertise were all necessary to interrogate the case in depth.

The equal participation of all roles—artistic researcher, co-participant, and researchers/ethics committee members—in the making of this article was fundamental. This plurality enriched the research process and helped maintain critical reflexivity, ensuring that diverse perspectives were not only acknowledged but integrated into the study’s design and interpretation.

We were acutely aware of the ethical implications of our chosen method. Autoethnography, by its nature, demands particular sensitivity to ethical and evaluative standards. Unlike conventional research, it does not conform to standard criteria such as reliability or generalisability (Ellis et al., 2011). Instead, credibility, relevance, and ethical reflexivity serve as guiding principles (Adams et al., 2015; Sparkes, 2022).

We adopted several strategies to uphold these principles. To ensure credibility, we focused on honest and coherent storytelling. Verisimilitude was pursued by making narratives immersive and engaging, while relevance was considered in how our experiences might resonate with broader contexts. Ethical vigilance included informed and ongoing consent, awareness of potential harm, and regular member checks to confirm accurate representation (Adams, 2008; Lapadat, 2017). We also kept on reflecting critically on our own positionalities and biases throughout the process. Rather than treating these differences as

obstacles, we considered them essential for the project: they enabled us to examine the case from multiple vantage points, to challenge each other’s assumptions, and to integrate insights that would not have been possible from a single disciplinary or experiential position.

4.2. Process and deductive analysis through care ethics as conceptual lens

In participatory, co-creative, and artistic research traditions, ethics is not peripheral or procedural—it is central to the research practice itself. These approaches seek not only to generate knowledge but to do so with and for communities, often with the explicit aim of fostering social change (Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019; ICPHR, 2013). This shift in purpose demands a parallel shift in ethical orientation: from rule-following to relational reflexivity, from detached judgment to shared responsibility.

Rather than seeking to resolve such tensions through fixed protocols, scholars increasingly argue for ethics-as-practice, a mode of working that remains responsive to lived relationships and contextual particularities (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action & National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2022; Groot and Abma, 2022).

This is true not only for situated practices like artistic and participatory research, but it is also a valid issue in other scholarly fields that highlight the role of relationality in research and ethics practices, like care ethics. Care ethics offer a valuable lens for conceptualizing this ethical mode. Drawing on the work of Noddings (2013), Tronto (1993, 2013), and Brannelly (2018), care ethics emphasizes attentiveness, responsiveness, and interdependence. It foregrounds the responsibilities researchers bear not only toward abstract principles or institutional norms, but toward the people and communities with whom they work. In this framing, ethics becomes a continuous process of attunement—one that is never fully resolved but must be actively sustained.

Guided by *care ethics*, we analysed our collaborative autoethnographic data in three iterative steps. Care ethics conceives caring as inherently relational and co-constituted by caregivers and care receivers, always embedded in organised society (Gilligan, 1982; Leget et al., 2019). This perspective foregrounds whose voices are included when deciding what counts as “good care,” and urges continual attention to power, context, affect, and vulnerability within empirical inquiry.

Step 1 Clustering the vignettes.

Each researcher produced a (set of) reflexive vignette(s) about their involvement in the case. We first read these texts and grouped them into three overarching categories that recurred across all narratives: a) consent; b) institutions; c) roles.

Step 2 Inductive–thematic refinement.

Working within each category, we conducted a thematic analysis to articulate the shared concerns more precisely, arriving at three empirically grounded themes: 1) Forms of consent; 2) Institutional responsibilities; 3) Positionality of (co-)researchers.

Peer-debriefing moments ensured that interpretations were challenged and refined by all team members, Philippine Hoegen, Truus Teunissen, Veerle Spronck, Fabiola Camuti, and Judith Leest, thus preserving the multiplicity of perspectives that characterises collaborative autoethnography.

Step 3 Deductive mapping to care-ethical principles.

In the third phase we linked the three themes to three guiding principles drawn from Leget et al.’s (2019) articulation of care ethics.

Care-ethical principle (Leget et al., 2019)	Theme addressed	Analytical focus
Relationality	Forms of consent	Consent was approached not as a one-way, top-down act but as an ongoing mutual negotiation among participants, researchers, and the hosting institution. This reciprocal

(continued on next column)

(continued)

Care-ethical principle (Leget et al., 2019)	Theme addressed	Analytical focus
Vulnerability	Institutional responsibilities	“attuning” reflects care’s inherently relational fabric. This process revealed that vulnerability is not limited to so-called “vulnerable groups,” but shared by all actors, including institutions. What differs is the degree and nature of the responsibility each must carry.
Attention to power and position	Positionality of (co-)researchers	We examined how researchers’ social locations and institutional affiliations shape knowledge production, echoing Gilligan’s (1982) insistence on contextual moral understanding and Tronto’s (1993) political view of care.

Together, these principles provided the deductive scaffold through which the empirical material was read, allowing us to move from personal experience to theoretically informed insight without losing the nuance of each narrative.

The choice of care ethics aligns with our study’s focus on artistic, participatory research at the University of the Arts Utrecht and resonates with the institution’s broader strategic framework, including its multi-year focus on care, meaning-making, and inclusion. Care ethics offers a vocabulary – relationality, contextuality, affectivity, vulnerability, and power – for analysing practices where boundaries between researcher, practitioner, and participant are fluid. By integrating insights from a long-lasting interdisciplinary discussion (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993; Leget et al., 2019), we ensure that our analysis is theoretically nourished while remaining grounded in the lived realities of our collaborative group.

5. Empirical analysis

5.1. Relationality and forms of consent

In our analysis of the vignettes concerning consent, relationality emerged not only as a thematic concern but also as an ethical orientation. Drawing from care ethics, relationality positions care – and by extension, consent – not as a fixed action or formal transaction, but as a socially mediated and evolving process (Leget et al., 2019). It is embedded in the specificities of context, co-constituted by all participants, and constantly in motion. This understanding clashed early on with institutional expectations. When artist-researcher Philippine Hoegen submitted her proposal without a standard consent form, members of the ethics committee Veerle Spronck and Fabiola Camuti experienced tension between institutional demands for demonstrable consent and their recognition that artistic, situated research often resists prescriptive formats. As they reflected, “the standard A4 sheet (a pre-formulated legal document) can be misaligned with the ethos of many artistic research practices. It risks flattening complex relationships, or interrupting trust rather than fostering it.” Instead of issuing a directive, they framed the tension as a design challenge: how might consent be reimagined as an embodied, co-created practice?

Hoegen, drawing on care ethics and consent practices from sex-positive and BDSM contexts, reframed the question entirely: What do you want, what do I want, and how can we help each other realise that? Translated into a participatory research setting, this becomes a question not of pre-approved conditions, but of mutual needs and ongoing responsiveness: What does each participant want from the collaboration, and what is needed—from the researcher, the institution, and the process—to enable that? This dialogical, open-ended framing of consent reflects the care-ethical view of relationality as attunement, a continual

ethical practice of listening, adjusting, and responding (Gilligan, 1982; Leget et al., 2019). Rather than treating consent as a one-time checkbox, it becomes a relational practice negotiated over time.

Judith Leest's personal reflection, coupled to the official letter from the ethics committee, acknowledges this shift: "A legal form often stands in contrast to the interpersonal work you are engaged in." Yet, she adds a caution: a collectively designed consent process must not silence individual dissent through implicit group pressure. Relationality, in this sense, is not romanticised consensus but negotiated difference, with room for dissent and ambivalence. This tension became apparent in the field. Hoegen eventually produced a formal document "for the sake of the exercise," and though everyone signed it, she later regretted the move. It "created confusion" and momentarily stalled the group's exploration of a more meaningful alternative: a pact, inspired by The Post Collective's PAACT model. This pact would allow each participant to articulate individual needs and desires and collectively explore how to support them. About the formal document participant Truus Teunissen noted how awkward it felt to introduce a formatted agreement in the midst of a collaborative process that was already relationally rich: "We're already working together in a pleasant and meaningful way—so is that still necessary?"

In the end, what emerged was not a definitive solution, but an ethically generative struggle, one that exemplifies care ethics' view that moral understandings arise from lived, relational contexts and are shaped through ongoing negotiation. Consent, in this project, is not a form to be signed but an ongoing pact to be lived.

5.2. Vulnerability and institutional responsibilities

The move from relational consent to institutional responsibility brings us into more turbulent terrain. If relationality in care ethics highlights mutual attunement, vulnerability asks not only what is at stake, but for whom, and challenges the assumption that only certain participants qualify as 'vulnerable'. Standard ethical review often frames vulnerability hierarchically, asking whether researchers are working with 'vulnerable groups', typically referring to target populations or participants. This framing overlooks the broader truth that vulnerability is a shared condition of all actors involved in research—participants, researchers, and institutions alike (Leget et al., 2019; Tronto, 1993).

As Teunissen reflected, "Can you, as a participant, consent to an agreement that will last for years?" Life situations change – illness, new work, family responsibilities – especially when participation is voluntary and unpaid. This recognition prompted the proposal of an ongoing informed consent model, to be revisited at regular intervals, and always with the reminder that withdrawal is a right, not a failure. Autonomy, here, is not just an individual right but a relational responsibility: we must continually make space for uncertainty, change, and exit without penalty.

Yet vulnerability does not lie solely with participants. Institutions, too, are exposed. They risk reputational damage, legal liability, and must reckon with their own authority and limitations. As committee members, we found ourselves in a familiar ethical tension: how to balance the open-endedness of artistic, collaborative work with the formal requirements of research integrity. The project's emphasis on co-creation and horizontal roles was compelling, but also raised difficult questions: If roles are fluid, who is accountable when harm occurs? If boundaries are blurred, who holds the responsibility to respond?

What differs, then, is not the presence of vulnerability, but the degree and nature of the responsibility each actor must carry. Care ethics helps make this visible, not by ranking vulnerability, but by asking how it should be acknowledged and shared across a research ecology. This became especially clear in our discussions about the framing of the research. As committee members Camuti and Spronck noted that the proposal, while rich in collaborative and artistic intent, lacked an explicit articulation of its research framework. Was this a project of

artistic inquiry, of social engagement, or both? The ambiguity is typical of many artistic research contexts, where porous boundaries can be a source of vitality. But institutions, by contrast, operate under structural obligations: grants require definitions, ethics require lines of accountability. As they put it, "A research grant is not a community grant." In this case, the absence of a clear research frame did not suggest failure, but it did raise a care-ethical question: Who holds the space when definitions are fluid? Vulnerability, here, was not only about the risk of exposure, but also about the need for containment, for someone to carry the ethical and procedural responsibility of keeping the process coherent and accountable.

From a care-ethical perspective, this shifts the focus from rules and protections toward situated responsibility. Unlike standard ethical review, which tends to locate vulnerability in predefined 'target groups', care ethics reveals how vulnerability emerges in many forms—emotional, relational, institutional—and affects all participants. This was evident in participant Teunissen's observation that people might sign a pact not out of genuine agreement but to avoid social friction, especially when the invitation comes from someone with influence. Vulnerability here is relational and political: participants may feel pressure to conform, while researchers and institutions may overestimate how voluntary participation really is. Acknowledging these dynamics, Teunissen underlined the importance of "repeatedly affirming that joining, declining, or withdrawing carries neither penalty nor judgement". This complexity was echoed in Leest's reflection on her dual role as ethics officer and qualitative researcher. She described the discomfort of operating between a juridical discourse of checklists and a personal commitment to ethics as a "living, learning practice." Vulnerability, for her, was institutional as much as personal: how can a university uphold ethical standards without undermining the complexity of artistic, human encounters?

In response, we began to reimagine accountability not as control, but as frame-holding: a form of ethical containment. The researcher, particularly when institutionally supported, cannot dissolve entirely into collective horizontality. Rather, they are called to carry a special responsibility: to maintain a sense of orientation and coherence, to clarify purpose, and to safeguard the integrity of the process. As Camuti and Spronck put it, the task is "not to limit, but to account." The researcher does not impose rigid definitions, but signals where inquiry begins, how it unfolds, and how it can be held collectively. In this way, frame-holding becomes an active form of care: one that holds open space for shared inquiry while remaining attentive to the differentiated responsibilities within it. Vulnerability, in this sense, is not weakness but openness to responsibility, to friction, and to the shared work of care.

5.3. Attention to power and position: positionality of (co-)researchers

As we moved from institutional responsibilities to the theme of researcher positionality, the ethical focus shifted from structures to relations, from external accountability to internal negotiation. While care ethics affirms the value of equality and shared responsibility, it also calls for attentiveness to positionality and power (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993; Leget et al., 2019). This means not erasing asymmetries, but making them visible and ethically negotiable.

Participant Teunissen aptly captured the bridge between vulnerability and power by naming autonomy, respect, and transparency as central values, especially in situations marked by implicit hierarchies. In participatory artistic research, where collaboration often occurs in atmospheres of friendliness or even intimacy, roles can become blurred and ethical boundaries with them. Hoegen, the main applicant and artistic lead, described this tension from within: "I feel at once incredibly ignorant and somehow 'overqualified'. I think my approach to ethics is way more nuanced and urgent than what can be achieved through consent forms or checklists, but then it turns out I have no clue about formal and institutional requirements, which makes me an idiot." This candid reflection highlights a double bind: a deeply developed ethical

stance rooted in artistic and feminist values, but a lack of fluency in institutional structures that also demand accountability.

From the committee's perspective, tension manifested in the ambiguity of roles. As Camuti and Spronck asked: "Who, precisely, is the researcher here?" While the proposal emphasised collective authorship—we will research, we will make—Hoegen was the sole grant holder, institutional representative, and ultimately the one responsible for reporting outcomes. The proposal evoked sameness, but the reality revealed differentiated roles. Teunissen, too, questioned her place: "What is my role in this group?" and later added, "If I stop participating, the project continues. But if the project lead steps out, the entire project halts." This discrepancy is not inherently unethical, it may even be inevitable, but it becomes ethically problematic when unacknowledged. As she put it: "Equality is there, but we are not all the same. Each person has different roles and responsibilities. And that's fine, but we should make it visible." Friendly, horizontal atmospheres can obscure power, leading to confusion or even disempowerment. Kindness must not substitute for clarity.

Ethics officer and researcher Leest reflected on the fundamental dilemma: how can one ask for consent from a position of care and equality, while still occupying the researcher's role with its institutional weight, its budget, and its authority? "There is always inequality in the roles," she noted, "and that's not necessarily a problem, but we must address it explicitly, including in the consent process." Camuti and Spronck echoed this point: "We don't say this to defend hierarchy, but to acknowledge asymmetry." The language of collectivity should not mask unequal responsibility. Instead of collapsing distinctions in the name of flat collaboration, the care-ethical imperative is to articulate positions clearly, with humility, and with care. As they wrote: "The researcher need not claim more power, but must carry more accountability." This understanding led to constructive institutional dialogue. Leest, writing on behalf of the ethics committee, acknowledged Hoegen's effort to reconcile artistic methods with institutional demands.

5.4. Discussion: toward ethics as situated, co-created practices-in-the-making

Bringing these themes together, this section discusses what our analysis suggests for understanding ethics as a situated, co-created practice-in-the-making. Across the three themes, our analysis suggests that tension is not a deviation from good practice but a constitutive feature of artistic, participatory research. Through a care-ethical lens, these negotiations become sites of learning: not failures of compliance, but invitations to practise responsibility differently.

First, consent reframed through relationality emerged not as a singular act of approval, but as an evolving process of attunement. It demanded attentiveness to shifting needs, mutual desires, and the lived conditions of participation—including those of the researcher. Rather than functioning solely as protection from harm, consent became a way to cultivate ethical togetherness over time.

Second, institutional responsibility viewed through the lens of vulnerability revealed that fragility is shared—by participants, researchers, and institutions alike. Accountability here is not about enforcing rules but about holding a frame: enabling inquiry to unfold in open yet coherent ways, while remaining responsive to change and risk. Institutions are not merely enforcers of ethics, but participants within the research ecology.

Third, researcher positionality required an honest reckoning with asymmetries. While co-creation and collectivity were core values, the researcher's institutional role, funding position, and responsibility for outcomes could not be flattened into sameness. Ethical clarity meant articulating, not erasing, lines of difference—without abandoning the commitment to shared ownership and trust.

Seen in this light, ethical review should not force artistic research into rigid formats, but create space for forms of reflection and accountability that arise from within the practice itself. Care ethics does

not offer a new checklist; it offers direction—asking whose needs are considered, whose voices are heard, and whose responsibilities are taken up or deferred. The emphasis falls on cultivating an ethical life in research as an unfolding, negotiated process, rather than policing compliance with stable categories of researcher/subject, fixed temporalities, or a narrow understanding of vulnerability as a property of participants alone.

It is too early to claim far-reaching institutional effects. Nonetheless, several modest but tangible shifts followed from the review of *Performing Working*. The ethics committee has adjusted review formats to be more suited to iterative methods, and is involved in ongoing discussions about accommodating evolving consent procedures in its templates. These shifts suggest that artistic research can serve not only as a hard case for institutional review, but also as a resource for renewing it.

In sum, what emerged was less a model than a collective learning process—one in which researcher, participants, and institution engaged in joint ethical world-making. Framed this way, ethical difficulty is generative: an invitation to hold space for friction, to practise responsibility relationally, and to keep ethics alive as a situated, co-created, and unfinished endeavour.

6. Conclusion

This article examined how artistic research can inform and reshape institutional approaches to ethical assessment, focusing on consent, responsibility, and positionality through the ethical review of *Performing Working*. The case shows that artistic research is a "hard case" not because it is opaque, but because it exposes limits within standardised review frameworks—particularly assumptions of linearity, fixed roles, and vulnerability confined to participants. Our methodological choice of collaborative autoethnography underscores how, in the context of this investigation, its performative and reflexive dimensions made it possible to engage the self as both subject and medium, thus opening a different ethical and epistemic space for inquiry. As our collaborative exploration unfolded, it became increasingly clear that classical models of ethical review—predominantly derived from biomedical and social science traditions—are often ill-equipped for practices that are processual, relational, and co-created.

Care ethics has served as a valuable orientation for our work as it invites us to hold space for friction, to welcome ethical discomfort as generative, and to design our research not despite, but through, these tensions. Judith Leest's reflection from the ethics committee offers an institutional echo of this learning process. In the official ethical review, the research was acknowledged as a difficult but sincere attempt to reconcile artistic methods with institutional frameworks: "The ethics committee recognises the struggle of your artistic method within a standard research format. It sees that you have largely succeeded in finding a middle way." The resulting "yes, provided" (*ja, mits*) did not signal failure, but an invitation to continue the conversation—together.

Throughout this process, we drew on inspirations beyond conventional institutional ethics, including practices from activism, performance, and relational care. These influences did not provide ready-made solutions, but they helped articulate alternative imaginaries of what ethical research relations could look like: grounded in reciprocity, dialogue, care, joy, trust, and attentiveness to difference. This collaborative gesture extended further: to the co-authorship of this article itself. In this spirit, ethics appears not as compliance, but as co-created inquiry; not as conclusion, but as conversation in motion.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Veerie Spronck: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Fabiola Camuti:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Judith Leest:** Writing – review & editing, Writing –

original draft, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Philippine Hoegen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation. **Truus Teunissen:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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