

Dear colleague,

ethics are imbedded in every single aspect of my work as an artist and as a researcher.

In this letter I will start to address some of the ethical urgencies that inform and reform my artistic practice and research. I will share with you experiences and thoughts about co-creation and agency in the work *No Show*.

At the core of the project is the encounter. The moment of encounter is where ethics are relevant. Encounter means a meeting that happens unexpectedly, where you are confronted with something you did not anticipate. It is in this unexpected meeting that I situate my artistic research. In my performances I bring spectators to places where they are invited to witness real life conditions, situations, fragmented narratives of a host or hosts, private persons, or communities. For the spectator, the significant moment is not necessarily the actual encounter with the host but the encounter that is experienced through their host with themselves, their own ideas, choices, and personal values. It is in the very moment when someone accidentally bumps into something or someone and is profoundly touched, that the ethical stakes are high. Trying to construct those moments through art makes the ethical stakes even higher. In this letter, I will focus on the encounter with my co-creators and to address the ethical implications of co-creation and care as it manifested in *No Show*.

Working on *No Show*, I experienced an ethically demanding situation trying to negotiate responsibility with a less privileged and less able collaborator. This is a case of a young woman in a wheelchair with CP disorder (Cerebral palsy). She lives in a social housing for people with disabilities which became the site of the performance. In my encounter with this collaborator, I found myself in ethically challenging situations. At the onset of our collaboration, I immediately sensed the divide in privilege and ability between us. She had much respect for me, and I gradually understood how easy it would be to cross her boundaries. The power dynamic was inherent in our positions, embedded in the social fabric and was not specific to the circumstances. She was eager to meet my demands and was very positive about all aspects of the work and said yes to all my suggestions without hesitation

or reflection. I felt that I had to take extra care of pointing out possible negatives of participating in the project. We spoke about inviting strangers into her home and sharing her story with the public. She was adamant to participate and expressed an urgency to inform people about her situation. She suggested that the guest would navigate the performance in the wheelchair and put themselves in her place. The format of the work was already to invite the guest to re-enact everyday rituals and perform tasks in the home, observe and reflect on their own reactions to the fragmented narratives, life conditions and life principles of the host.

I felt a strong urge to take care of her and protect her beyond my role as a collaborator, being a mother of three, I identified my urges as "mothering". I had imagined that she could write the personal letters by hand but in fact she struggled just signing the letters that I had written on my computer and printed out. In the process I felt an urge to scrutinize how she was represented in the work. I worked hard creating a strong image of her in the letters by highlighting her abilities and positive attitude to life. I also took the responsibility for the state of her home by turning up an hour before each performance and do the dishes, clean surfaces, open windows and make sure everything looked tidy. This did not even enter my mind with the hosts I had previously worked with. Our collaboration was different because of our different abilities. This situation highlighted certain aspects of my role. It became clear to me that these factors had been at play with other hosts but were negotiated delicately in a nonverbal contract. Non-verbal negotiations were not an option in this situation. I needed to verbally articulate all my concerns, that I considered obvious details with the other collaborators, such as hygiene, risks, and personal boundaries. I asked for permission to do the dishes, clean up and open closets. It felt important for my work to present a positive and dignified image of her. One way of creating that image was by moving things that might stand in the way and blur the vision of an onlooker, like dirty laundry and narratives that evoke feelings of pity. I felt that I had her life in my hands, using theologian Eva Skærbæk's words.

By taking ontological interdependency as a point of departure the question is no longer whether to interfere or not. Interdependency means that every one of us holds some of the life of the other in our hand. Continuously confronted with each other's lives it is not possible not to be involved, to use another word than care.

(Skærbæk, 2011, p 44)

By embracing ontological interdependency as a guiding principle, the question shifted from whether to interfere to how to do so responsibly. Recognizing our mutual reliance, I understood that not only was her life partly in my hands, but my life was also partly in hers. We became each other's agents, and the work became our means of engaging with and intervening in each other's struggles. In this negotiation the balance is precarious, and trust becomes of essence.

The artwork I seek to produce does not come with strict definition of who the creator is and what is part of the creation or the artwork. The participants are divided into four categories: the artists, the hosts, the guests, and other artistic or local contributors.

Trust is the fuel that runs the engine of this work. Without mutual trust between the different agents that encounter each other through the work, the performance would be impossible or potentially dangerous. The encounters are precarious and bring out vulnerability in the participants and reveal power structures that exist in the processes of the work or in the social fabric of the site as the case above depicts. As the artist and initiator, I feel responsible for the wellbeing of people and other beings involved in the artistic process. Taking care does not mean taking the responsibility from the parties involved but rather to share the responsibility with the co-creators and participants through a delicate action of negotiation. With responsibility comes agency and with agency comes power. I work with non-professionals, drawing on their lived experiences in their private surroundings and by proposing a co-creative process with them I am in effect offering them to have agency in the work. But what does co-creation mean in this context? The power dynamic is still precarious since I set the frame and have the professional tools, experience, and overview. Co-creation

does not necessarily create equity. There is an ongoing negotiation on what narrative to present, but the perspectives in the actual creative process are different and the power is always tilting towards the one that has the clearest overview and the experience, namely the artist. These precarious situations are like what ethnographers experience in fieldwork. The question of agency and responsibility are of great importance in the work and need constant attention, especially in the final stages of the creative process.

Ethnographer D.S. Madisons shares this insight in her book on critical ethnography, about the need to evoke response-ability in others:

I bear witness, and in bearing witness, I do not have the singular "response-ability" for what I witness but the responsibility of invoking a response-ability in others to what was seen, heard, learned, felt, and done in the field and through performance.

(Madison, 2019, p. 101)

I share the perspective of critical ethnographers that one becomes an advocate for one's collaborators but at the same time one needs to be critical towards what is being witnessed in the field. You need to listen and pay attention with care and tenderness, aware of that you have entered another person's world and in dialogue with the interlocutors, to borrow a term from ethnography (Madison, 2019), you subtract a narrative from the data. In the end it is your call. You do not share the responsibility for the final outcome with your collaborators, you have become their advocate, and you are responsible for the narrative presented to the public. By situating my ethical practice in the context of critical ethnography I gain a new insight on my practice.

Apart from these obvious ethical challenges in connection to co-creation and agency that I have discussed above, my biggest ethical concern is to scrutinise my motivation to invite people to a transformative encounter and justify my urgency to change the world.

How ethical is it to invite an audience to a potentially life changing experience?

This question is still to be answered but until then I might need to apply a trigger warning to my performances.

BEWARE, THE AFFECT OF THIS WORK CAN BE LIFE CHANGING!