

Without harming the other person

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Abstract: The term “ethics” today has an unprecedented notoriety, being used in contexts and relating to the most varied, sometimes even contradictory, actions. Behavioral ethics refers both to the statements or actions of a public figure, and to alleged social justice, marginalization and “Cancel Culture” media lynching. The university environment is, par excellence, a generator and, at the same time, a defender of ethical principles, despite its versatility derived from the multitude and specificity of fields. The criminalization of plagiarism, combating discrimination or abuse are, one by one, topics of discussion in the ethics commissions of universities. At the level of doctoral education, especially in the field of applied research, moral norms become referential benchmarks. If art has its own moral code, why wouldn't we apply the same units of measurement to artistic research? How far can we safely “drill” without hurting the other person? When we research can we “shelter” behind the specific freedoms of creation? Who sets the limits and on what terms? We don't know if we can answer these queries, but we can try to theorize some of the ethical filters that govern the act of research, using concrete examples from here and there.

Keywords: ethics, doctoral, art, theatre.

1. Introduction

The term “ethics has an unprecedented notoriety nowadays, being used in a wide variety of contexts and relating to a wide variety of actions, sometimes even contradictory. Behavioral ethics refers to a person's statements or actions as well as to alleged social justice, marginalization and “Cancel Culture” social media lynchings. Ethics legislates the morality of existence, but can also don the garb of totalitarianism, censorship, communal or individual obstructionism. It is a ball thrown from one side to the other as a “ball of justice”, often with determinants and effects contrary to the moral principles on behalf of which it acts. The noblest arguments and motives can instantly turn us into (radicalized)

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fighters affiliated to a cause. From politics, medicine and showbiz to entrepreneurship, sport and education, the rules of ethics manifest themselves as forces of law and order ready to intervene at the slightest law-breaking.

At the academic level, the standardization of ethics ensures a degree of resolution of specific problems. At the same time, the academia, which is by excellence a generator and defender of ethical principles, gives rise to a number of antagonisms arising from the versatility of the system, university autonomy and the multiplicity and specificity of fields. The incrimination of plagiarism, the fight against discrimination and abuse are becoming, one by one, topics of discussion in university ethics committees. In doctoral education, particularly in the field of applied research, moral standards are the benchmarks. The so-called “inflationist phenomenon” or “PhDs on a conveyor belt” creates the optimal framework for specific pitfalls and vulnerabilities. The PhD is, as we know, an endeavor aimed at confirming individual performance in a particular field, contributing in an original way to advanced research, involving creativity and knowledge, generating progress, developing ideas, innovating and promoting interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

Even if we, in the arts, do not do scientific research in the technical sense of the phrase (we do not test different treatments on living subjects in the laboratory), we invariably come under the scope of ethics, whether we operate with hermeneutic tools, associative/dissociative analysis, comparisons and abstractions, with documentation in dusty archives or with our own biological, emotional and cognitive arsenal. The appanage of political correctness plays a decisive role here. In his study of the decline of contemporary society, the philosopher Philip Atkinson considered that

by using the excuse of not upsetting anyone, the politically correct are demanding that people behave like the fool who would please everyone; that everyone must become such a fool! All must accept the notions of the Politically Correct as truth, or else! This is the same mentality that inspired the Inquisition and forced Galileo to recant; the same mentality that inspired the Nazis and obtained the Holocaust. Once expression gets placed in a straitjacket of official truth, then the madness that occurs in all totalitarian states is obtained. Life, in private and public, becomes a meaningless charade where delusion thrives and terror rules.²

² Philip Atkinson (2007), *A Study of Our Decline*, retrieved from Lulu.com, pp. 146-147.

So, when we choose to research, and I am not referring here to fundamental research, based on exegesis, but to the set of methodological techniques and tools that question the current reality, the cultural, social and political issues of the moment, we are faced with difficult choices. If the topic of study is aimed at a disadvantaged environment, such as, say, independent art, inevitably, the research will collide with the institutionalized system of art, with the “favorites of fate” who manage public money, not a few. The analysis of the independent artistic environment will also require a comparative perspective in which the image of the state system will certainly come out *wrinkled*. We all know the legislative and institutional dysfunctions that turn art and mass culture into bottomless budget pits. So far, ethics is only manifested at a generalizing level. When, however, we move on to particular examples, because the system means a tree structure in which each *leaf* has a National Identification Number, regardless of whether we are talking about the decision-makers at each level or the employees with a lifetime contract, the character of the investigation – basically, an objective research – takes on slightly blameworthy nuances through the viewpoint of ethics.

If, instead, the research takes the form of a laboratory of specific practice, we will immediately “face off” other kinds of moral filters, at least in the environment I know best, the theatre. A first filter is that of the ethics of interpersonal collaboration. Theatrical research involves, most of the time, dialogue between creators who probe the limits of corporeality or the human psyche. Establishing ethical collaborative relationships in such micro-communities, by respecting the rights of each participant, becomes, in itself, an arduous process. And I don't mean the extreme cases publicized in the public space – accusations of violence and sexual harassment, abuse of power or various forms of discrimination³ – but the usual behavior in which you test with “the other” person emotions, thoughts and extreme actions. Inevitably you probe through vulnerabilities and bring to the fore an intimate arsenal of the individual's resources. Is it ethical or not, for example, an anthropological research like the one carried out by Jerzy Grotowski with his actors in *Teatr Laboratorium* in Wroclaw, or like the one undertaken by the founder of the New York company Performance Group (1967), Richard Schechner⁴, who in the show

³ Recent cases in social media have focused on artists such as Jan Fabre, Andriy Zholdak and Felix Alexa, but there are many more examples of ethical breaches in the theatrical world.

⁴ Cobina Gillitt (2013), *Richard Schechner*, Asian Theatre Journal, Vol. 30, No. 2 (FALL), pp. 276-294.

Dionysus after the *Bacchantes* by Euripides, staged in 1969, explored the human body “as a medium for staged, ritual and therapeutic techniques”⁵

Theatre and democracy often have parallel discourses, despite the fact that the stage is a safe space for everyone, regardless of ethnicity, religious beliefs, political beliefs or sexual orientation. However, limitations, obstructions or radical expositions are always present in the scene. If art has its own moral code, why can't we apply the same units of measurement to artistic research? You are probably wondering what relevance all these observations have in the field of doctoral research. The answer lies in the very opening that the field of theatre and performing arts is enjoying at the moment, by accessing the professional PhD. Thus, a series of applied study sites is launched in the most varied spheres. The contribution of each research is ensured, beyond interpretations, analogies or references, by the courage to “clear new paths”. Under these conditions, with what weapons should the researcher go on the road? With the daring dream and fertile curiosity or with the caution of the steps and the fear of possible failures in morality?

To put into practice research that radically changed the dynamics of contemporary performing arts, the rules of ethics were blatantly violated. The New York-based company The Living Theatre⁶, founded in the early 1950s by set designer Julian Beck and actress Judith Malina, was blasting the American way of life with shows like *Paradise Now* and catchphrases like “unconditional no to today's society!” Seen as escapist by critics, the company's productions proposed anarchic escapes from the system, instigating revolt.

Also, the radicalism of social criticism manifested in Japan in the late 1960s through the *angura* (underground) theatre movement in Japan targeted Japanese youth and was a form of instigating protest through manifesto texts and shocking performances. Terayama Shuji, one of the leading artists of the “underground theatre, had, working with the Tenjo Sajiki group, arrived at the radical concept that theatre is “the only place where lawlessness is tolerated”⁷.

Marina Abramovic and her partner Ulay blew up any form of social morality in their 1977 performance at the Gallery of Modern Art in

⁵ Manfred Brauneck, *Independent Theatre in Contemporary Europe: Structures – Aesthetics – Cultural Policy*, ITI Germany, 2017, p. 23: “Schechter's staging of *Dionysos* in '69, a free adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae* (first performed in 1968), was a group performance which probably most consistently and exclusively relied on the human body as a medium for staged, ritual and therapeutic techniques.”

⁶ <https://www.livingtheatre.org/>

⁷ Manfred Brauneck, *op. cit.*, p. 28, “According to Terayama, theatre is the «only place where lawlessness is tolerated».”

Bologna. I quote from the project website: “In *Imponderabilia* two performers, both completely nude, stand in a doorway. The public must squeeze between them in order to pass, and in doing so choose which one of them to face.”⁸ Not to mention the famous 1974 performance *Rhythm 0*⁹ at the Studio Morra in Naples, in which Marina Abramovic offered her own body to the audience for unlimited exploration, to the point of flagellation and the threat of death.

What do we do, then, in the face of an increasingly harsh counter-offensive of the public good seasoned with militant formulas and social media lawsuits, when artistic research targets sensitive or downright *undermined* areas? How far can we safely drill without harming the other? Obviously, there are rules. They have more of a technical, transhuman nature. The confidentiality of personal data, the participants' consent, the use of the subjects' images under conditions of the utmost care, the blurring of identity traits, the ultra-controlled impact of the study results on society, the obligation to deal responsibly with sensitive subjects, the avoidance of perpetuating stereotypes or discrimination, etc.

And yet, the plague of political correctness which fuels the witch hunt in today's public space has a next level: abuses in the name of equality – “Let's abolish nations, because look how unequal they are. Or the feminine and masculine genders in grammar, because they discriminate. Or even grades in the register because they're not equal for everyone. Or, or, or...”¹⁰ Also, trumpeting multiculturalism at all costs – despite the fact that some cultures practice physical and mental abuse, in others there is a state policy for military and/or religious indoctrination, and yet in others there is a pro-discrimination legislation.

How do we go about when highlighting these specific features in artistic research? Because an analysis of substance cannot avoid dominant characteristics that define a way of being. Can we protect ourselves, when we research, behind the specific freedoms of creation? Who sets the limits and in what terms? In my capacity as Vice-Rector for Research and Artistic Creation (George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași), I have no official answer. And if I am given the choice, I will probably speculate, choosing to do everything in my power to achieve my goal, to demonstrate the premise from which I started my research. A politically correct representation of different cultures and communities, people and facts, an

⁸ <https://www.wikiart.org/en/marina-abramovic/imponderabilia>: “In *Imponderabilia* (1977, reenacted in 2010) two performers, both completely nude, stand in a doorway. The public must squeeze between them in order to pass, and in doing so choose which one of them to face.”

⁹ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/abramovic-rhythm-0-t14875>.

¹⁰ Statements made in the public space in different contexts of political and/or social analysis.

analysis carried out with caution and respect, will invariably elide fundamental aspects, identity particularities of the subject of study.

When it comes to minorities or disadvantaged groups, the problem becomes even more acute, even more thorny. On this moving ground we have carried out several researches, artistic practice labs finalized by performances. One of them took place in the tram depot in Iasi, turned into a camp, a gas chamber, a classroom or a Parisian café for the production *Fondane's Last Cigarette*. Funded by a Norwegian grant, the show re-enacted a painful episode in recent human history, centering on the poet and essayist Benjamin Fondane, who met his end in the horrific Auschwitz extermination camp. Throughout my documentation in the archives, but also in the memorials of the concentration camps in Poland and France, I felt I had to “tiptoe” around the topic. I knew that I was approaching a hot topic, a culture whose representatives in Iași would judge me for any deviation, error or inadvertence. And so it was. The show, hailed by the Iași community and critics alike, was the subject of debate at an event related to the Iași pogrom, where members of the local Jewish community expressed their apprehension – the term can be seen as a euphemism – about “the way the show portrays their nature and lifestyle”. The show was a tribute, and yet it still hurt. About this balance between diametrically opposed realities and perspectives, about this ridiculous balance between principles and evidence is, in fact, my article. A naive, therefore deeply subjective confusion.

The same thing happened in the case of another research project carried out about and within a vulnerable community, a very special one: the blind. Seven years ago, more precisely in January 2017, we had the premiere of the show *Completely white*, an atypical approach for the local theatrical landscape, research funded by the Iasi City Hall and implemented by the ARTES Association in partnership with the Association of the Blind. The press release then announced a double premiere: “For the first time in our country, a show is being staged with a script adaptation from José Saramago. In addition, in order to make the fictional universe of the novel *An Essay on Blindness* reach the audience as well as possible, the artists of the *Completely White* project decided to make the performance a singular experience, based on sensoriality.”¹¹ At the end of the first performance, some members of the Association of the Blind, who had supported the actors in documenting for their roles in the

¹¹ Fragment from the press release retrieved from <https://www.agerpres.ro/comunicate/2017/01/31/comunicat-de-presa-asociatia-artes-iasi-12-06-06>

project, objected to the many aspects that put them in a bad light, distorting their reality and circumventing the purely fictional nature of our approach.

In this context, I drew the attention of a younger colleague who is carrying out niche research in the framework of his own professional doctorate to be mindful in his approach. After a workshop that focused on institutionalized elderly people in the context of body shaming, now the young PhD student Radu Alexandru, under the coordination of our colleague associate prof. dr. habil. Călin Ciobotari, launches his analysis on the vulnerable area targeted by the *Completely White* project, that of blind people. I sincerely hope that he will not stumble into any ethical pitfalls during his research

There are other aspects that make the subject of such an analysis, but I prefer to leave my practical research experiences for other moments of reflection and stocktaking. I have certainly not answered all the questions raised here. Nor have I set out to do so. I am merely meditating on some of the ethical filters that govern the act of artistic research in order to better understand the “rules of the game”. The ethical challenges facing artistic research can erode the integrity of this form of knowledge and innovation. At the same time, the value of such an endeavor can be enhanced by courage, perseverance, but also a certain form of “intellectual cheekiness.” I believe that this is the only way to add new and relevant knowledge and information to your field of interest and expertise, a rare skill considering that the system largely operates with existing knowledge, reapplying it all over again.

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