

TRUST ME, I'M AN ARTIST

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Abstract

"Trust Me, I'm An Artist / TMIAAA" (1) is a European-based project devoted to developing "Ethical Frameworks for Artists, Cultural Institutions and Audiences Engaged in the Challenges of Creating and Experiencing New Art Forms in Biotechnology and Biomedicine". As such it brings together a wide variety of interested parties to debate, and hopefully to some extent resolve, ethical issues arising at the intersection of art, science and biomedicine. *Leonardo* hosts a selection of articles by the artists and curators reporting about the project and the experience.

Between 2011 and 2014, artist Anna Dumitriu (2) and ethicist Bobbie Farsides worked together to stage a series of events exploring the impact of ethical review or regulation on the work of artists working in scientific institutions, investigating among other things the prevalent assumption that artists should be allowed to create and display their work unfettered by ethical review or regulation. This position has been defended even when work entails risks of various types to both artist and potential audiences, and even society at large. Furthermore, the view that artists are importantly different to scientists persists, and has left the artistic community to some extent immune to the growing regulatory frameworks that seek to contain science and biotechnology. This leads to interesting challenges and potential misunderstandings when artists and scientists are drawn to work together.

The original "Trust me I'm an Artist" events transported the artist and art work into a formally regulated space, requiring engagement with the bureaucracy of ethical review and face to face scrutiny by a specially convened 'ethics committee'. After confronting the alien language of an ethics application form the artists were required to present their work for formal consideration. In turn the committee was able to approve, reject or require modification before allowing that the work could commence. The process was laid bare as performance in front of an audience, which was also encouraged to offer their reactions to being present in this unusual regulatory space.

Following on from the success of the events in Amsterdam, London, Paris and Dublin (3) five European art/science organizations came together to expand the project (Fig.1) and further explore the challenges posed by the idea of governing modern bio-art. Led by Waag Society, Institute for Art, Science and Technology in Amsterdam (Netherlands) the partners include Arts Catalyst in London (UK), Ciant in Prague (Czech Republic), Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana (Slovenia) and Medical Museion in Copenhagen (Denmark), and again working with lead artist Dumitriu and lead ethicist Farsides.

Phase two of the project has differed in that the nature of the ethical encounter has been less closely proscribed. Few centres



Fig. 1. *Trust Me, I'm An Artist* logo, designed by Laurie Skelton for The Waag Society, photo Jimena Gauna

have chosen to adopt the formal approach of the earlier events where art was presented indirectly via a process involving completed paperwork, a presentation, interrogation, discussion, and decision. Instead on this occasion ethical commentators have interacted directly with the artist and art works, meaning ethical reflection is informed by direct personal experience and the observation of work (and audiences) *in situ*.

In this second phase, each participating centre organised a performative event which served as a "case study" for exploring questions about the complex and contested relationship between art and science. Questions raised by and in response to the works include 'Does regulation diminish art?' 'Is risk an acceptable component of art in the absence of an audience's informed consent?' 'Should artists be allowed to uncritically utilise negative stereotypes or propagate scientific inaccuracies in their work?' Conversely, 'should artists allow themselves to be co-opted into the defence and legitimization of questionable scientific practices?' 'If there is to be a productive relationship between art and science what, if any, are the reciprocal responsibilities and shared goals? Do the goals of art and medicine justify different approaches to risk? Indeed, without the hoped for benefits of science, do some of the actions involved seem frivolous or maybe even cruel?'

Each event inevitably raises and explores different issues, but there are also themes that cross cut the series, an important one being the role and responsibilities of curators and the co-construction of an ethically sound relationship between them, the artist, the proposed audience and society more broadly. It is for this reason that *Leonardo* has brought together paired authors –curator and artist – to reflect upon the experience of curating and producing a TMIAAA event.

The current series of events include *Taste of Flesh, Bite Me, I'm Yours* by Martin O'Brien, curated by Jareh Das, for The Arts Catalyst, London. Described by the artist as an 'endurance event', the work took place in a confined space over many hours and involved physical hardship for the artist and stress and uncertainty for the audience. It culminated in invitations to intimacy, but only after long periods of threat and limited physical assault. Even this brief description is suggestive of the ethical issues entailed in staging and viewing the work.

Confronting Vegetal Otherness: Skotopoeisis by Špela Petrič, curated by Jurij Krpan, for Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana was the first in a series of works proposed by the artist. Špela Petrič stood for two days in front of a fertile tray of cress, employing her own shadow to influence the growth of the plant. Beyond an attempt at intercognition with a live non-human, the work also raised interesting issues of plant ethics and questioned our hierarchical view of the living, where some organisms are clearly regarded as more worthy of respect and consideration than others.

Molding the Signifier by Ivor Diosi, curated by Ondřej Čákl for CIANT in Prague, focused on the development of artificial intelligence, placing computer generated avatars in company with growing mould to explore ideas of agency, control and degradation and the audience's role as onlooker. By confronting the viewer with the physical and mental deterioration of a female character, without offering any opportunity for intervention or rescue, the artist placed the audience in a powerless position as witness to extreme and at times ambiguous human-seeming emotions 'experienced' by a recognizably non-human entity. In common with O'Brien's work it thereby confronted the social and political (or social scientific) as directly as the scientific

At the time of writing this introduction in December 2015, the three above events have taken place. Three others are scheduled in 2016. The event proposed by Gina Czarnecki & Rod Dillon, curated by Louise Whiteley for Medical Museion, Copenhagen will respond to the museum's exhibition *The Body Collected* which presents an historical account of the display of human remains. The work will be given extra poignancy by the fact that the artist lives in Liverpool, a UK city still recovering from the scandal of retention of body parts without the consent or knowledge of parents of children who had died undergoing medical treatment. The final event of the series takes place in Amsterdam at the Waag Society curated by Anna Dumitriu and Lucas Evers and focussing on the work of Jennifer Willet and Kira O'Reilly. The event will explore ways in which artistic and performative approaches can affect our perceptions of issues in animal ethics.

As well as the TMIAAA events themselves, the planned outputs of the project are a symposium, an exhibition, podcasts in the Audiolats channel of the Leonardo Creative Disturbance platform (4) and a series of publications both online and on paper (5). Thus the project will contribute to the growing body of knowledge and literature around art/science communication and engagement. However, the aims of the project are also more directly practical, and at the core of the project lies the ambition to create a 'do it yourself' pack for cultural institutions, artists groups, community groups, students and individuals to create their own "DIY Trust Me, I'm an Artist events". The first of the DIY events should be with artist Terike Haapoja curated by Ulla Taipale for Capsula, Helsinki.

This means that the project will leave a legacy which will further stimulate dialogue and experiential engagement around the intersecting domains of art, science and the human condition. The issue of legacy is important because interesting ethical questions will continue to arise when artists and scientists, curators and publics come together to explore our shared past and possible futures. In October 2015, the Parisian "Musée de l'Homme" (France's anthropology museum) re-opened after 6

years of renovation. How (or indeed whether) to display human remains and body parts has been one of the pre-occupations for museum staff whilst re-situating the museum's extensive collection. Framed by a post-colonial approach, one could argue that these concerns were only just surfacing when the collection was packed away, and certainly did not arise when the specimens were collected. Values, attitudes and ethical imperatives can shift over time, and art and science cannot be seen as divorced from these shifts. Whilst censorship may always be the enemy of free artistic expression, ethically sensitive and responsible curation is a modern ethical imperative.

For artists who work at the forefront of innovation and who push boundaries in terms of what they say and how they say it regulation and governance will necessarily present a challenge. However, their proximity to scientific and intellectual boundaries will require them to engage actively with the ethical and philosophical challenges that science and new technologies pose to our societies. In this round of events several of the pieces challenged audiences to think about the social as well as natural sciences, highlighting the way in which our social scientific understanding frames our interaction with an art work and the science with which it connects and helps to determine the ethical issues it invokes. TMIAAA aims to prompt new ways of thinking about how art, biotechnology and biomedicine can intersect, to encourage artists to embrace the ethical and social implications of their creative output, and to provide science and technology collaborators with new ethical frameworks within which to work with cultural and creative players.

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The UT Dallas ATEC ArtSciLab supports and participates in the Trust Me, I'm an Artist project through the Leonardo Initiatives projects in Experimental Publishing including the Creative Disturbance platform channel on art and biology (<http://creativdisturbance.org/channel/meta-life/>) associated to Audiolats and the Meta-Life (<http://synthbioart.texashats.org/about/>) project website.

References and Notes

1. <http://trustmeimanartist.eu/>
2. Dumitriu Anna, Farsides Bobbie, *Trust Me, I'm an Artist. Towards an Ethics of Art and Science Collaboration*, Blurp Edition, 2014
3. <http://www.artscienceethics.com/> and <http://artscienceethics.tumblr.com/book>
4. Audiolats on Creative Disturbance: <http://creativdisturbance.org/channel/audiolats/>
Direct link to the TMIAAA podcasts from Leonardo/Olats web site: <http://olats.org/trustme/podcasts.php>
5. Beyond the articles published on the Leonardo/Olats website and here in the journal *Leonardo*, the series of publication will include a white paper, catalogue, and a "Trust Me, I'm An Artist DIY Pack"