

Ethics Reviews in Socially Engaged Arts Research

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Biography

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Abstract

This article explores researchers' perceptions of discrepancies between the creative goals of research projects in which artists are recruited and requirements established by ethical review boards in higher education. It describes issues that researchers typically face when applying for the ethical clearance of research projects that engage various communities in participatory activities involving creative professionals. While the observation of ethical codes of practice is very important in all academic research, it is equally important to understand how the goals of research and artistic outcomes may be affected by regulatory procedures as well as variable institutional practices related to

ethical reviews of research. Ethical requirements may impact research in any discipline and are certainly not unique to the arts, but it is important to understand the specific effects of ethics review boards on research projects that venture into new creative areas that might involve vulnerable participants or include unforeseeable artistic outcomes. The article analyses studies undertaken by a research team made of academics, artists and other entities at the University of Malta and shows how the ethics review process affects timeframes, levels of participants' involvement and the organic development of creative processes. Finally, it makes some recommendations for ethical review boards in the evaluation of socially engaged arts research projects.

Keywords

Socially engaged arts research, research ethics reviews, researchers' experience; barriers to research; ethics review boards

Introduction

Practice as research has become an established mode of academic inquiry that incorporates creative practices into research contexts, bridging age-old divides between theory and practice within the context of research infrastructures like universities, peer-reviewed journals and doctoral studies (Wilson & van Ruiten, 2013). During recent decades, this development in academia has had various implications for PhDs in the arts and other disciplines, bringing into play tensions relating to accreditation or standards and epistemological debates revolving around the development and communication of knowledge (Sullivan, 2010; Nelson, 2013). While the use of multi-modal research protocols and creative presentations in research contexts may have

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had a liberating effect in certain academic circles, the repositioning of artistic practices within higher education and research, in general, has also meant that artistic research now needs to comply with regulatory requirements that are standard practice in universities. Specifically, ethical codes of practice are central to research projects in any field that brings academics into contact with members of the broader community. Given that the aims of socially engaged arts projects are generally associated with community-driven needs and political goals, management plans for artistic research involving the collection of data from participants now need to include provisions for participants' informed consent, secure storage of personal data, protection of the participants' identity, respect for the rights of individuals, and so on.

This article will not argue that ethical requirements in other university disciplines should not apply to research in the arts. Rather, this study is focused on a review of the issues that researchers encounter during the planning of research and applications for research ethics approval to conduct their studies, with a particular focus on socially engaged arts research. It explores specific constraints that are experienced by academic researchers as well as creative practitioners involved in research projects, particularly projects that interact with other communities like marginalised groups through the arts. The challenges it will discuss cannot be generalised, because different research proposals and ethics review boards may bring into play different scenarios. More concretely, the sort of research this article will discuss could involve researchers in fieldwork in a context in which an artist or creative team is interacting collaboratively with a community, such as a group of elderly persons in a retirement home. Such a scenario can be complicated further if one also takes into account the fact that academics working in arts departments are sometimes practising artists themselves, while freelance contemporary artists increasingly think of their artwork as a form of 'research' in its own right. While preparing applications for the ethical review of research, the mindset of persons trained in the importance of risk-taking and unpredictability in artistic disciplines may require a kind

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of epistemological repositioning in order to cater for the minimisation of risk or to communicate potential risks in advance to all participants. As a result, persons who are trained as artists (amongst others) may perceive their institutional ethics review boards' requirements as restrictive due to the creative and not always predictable nature of artistic research.

While researchers would generally agree that the rights of participants in any form of research should be respected and that researchers must prevent harm to the participants, a number of researchers are concerned about the procedures and requirements imposed by International Research Ethics Boards (IREB). According to Oancea (2016), for example, a growing concern about ethical issues in research is particularly visible among researchers in the domain of qualitative and visual research. Also, in the complex and multidisciplinary domain of socially engaged arts research that focuses on exploring the intersection of social, educational, and arts-related issues, researchers face challenges specific to social research and the particular challenges inherent to socially engaged arts. While socially engaged arts or social practice revolves around creative and other processes that artists and other groups collaborate on to implement change, for the purposes of this article socially engaged arts research is being understood as academic research that studies these processes in order to understand and possibly assess the kinds of change that occur within such co-produced work.

According to Punch and Oancea (2014, p. 58), "Research ethics is a branch of applied ethics focused on the specific contexts of planning, conducting, communicating and following up research". Oancea (2016) also emphasizes that ethical issues are always present in educational research that includes human subjects, particularly when the research involves children or other vulnerable groups. There is general agreement among scholars that the ethics review process in research is important (Carr, 2015; Scherzinger & Bobbert, 2017) but demanding (Silberman & Kahn, 2011) and often a challenging (Lewis, 2008; Sikes, 2013) component of empirical research studies. Arts-based research and doctoral studies that include a strong

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component of creative practice could not exist without an understanding of the value and application of ethics reviews. However, some issues were also identified in the domain of socially engaged arts research that represent an obstacle to pursuing quality educational research due to (un)reasonable requirements imposed by institutional ethics review boards (Sanders & Ballengee-Morris, 2008). Consequently, practices adopted for ethics reviews in the domain of social sciences enforced by institutional review boards are perceived by artists and researchers as highly restrictive and challenging (Israel, 2017; Dingwall, 2012; Schrag, 2010; Wassenaar and Slack, 2016).

Literature shows that scholars understand the ethical requirements for studies involving human participants and consider them as highly relevant. Still, they emphasize that the process is usually too long and restrictive (Shoenbill et al., 2017). Since institutional regulations frequently change, researchers involved in socially engaged arts-related projects and other researchers often experience difficulties through this process (Dingwall, 2008, 2012; Emmerich, 2013; Librett & Perrone, 2010; Lombardo, 2017).

Scholars unanimously agree that the observation and practice of ethical research are of utmost importance, and need to protect participants from any physical, social, legal, and psychological risk. Based on a critical analysis of research ethics regulations in the social sciences, however, Dingwall (2008, 2012) concludes that ethics reviews in social science limit the rights and freedom of researchers and jeopardize trust between researchers and participants and, in this way, represent a risk for the quality of social research. Research studies that apply an ethnographic approach are particularly affected by ethics regulations (Mapedzahama & Dune, 2017). According to Librett & Perrone (2010), ethics regulations and the required mandatory consent and monitoring compromise confidentiality and significantly affect “contemporary ethnographic research and has had serious consequences for both the research participants and the production of knowledge (p. 729).

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In addition, several scholars claim that ethics reviews based on the biomedical model constrain research work in the social sciences (Israel & Hay, 2006), limit research methodology choices, and compromise academic freedom (Iphofen, 2020). Many researchers also perceive ethics reviews as too restrictive to the extent that they prevent research and debates about sensitive research topics (Scott, 2008).

Many researchers are aware of the volatility of the ethics review process, and studies that examine empirical literature evaluating institutional review boards demonstrate inconsistencies regarding risk level, recruitment, methodologies, and other vital aspects of research (Abbott & Grady, 2011; Lees et al., 2020). Analysed studies included in Abbott and Grady's review also show a site-to-site variability regarding institutional research board requirements and inefficiency of the institutional review process that often leads to changes in research proposals and, in this way, jeopardize the quality of science. Based on this comprehensive review of the existing literature about the work of institutional review boards, Abbott and Grady (2011) suggest several recommendations, including guidance or training for the members of the ethics review boards and additional research studies to inform the structure and processes of institutional review boards. In another comprehensive study of ethics review practice, Lees, Walters and Godbold (2020) found a similar inconsistency regarding institutional ethical review processes and outcomes with a particularly strong negative impact on studies that apply an ethnographic approach due to the epistemological assumptions which strongly oppose positivist models used by most ethics review bodies.

McCracken (2020) provided evidence that ethics review boards usually apply a positivistic approach in the ethics evaluation process with marginalized communities, and this is probably one of the main reasons for tensions that exist during the review process of socially engaged arts studies that are based on critical or interpretive methodologies and ideologies that are focused on social challenges. In addition, formalized research ethics review processes and bureaucratic

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requirements are perceived by researchers as factors that negatively influence the quality of social (Hammersley, 2009) and educational research (Scott and Fonseca, 2010). Another comprehensive review of the literature (Anderson et al., 2012) found that studies of research ethics are usually conducted in the biomedical domain, while studies of ethics review processes in education and community-engaged research are largely neglected.

Overall, our literature review shows that an evaluation and improvement of the ethics review process are necessary since mandatory ethics reviews of social and art-related empirical studies affect many research studies and influence the selection of research problems and research methodology as well as efficacy, relevance, and quality of research. Problems related to ethics reviews in the domain of socially engaged arts warrant new studies in order to enable researchers to deal with challenging ethics review processes in this significant but complex multi-disciplinary domain.

In the domain of socially engaged arts research, the careful planning and predictability of data collection tools in research processes and applications for ethical clearance from institutional research ethics committee boards may seem to run counter to the twists and element of surprise found in many creative pursuits because professional standards of good practice and university directives tend to be regulated by procedures that were generated in other disciplines like medicine (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014). This could mean that certain discrepancies might arise between artistic goals or the expectations of researchers based in artistic disciplines and actual research outcomes or possibilities. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that participatory processes in the arts can be accompanied by instances of abuse of privilege by artists or other research coordinators as well as other issues related to ownership of data and creative outcomes, informed consent, and so on. It would therefore be unreasonable to expect anything less rigorous than a thorough ethics review prior to commencing such research projects.

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In this article, the challenge of planning and implementing socially engaged arts research within the remit of university institutional research codes will be discussed by describing and analysing a series of funded research studies submitted for ethical review by a team at the University of Malta. These studies form part of an EU-funded, Horizon 2020 project called ‘Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture’ (AMASS), in which several other European partners are involved. AMASS aims to bring people from different walks of life to work with artists on the development and implementation of multidisciplinary, creative projects. It also aims to study and evaluate the societal impact of the arts and present policy recommendations in different European countries and regions. AMASS research at the University of Malta was led by a team of researchers with expertise in art education and socially engaged art, drama education and empirical research. For the purposes of this research, artistic practitioners with years of experience in theatre, scriptwriting, screen printing, fashion, socially engaged arts and other artistic and educational areas were commissioned to support various aspects of the research projects. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other specialised entities also supported the research process by advising about different aspects like recruitment of participants, suitability of data collection tools, and so on.

The article will delve into a broad discussion about the nature of experimentation, ethics and possible instrumentalisation of the arts in research and social engagement. It will then examine mixed methods of data collection (including arts-based methods) adopted by the University of Malta team to understand the social impact of artworks and will discuss ethical procedures leading to submission and acceptance by the university’s ethics committees. Finally, it will reflect on the possibility of improving ethical reviews of partnerships between university researchers, artists and communities in order to ensure that such partnerships revolve around meaningful dialogues rather than problematic trade-offs.

Social practice: Between instrumentalisation and antagonism

Thompson (2012) writes that “social practice artists create forms of living that activate communities and advance public awareness of pressing social issues” (p. 8), thus expanding our understanding of art and involving new publics. In short, socially engaged art replaces representational goals prevalent in earlier artistic practices with more participatory goals that bring others’ work into the equation. The emancipatory goals of some forms of community-based arts (or their manifestation in discursive practices) have occasionally been criticised for developing paternalistic attitudes towards participants, characterised by the view that these artistic practices ‘improve’ the lives of others (Kester, 2013).

Alternatively, participatory projects can be problematic because they instrumentalise the arts by focusing on their ‘usefulness’ and minimise, or even do away with, antagonistic situations that form a necessary part of any democratic society (Bishop, 2012). The use of state funding to construct unrealistic narratives of consensus or inclusion can overburden the creative arena with expectations of social cohesion (Dewinter et al., 2020). Such narratives can also give the impression that individuals or communities, rather than institutions and systemic structures, are ultimately responsible for finding ‘solutions’ for societal challenges. There exists a risk that official cultural policies that prioritise arts projects with a social dimension can end up reducing the arts to an extension of government policy. Artists who make use of participatory processes in their practice need to be aware of this risk in order to maintain a good balance between social goals they embrace and the need to ensure that the arts remain critical of the status quo. Creating false expectations about the eradication of social inequalities through the funding of participatory arts initiatives is potentially exploitative of various social groups involved in such projects and artists could be instrumental in ensuring that communities use such platforms to develop political critique instead of ‘happy’ compromises that merely appease cultural authorities.

The criticality we associate with serious artistic practices may be reinforced in social prac-

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tice by cross-medium tendencies that challenge “inherited parameters for defining the within and the without of art” (Jackson, 2011, p. 28). This necessary critical engagement between artists working in different media, participants and authorities shows that ethical considerations are indeed an essential condition of socially engaged arts. Rowe (2019) has also written about the importance of introducing a measure of antagonism in socially engaged, arts-based research projects. Clearly, these kinds of issues warrant a thorough review of ethical implications in higher education contexts, where qualities like honesty, transparency and academic integrity are a *sine qua non*.

When we consider the impact of ethics review procedures on the development of more antagonistic socially engaged arts research we might ask whether such university procedures confine practice as research and participatory, creative projects within ‘acceptable’ or altruistic parameters, hence making it difficult for artist-researchers to break through these inherited parameters. Might it become too challenging to simultaneously break through accepted aesthetic boundaries and satisfy ethical requirements? Putting this question a little differently, one could ask: do university codes of practice serve not only to protect members of vulnerable groups from abusive relationships and any form of risk or harm with artist-researchers but also to determine the extent of experimentation and collaboration that would be possible? Can ethics review boards discourage real participation by expecting academics to maintain a safe, professional distance from participants?

Description of University of Malta AMASS studies

As part of its AMASS obligations, the University of Malta team developed and is implementing a pilot study and four additional studies, all of which employ arts-based strategies and mixed data collection and assessment methods. Below is a brief description of these Maltese testbed studies, followed by an analysis of the work and difficulties involved in submitting

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these artistic projects for ethical clearance. The pilot study was a theatrical project that aimed to engage with challenges experienced by persons living with HIV in Malta. Its final title was *Il-Pozittivi* (The Positives), and it was developed by a creative enterprise called Culture Venture as well as a scriptwriter and several actors. The data that helped the team to develop the script was gathered from a small group of persons living with HIV, who were interviewed by two social workers to maintain complete anonymity. The interviewees and other members of the pilot study's gatekeeper, MGRM (Malta LGBTIQ Rights Movement) were invited to give feedback about the play's first draft during an online rehearsed reading, and the script and title were changed on the basis of this feedback. A new version with a more positive outlook on the life of persons living with HIV was professionally filmed and shown to online audiences around six months later. Additional data was gathered using other means like pre- and post-test strategies and paper-and-pencil surveys.

Suitable Citizens was developed by artist/academic Raphael Vella with the support of a photographer, a screen printing artist, a fashion designer and an amateur filmmaker who was trained in filmmaking and video editing specifically for this project. The project revolved around the exclusion of migrants from cultural life in Malta and was supported by an NGO, *Jesuit Refugee Service Malta*. Participants from various African countries participated in different data collection strategies, including pre- and post-surveys, focus groups, photovoice, journals and other arts-based methods and open-ended discussions and workshops. They produced a series of photographs, which were screen printed on paper and different types of fabric, leading to colourful tote bags, face masks and scarves.

F'Ħakka t'Għajn is a theatre project developed by academic and drama educator Isabelle Gatt from the University of Malta, with the support of different actors. Assisted by *Active Ageing*, a national entity that works with the elderly in Malta, the team (which included a scriptwriter) worked with a small group of elderly persons on the development of a script for

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a new play. Similar data collection strategies to the other projects were used, though the vulnerability of this group of participants led to various delays during the COVID pandemic. The project still hasn't reached completion at this stage, but Isabelle Gatt plans to have the play filmed and shown online to different audiences, given the restrictions currently in place for physical theatre.

The final two projects in the University of Malta AMASS testbed are still in their early stages, though both have already received ethical clearance. *Batman Gżirjan* is being developed by artist Kristina Borg with the support of an environmental and heritage NGO and a local community group. This project is currently being developed in a series of online and face-to-face workshops with elderly residents (or ex-residents) and fishermen in a small town called Gżira that is suffering from overdevelopment, particularly its more popular public spaces adjacent to the sea. The project leader aims to develop 'guerrilla' actions and a final performance near or in the sea, with the contribution of the participants. In this project, data will also be collected from passers-by, who will be asked to contribute with feedback about their perceptions about these developments in the town.

The final research project is also being developed by *Culture Venture*, with the support of Opening Doors, an NGO that works with adults with intellectual disabilities. A script for a new play will be co-written by participant-members of *Opening Doors*, with the assistance of professional actors, a director and a script writer, leading to a public performance that will engage with issues raised by the participants themselves during workshops and rehearsals. Data collection tools will include pre- and post-assessment interviews, focus groups, journals and audience paper-and-pencil surveys or structured interviews.

The Ethics Review Process

The ethics review process used at the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta is rigorous and typically expects a great amount of detail from researchers applying for ethical approval of their research projects. For each of the research projects described above, the AMASS researchers at the University of Malta supplied the ethics board with over fifty pages of project descriptions, data collection tools, recruitment procedures, participating artists and community members, risks envisaged at different stages, data management plans, and so on. Comprehensive applications like these are generally required to provide further details following a first evaluation by the board, and occasionally expand even further following a second evaluation. Of course, this process is to be expected in any serious ethical review of research.

It has been argued that partners in participatory research involving the input of community members should ideally choose their level of involvement with a university's ethics review board (Shore, 2007). In practice, this is not always possible, as the University of Malta AMASS team found when planning to engage with persons living with HIV in Malta in one of its theatre research projects. The level of caution exercised by the faculty's research ethics committee and the gatekeeper providing support in this project (MGRM, the Malta LGBTIQ Rights movement), as well as the request for anonymity of the interviewees, highlighted the difficulty of employing a more inclusive approach in this study (Gatt et al., 2021).

Another difficulty encountered by the University of Malta AMASS team and other researchers is related to the organic development of projects of a creative and/or community-based nature. Artists know that projects can rarely be planned very precisely in advance and may also argue that prescriptive models of artistic practice stifle the creative process. When artists collaborate with others, the problem is intensified because the participatory approach itself would appear to dictate that room must be left for possible changes in direction based on co-creators' input. However, the ethics review procedures in the team's faculty (particularly

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the procedures' emphasis on informed consent and accurate information) require researchers to have very precise data management plans in advance, specifying the duration of different activities and expectations from all participants and stakeholders. Maintaining equity in community-based research processes would need to take account of the fact that research projects of this sort "involve learning and change at the individual, group, organization, and ultimately societal levels" (Wood, 2017, p. 2), but in practice, the strict rules and time-related limitations may not encourage changes in research plans that are inherent to creative artistic creation. Apart from its possible effect on artistic innovation, this adherence to ethical regulations could also lead to the conversion of potentially exciting research methods to relatively bland or conventional modes that would not take risks or present possible pitfalls during a review.

Other questions that arose during preparations for AMASS studies were related to the participant's right to withdraw from theatrical productions that would be virtually stalled if any actor occupying a central role decided to exercise this right at the eleventh hour. Difficulties like this led to countless debates involving the University of Malta research team and participating artists like theatre directors and scriptwriters. Of course, this does not mean that ethical review procedures can or should be done away with. Such practices go a long way towards protecting the identity of vulnerable persons, protecting participants from possible harm, ensuring that they are given relevant information about the research, and that collaboration is entirely voluntary. Instead, it is crucial that these and other difficulties in ethics review procedures are understood well in order to guarantee more creative freedom and equitable forms of power-sharing in participatory artistic research.

During the evaluation of applications for the above-listed studies, the AMASS team encountered many obstacles similar to the issues identified in the literature. Indeed, it is likely that academics in several other fields of research encounter similar obstacles during the process of ethical approval. One of the first issues encountered during the application process was the

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submission of applications through an online system, a form similar to an online survey that is limited regarding the length of the fields, but the length of the answers was unknown, and the applicants needed to guess the expected length of their responses.

In addition, communication with the ethics committee through this system was limited and confusing since this form was designed mainly for submission of students' individual applications for approval of their dissertations. In this way, the communication was limited to only one member of the research team, which required additional effort to involve all team members in submitting and revising their applications. Re-submission of the requested revisions was also challenging since additional requests often led to additions above the capacity of this online system. Such re-submissions often required repetitive new submissions and the adjustment of the already accepted components of applications.

Due to a large number of applications for review, the limited number of committee members and complications due to the pandemic, in addition to the technical challenges related to the submission of applications for ethics reviews, one of the serious challenges was the amount of time required for reviews by the ethics committee since each application required several months to be approved. This was particularly challenging for applications that were part of large-scale international studies due to the strict deadlines, interdependent research activities, request for frequent reporting and synchronized delivery of results from various national studies. The slow review process also created anxieties amongst various members of the team, given that there was a risk that some artists' commitment to participate might have been affected by changing timeframes. This last problem was exacerbated by the pandemic, during which work in the arts was particularly precarious and artists could not afford to involve themselves at length in projects that might change considerably or fall through due to decisions taken by the ethics review board.

Probably the most serious challenge for researchers was the scope of reviews that were,

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according to researchers, highly restrictive and mandatory for all studies regardless of the domain of research and the specific methodological approaches of various research disciplines. Researchers often felt that the ethics reviews went beyond the scope of the review process and protection of the participants since reviews also included assessment of research questions and issues of a more academic nature. Such reviews were perceived as a restriction of researchers' academic freedoms and a barrier that limits the application of the theoretical and methodological approaches specific for studies in various fields of social science, education, particularly in studies that make use of qualitative and action research in the domain of socially engaged art (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2005). Similar issues identified in the literature of social and socially engaged arts research were identified in a recent study of researchers involved in educational and social research (Gatt et al., 2021). Artists working with university researchers in this set of AMASS studies were vocal about their perception that institutional ethics reviews restricted their artistic work and freedom.

Conclusion

Although many conceptual issues emphasized by researchers involved in socially engaged arts research exist (Bolt, 2016; 2019; Klassen, 2016; Pavarini et al., 2021) that warrant further studies and scholars' continuous involvement in the search for acceptable solutions for complex ethical issues in social and socially engaged research, many issues could be solved that would improve the efficiency and the quality of empirical studies as well as creative outcomes.

Based on the conducted literature review and experience from these complex socially engaged arts studies, it seems that some of the identified issues could be solved through improved procedures and technology of the submission of ethics reviews. A more flexible online application system based on some of the available online database technologies would certainly eliminate many technical issues that researchers face during the application process.

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The identified difficulties in communication with the institutional ethics review boards and imbalance of institutional, researcher individual, and research teams' power (Locke et al., 2015) could be prevented through direct dialogue as suggested by Hammersley (2015) as well as through the training of all actors involved in the ethics review process, particularly those who evaluate socially engaged arts research proposals (Abbott & Grady, 2011; MacNeill et al., 2020). Centralized reviews and slow communication through official reporting and re-submissions could be much more efficient if the ethics review boards appoint members competent in the research domain of studies that require ethics reviews since many minor issues identified through the review process could be much more efficiently solved through direct dialogue with the appointed members of the institutional research board. Members of review boards with expertise in the arts could contribute positively to this process. The lengthy process of review (up to around six months in the case of AMASS) needs to be revised to avoid possible dropouts of participants and artists caused by changing timeframes.

The danger of restricting creative results to outcomes that have already been predicted in research ethics applications also needs to be taken into account by review boards. Such restrictions can skew creative and scientific results and negatively impact relationships between researchers and participating artists, who may find such constraints problematic. While the studies conducted in Malta worked around these constraints to allow for and even encourage unpredictable outcomes and tensions, the research process would definitely have been easier and less stressful had the ethics review board included members who had a stronger grasp of arts-based research methods and requirements pertaining to creative and socially engaged arts. Positivistic approaches and epistemological assumptions about what constitutes 'serious' or ethical research need to be counter-balanced by an understanding of the need for some level of flexibility, unpredictability and change in participatory, creative studies of this sort.

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