# “What we share is knowledge”

## A Study of Artist-Researchers Navigating Professional Uncertainty through the Lens of Meaningful Work

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# ABSTRACT

In the context of professional precarity and limited institutional support, early-career artist-researchers are challenged to define and sustain a meaningful professional practice. This thesis investigates how they experience and cultivate meaningfulness through their work. While artistic research is increasingly recognized as a legitimate mode of knowledge production (McNiff, 2011), the professionalization of this field often unfolds in an environment marked by economic insecurity, inconsistent recognition, and unclear career pathways. The study responds to this context by asking: *How do artist-researchers experience and cultivate a sense of meaningfulness in their early career phase?*

To answer this question, the research draws on eight in-depth interviews with early-career artist-researchers who studied in, or currently work in the Netherlands. A reflexive thematic analysis was used to explore their lived experiences, drawing on the framework of meaningful work as proposed by Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012), which identifies dynamic tensions between self and other, being and doing, and reality and inspiration. This framework, originally developed in organizational studies, was adapted here to account for the existential, embodied, and relational dimensions of artistic research practice. Four thematic clusters were developed: navigating precarity through reflexivity, resisting systems of visibility and recognition, constructing resonance through artistic process, and building interdependent communities of support. These themes illuminate how meaningfulness is not only experienced, but actively constructed in relation a yet not established professional field and absent institutional support.

The findings show that meaningfulness operates not only as a subjective feeling, but as a relational and processual practice. Artist-researchers engage in a continual negotiation between artistic autonomy and social relevance, personal values and systemic pressures. While they seek to make their work accessible and impactful, they also protect its integrity by resisting instrumentalization and creating their own ecologies of support. This research contributes to the understanding of meaningful work in precarious creative fields and raises critical questions about the ethics of professionalization under neoliberal conditions. It highlights the need for alternative infrastructures that support care-based, relational, and non-transactional modes of working. Ultimately, the study positions artistic research not only as a site for meaning-making, but as a vehicle for redefining the role of art in society, proposing new avenues for how value is created and sustained beyond the arts.

*KEYWORDS:* Meaningful work, Meaningfulness, Artistic research, Relationality, Resonance, Valuation of artistic work

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# Preface

There are many people I owe my gratitude.

Firstly, I extend my gratitude to my surpervisor, dr. Marloes Shami-van Houten, for her support and for the trust she gifted me thorougout this entire—reading, thinking, feeling, and—writing process. Thank you for offering me the tools to reconnect with my inner truth, and to let it guide me during the uncertainty of the thesis-writing phase.

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I am grateful for my partner, who has understood me when I could not understand myself. Thank you for always staying with me, and for staying with the trouble.

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In this process, I need to acknowledge my driving instructor, L., whose driving lessons translated into life lessons – of accepting control, responsibility, and competence. Thank you for the fun and for the power.

Finally, I wouldn't be here without the influence of the many incredible women who have mentored me along the way. I hope to bring you along with me everywhere I go.

This process has been incredibly transformative. Thank you for being my "partners in crime".

"Where research and making blur a lot of the time,
the face of art has changed.
It's not just about pretty aesthetics,
it's about widening what it is we can understand.

That's where art has a beautiful presence
that is often put to the side...
like it's just this element of performativeness:
you have something, it looks pretty...
*you've put your soul into it!*

But it doesn't have to end there.
It can also be the voice, the beginning of a voice for something.
The voice of a thought, which is important to channel...

Because it's where I think an updating
—of what it is that we do, and how we do it—
comes into power, or comes into play."

– Steven Maybury, artist-researcher.

# 1. Introduction

Today, the boundaries between making and research are increasingly blurred. Artistic research is not simply about aesthetics or products, but about how knowledge and meaning take form through practice (McNiff, 2011, pp. 385-393). As my fellow artist-researcher argues, where research and making blur, art becomes the "beginning of a voice", and not just the product of one (S. Maybury, personal communication, 16.04.2025). This shift from approaching art as a product, to approaching it as a form of voice, demands attention to both what voices the artist-researchers express, and to how they come to inhabit and sustain this role. This thesis takes that demand seriously, asking how emerging artist-researchers construct and cultivate meaningfulness in this space, exploring what their experiences reveal about the evolving position and pressures of creative labor.

While the term artistic research has gained institutional recognition, it remains a difficult concept to define – as it continues to develop itself and continues to challenge the normative boundaries of institutionalized disciplines (Grau-Perez, 2025, p.2). What counts as artistic research, who defines it, and under which conditions it is legible as "research", are ongoing discussions within the field (Borgdorff, 2012).

This thesis does not aim to resolve any definitional debates on the topic. Instead, it uses "artistic research" as a descriptive term for practices in which artists engage in sustained, reflexive inquiry through, with, and about their work. Often enacted through embodied engagement and iterative making, this form of inquiry is shaped by artists' moral values and social concerns (Hannula et. al., 2014). Unlike other forms of labor, artistic research is not defined by institutional structures, but often strained by their absence, as the artist-researchers experience a lack of funding, recognition, and sustained support. This thesis approaches artistic research as a set of orientations toward making and knowing – which may or may not be institutionally valued.

This framing foregrounds the lived and situated nature of artistic research, and thus allows for a closer examination of what it means to pursue such a practice under real-world conditions. Therefore, this thesis asks: "How do artist-researchers experience and cultivate a sense of meaningfulness in their early career phase?" This question brings together two interrelated lines of inquiry. First, it explores how artists experience their work as being meaningful: how they

make sense of their practice in the face of economic instability, audience reception, and institutional demands. Second, it investigates how artists cultivate meaningfulness through the way they conduct their creative practice. Thus, the research question includes both the internal dynamics of artistic work (through process, embodiment, autonomy) through the lens of cultivation of meaning, and the external conditions that shape it (through the art world, funding structures, institutional norms and recognition) which fundamentally shape one's experience of meaning.

The social relevance of this thesis lies in its focus on the meaning work – a topic of increasing public concern as developments in technology and AI continue to raise existential questions regarding the meaning, the value and future of human labor (Yeoman, 2021). Looking at how cultural professionals cultivate meaning through their work may aid in understanding what values are cultivated and what strategies are practiced when stable pathways are missing. This is because artist-researchers often activate within structurally unstable and under-supported professional fields. Such creative labor often happens within economic and institutional infrastructures that are opaque, misunderstood, and difficult to navigate – inspiring researchers to denote them as "sandpiles of opportunities" (Giuffre, 1999, p.829), to reflect how career paths are not only unclear, but are unique to the individual. Understanding how artist-researchers construct and sustain a sense of meaningfulness in their practice can thus have wider social implications.

From a scientific perspective, this study contributes through its intersecting bodies of literature. First, it adds to empirical research on the meaningfulness of work, which has grown substantially in recent years across organizational psychology, management studies, and the sociology of work (Rosso et al., 2010; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Berthoin Antal et al., 2018). While these studies have articulated various dimensions of meaningful work—including personal development, social relationships and social contribution (Berthoin Antal et al., 2018)—most of this research focuses on formal employment contexts and salaried workers. In this body of literature, independent cultural workers are largely underrepresented (with notable exceptions: Bendassolli & Borges-Andrade, 2013; Faria & Martins, 2025), despite working under different structural conditions, with higher risk and instability across multiple domains of life. This thesis addresses this gap by focusing on the specific case of artist-researchers and their meaning-making processes within loosely institutionalized and precarious environments.

While artistic research has received growing attention in both scholarly and institutional contexts, much of the literature focuses on epistemology, methodology, or pedagogical identity. Fewer studies attend to how artistic research is practiced as labor. This thesis addresses that gap by drawing on qualitative interviews with early-career artist-researchers, analyzed through the lens of meaningful work and creative labor. The semi-structured interviews are analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, which aims to reveal the lived experiences of artist-researchers.

The following chapter situates the study within existing debates on artistic research and meaningful work, presenting the work of artist-researchers, and subsequently positions it within its professional field. Chapter three discusses the methodological approach, detailing the choice of sample and method, in the light of the researcher's position. Chapter four presents the results of the thesis, structured around recurring themes delineating how artists describe, cultivate, and sustain meaningfulness in their practice. The chapter also brings these findings into conversation with broader discussions on labor, meaning and value in the cultural field, reflecting on how meaning is made and maintained when artistic work unfolds outside linear or secure career trajectories. Finally, chapter five presents the conclusion of the thesis.

# 2. Theoretical framework

To advance an answer to the question of how artist-researchers experience and cultivate a sense of meaningfulness through their work at the early stages of their career, several concepts are to be explored. First of all, it is necessary to introduce and explain what artistic research entails, in order to position it as the labor of the artist-researcher. For this purpose, several voices are introduced, to provide a detailed account of the practice of artistic research. Then, the artist-researcher is delineated as a professional, working within the larger context of creative labor and research, described through both its opportunities and challenges. Finally, the concept of meaningfulness of work is tackled, and a conceptual and methodological lens is proposed for the exploration of artistic research work.

## 2.1. The concept of artistic research: artistic practice as mode of inquiry

In the last couple of decades, the arts and sciences have pushed boundaries – so much so that the dichotomous view on the separation between arts and sciences has been blurred by curiosity on both sides. On the scientific side, there has been a growing interest in "applying artistic approaches to qualitative inquiry" (Wang et al., 2017, p.7), and on the artistic side, there has been an interest in researching "into, through and for art" (Frayling, 1993, as cited in Cazeaux, 2017, p.3). This convergence of arts and sciences facilitated a multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary context of labor. Within this context, artistic practice gained recognition not only as cultural expression, but as a legitimate "mode of inquiry", capable of not only generating knowledge, but also illuminating alternative "ways of knowing" (McNiff, 2011, pp. 385-393).

Following the historical line underlying the discourse in which arts and sciences converge into a fertile ground for artistic research to emerge in, it is possible to find multiple voices describing the emergence of artistic research, often comparing the more scientific research practice, on one hand, and the more traditional artistic practice, on the other hand. According to Jones (1980), Frayling (1993) and Borgdorff (2009), a foundational typology distinguishes between research into art, research through art, and research for art (Klein, 2017, p.2). Similarly, Dombois (2009, as cited in Klein, 2017, p.2) proposes a two-directional differentiation, distinguishing between: "Research about / for / through Art" and "Art about / for / through Research", underscoring the multifaceted approaches – the convergence of the two directions

seems to occur in the phrase “art through research” and “research through art”, signaling the possibility of art being research in itself.

Simultaneously, McNiff was advancing the concept of arts-based research, as a “new tradition of inquiry”, aimed at providing art-making practices as qualitative research methods, to advance both the field of therapy, and the experience of the client (2011, p.37). He later defined arts-based research as “involving the researcher in some form of direct art-making as a primary mode of systematic inquiry” (2011, p.385). While McNiff was promoting art-making as research practice, Sullivan (2006) recognized how artists’ practices are a form of research in themselves. He argued that visual artists’ whole “critical and creative investigations” are “forms of research grounded in art practice” (2006). Building on this idea, Klein (2017) also argued that it is not the art which somehow evolves into research, but it is the research which becomes artistic. A way in which research may become artistic is when the research “centers on the practice of making and playing”, highlighting that “practicing the arts” is “intrinsic to the research process” (Borgdorff, 2012, p.123). Although they come from different perspectives, and aim for different arguments, these scholars collectively relate in their positioning of the artist-practitioner at the crux of both the art-making practice and the researching practice, highlighting the crucial embeddedness of the artist-researcher in the production of knowledge through artistic practices.

Many scholars have developed the idea of artistic practice as inquiry, presenting it through various perspectives: art-as-research, practice-based research, arts-based research (ABR) (McNiff, 1998; Leavy, 2006), artistic research (Borgdorff, 2009), arts-informed research (Cole & Knowles, 2008), a/r/tography (Irwin, 2023), and artistic inquiry (Wadsworth Hervey, 2000), and possibly many other variants. While being mindful of their unique contributions to the field, it is also valuable to consider these various practices as being facets of one whole – which this thesis understands as artistic research. This choice is made with the understanding that, although artistic research lacks a universal definition (Grau-Perez, 2025), it remains a dynamic, evolving concept, because it grows and develops as artists practice it. The practice and the field of artistic research prevail beyond categories, because the outputs of artistic research generally contribute to its continuous development, exceeding previous methodologies and understandings (Sullivan, 2006; Biggs & Karlsson, 2010; Borgdorff, 2012). Although scholars conceptualize artistic practice as inquiry differently, a common denominator is recognizing that at “the interface of

artistic, scientific and academic inquiry", the embodied artistic practice functions as a legitimate mode of knowledge production (Boeck & Tepe, 2021, as cited in Grau-Perez, 2025, p.2).

In this sense, starting from "not-yet-knowing" (Klein, 2017, p.1), artist-researchers work on contributing to what we "know" and "understand" in general (Borgdorff, 2012, p.3). This knowledge-seeking and knowledge-generating process is evidenced by researcher Grau-Perez, when she posits that the fundamental practice of artistic research "entails the development of an inquiry aimed at yielding original contributions to advance understanding through the production and acquisition of novel forms of knowledge derived from the artistic practice" (Grau-Perez, 2025, p.3). Through this definition, she explains the system through which artistic research succeeds in using an artistic practice as a mode of inquiry.

Therefore, this thesis uses the concept of artistic research to describe the artistic practices which advance human understanding with knowledge derived in, through, from the artistic practice itself – without trying to categorize it within a particular method, discipline, or criteria. Thus, artistic research signifies the kind of labor which contributes socially by advancing knowledge derived from one's artistic practice. Without negating the theoretical discourses on artistic research, this working definition seeks to shift the focus away from the more theoretical narratives – and place artistic research back into the context of the lived experience of its practitioners, presenting it as a type of labor which artist-researchers perform in society. As this section investigated artistic research from the academic point of view, the next section will explore artistic research from the experiential point of view, at the level of the practice itself.

## 2.2. The embodied practice of artistic research: the approach of reflexivity

As mentioned previously, artistic research activates at the intersection of artistic, academic, and scientific inquiry (Boeck and Tepe, 2021, as cited in Grau-Perez, 2025, p.2). However, unlike other research paradigms, artistic research "privileges the experiential, sensory, and embodied dimensions of knowledge production, foregrounding the process of artistic inquiry as a mode of discovery and understanding" (Grau-Perez, 2025, p.3). In other words, artistic research is based on the interrelation between the embodied practice of art-making and the conceptual reflection about it, taking into account the sensuous qualities of the experience itself.

This idea is best clarified by the methodology of artistic research which was put forth in the book "Artistic Research Methodology", written by Hannula, Suoranta and Vaden (2014). The authors present a basic formula for artistic research: "artistic research = artistic process (acts inside the practice) + arguing for a point of view (contextual, interpretive, conceptual, narrative work)" (Hannula et al., 2014, p.15). The authors explain that the artistic process involves those acts performed inside the practice – such as documenting the practice, with an awareness of its conditions, moving between and activating from insider and outsider perspectives, and incorporating all this process into the making of artworks (Hannula et al., 2014, p.15). On the other hand, the phase of "arguing for a point of view", otherwise described as the "contextualization"-phase, encompasses the artist's social and theoretical imagination, hermeneutics, conceptual, linguistic and argumentative innovations, as well as their articulation through language (Hannula et al., 2014, p.15). This formula aligns with widely shared understandings within the field, which recognize the existence of a process of inquiry, which to some extent is "artistic" in nature (Klein, 2017; Grau-Perez, 2025), and a product of the inquiry, which entails "new" knowledge (Klein, 2017; Borgdorff, 2012).

This proposed framework describes artistic research as if it occurs in two different ways: one grounded in embodied action, the other in conceptual reflection. However, practice and theory are not separated in artistic research, but are two facets of the same phenomenon – researchers Hannula, Suoranta and Vaden illustrate this idea by recognizing that the physical practice of writing is "a way of thinking and discovering things" (2014, p.17). Therefore, the "artistic process"-phase and the "contextualization"-phase are not separate stages of the artistic research practice, but are present in the same ongoing process (Hannula et al., 2014).

In the same way, the artistic research practice does conclude with its public presentation; instead, the artist-researcher integrates the experience of documenting and exhibiting the work into the research process itself. In this way, the artistic research practice can be understood as a framework which initiates, documents, shares, and re-absorbs the research process (Hannula et al., 2014, p.18).

The capacity for artistic research to function as such an iterative and integrative framework—where making, contextualizing, and exhibiting, contribute to knowledge production—is made possible through the means of *reflexivity.* Reflexivity allows the artist-researcher to recognize how their embodied experience informs the production and interpretation

of knowledge. To understand how reflexivity in artistic research allows the artist-researcher to access and to communicate the knowledge which their (artistic) practice embodies, it is first important to clarify the concept of *embodied knowledge*. Feminist researcher Pérez-Bustos highlights that knowledge is not only conceptual, but it is constituted materially, through its physicality, and relationally, through one's relationships with others (2018). In her research, she presents how embroiderers acquire and transmit knowledge through their hands, rather than through verbal explanation – often answering questions with the phrase "Let me show you" (Pérez-Bustos, 2018). This approach to physically show—rather than verbally articulate—highlights the experiential nature of their expertise, signifying how their knowledge is embodied in the actual physical practice (Pérez-Bustos, 2018). The embodied knowledge may be actively recognized through reflexivity – the practice of engaged awareness, which enables the artist-researcher to continue taking into account how their own experience and positionality contribute to the discovery, the construction, and the interpretation of meanings (Bogumil et al., 2017).

The artist-researcher does not only consider the embodied practices of life, researching their subjective, internal experience, but they also use the practice of reflexivity to position and orientate themselves within their current context, on various scales, and various timelines. This is what researcher Borgdorff suggests when describing artistic research as "situated and embedded" (2012, p. 47) – the artist works in direct relationship to their environment, aware of their position, thus producing knowledge through "interactions with relevant surroundings" (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 47). Therefore, the "situatedness" of artistic research carries an inherent responsibility to not only produce knowledge, but to also make it public. This responsibility is highlighted by Shaun McNiff's questions: "What can you do that is uniquely yours and that grows from the authority of your experience? Where does your authentic expertise lie?" (2007, p. 39). These questions reflect the "unspoken" responsibility of the artist-researcher to contribute. By asking what one can contribute that is uniquely theirs, McNiff emphasizes not only the wisdom of one's personal insights, but also puts forward the ethical imperative of sharing these insights to deepen our collective human understanding (2007). This process entails turning embodied knowledge into explicit knowledge (Grau-Perez, 2025), meaning transforming the knowledge that a person embodies, into knowledge which is explicit enough for someone else to understand.

It may thus be argued that the artist-researcher is embedded in their artistic research work, which is also embedded in the larger context of the world. There is a back-and-forth symbiosis between the artist and the world, which, through the reflexivity of the artist, informs the artistic research work. In this process, the artist-researcher is self-aware, artistic-research process-aware, and context-aware. This idea is further described by Hannula, Suoranta and Vaden (2014), already in the preface of their book: they acknowledge that artist-researchers have "at least three intertwined jobs" in front of them: 1) to advance their artistic work (their craft, creativity, and conceptual thinking) through the method of artistic research, 2) to contribute academically by proposing a thesis and advancing the emerging field of artistic research, 3) to act as mediators between artists and audiences, performing "audience education".

## 2.3. On being an artist-researcher

Just as the concept of artistic-research remains ambiguous, even after its emergence in academia with the Bologna Reform, the field of artistic research remains perpetually evolving, somehow not yet established, but still emerging. This shifting professional landscape also has an effect on the practitioners of artistic-research. The literature is still unsure to what extent artistic research is distinguished from "professional artistic practice in general" (Vanlee & Ysabaert, 2019, p.36), suggesting the same uncertainty in differentiating the artist-researcher from the artist.

However, it appears as if practitioners of artistic research prefer using the titles "artist" and "researcher" separately – with only the most established professionals making use of the "artist-researcher" label. This discursive choice may be a strategy to maintain professional recognition in both fields. This hesitation to embrace a unified identity is not only personal or strategic, but it is shaped by the historical and institutional context in which artistic research was formalized. When art and design academies began to popularize the practice, they did so by framing it in relation to established scientific models, without fully recognizing its independent value (Henke et al., 2020). This framing prompted artist and researcher Borgdorff to look at the emerging field of artistic research through the lens of the conflicting "faculties", with the arts at one pole, and the sciences at the other (2012). Given that the notion of artistic research might bring about controversy, critique and resistance, from both the scientific research field, and from the art field

alike (Borgdorff, 2012, pp. 4-6), it is perhaps not surprising that many practitioners continue to shift identities, presenting themselves separately as artist and researcher depending on context.

The conception of artistic research set in motion an academic, epistemological struggle. The articulation and development of artistic research was set in motion by the Bologna Reform—the European level decision to establish a multi-tiered educational system—which required art and design academies to integrate research into higher education levels (Borgdorff, 2012). This phenomenon  derived the emergence of artistic research at the interstice of academia, politics, and education—driven in part by the encroachment of audit culture into university research, and the broader "marketization" of higher education Cazeaux (2017, p.1). Although the Bologna Reform was intended to reform higher education, it inadvertently triggered a "fierce battle for the definition of research" (Lesage, 2009, p.4). In his article titled "Who is afraid of Artistic Research?", Dieter Lesage unravels the implications of research which is artistic, hypothesizing artistic research is feared by groups "within the academy and the arts world" on the one hand, and by groups "within the university and the scientific world" on the other hand (2009, p.5). He explains how the fear of artistic research stems from a resistance to broaden the definition of research beyond the scientific model, an organizational need to maintain traditional boundaries between artistic practice and theory, and an apprehension towards evaluating artistic outputs as legitimate forms of research without relying on the scientific model of evaluation (Lesage, 2009, pp.5-7).

As all academic disciplines rely on assessment, so numerous criteria and methods for evaluating the quality of artistic research projects are developed (Lewandowska & Kulczycki, 2021). However, it is argued that by situating artistic research within the formal research context belonging to universities, the praxis of artistic research is at risk of becoming instrumentalized and commodified, being forced to divide "its natural flow", in order to fit it into pre-imposed categories, with "fake beginnings, middles and ends" (Hellström, 2010, p.308). As Hellström argues, this focus on producing deliverables, "countable output units" in the form of citations and publications, may on one hand, secure funding for these projects, but these standard, artificially imposed formats of producing and evaluating knowledge do not correctly reflect the value of the artistic research field (2010, p.308).

## 2.4. The work of the artist-researcher

The practice of artistic research is not only inter- and trans-disciplinary, but it is also "trans-sector", meaning that it stretches the boundaries between the arts and the sciences (Hellström, 2010, p.309). Therefore, it can be argued that artistic research is practiced by a diverse range of artists, designers, and researchers (Dombois et al., 2012). And, as their work is situated in specific contexts, they often collaborate with others, such as scientists, policy-makers, and activitsts. Thus, artist-researchers work across disciplines, including visual arts, performing arts, music, design (Dombois et al., 2012; Collins & Sullivan, 2020), and, from what the academic literature can present, they are also working in policy (Brown & Jeanneret, 2017), healthcare (Zawadi, 2024), environmental studies (Torresan, 2023), or business innovation (Sandberg, 2019).

Although artist-researchers are yet to establish themselves into the social fabric with this title, the value of their work is acknowledged in the literature, with Hannula et al. (2014, pp.69-71) outlining more embedded roles the artist-researcher can enact in society: as an artistic research professional, a critic, a public speaker, or a policy adviser. From these positions, artist-researchers can contribute to broader social, cultural, and intellectual debates, by making use of their "sociological imagination" – as C. Wright Mills (2023, pp.107-108) described it as the capacity to grasp how personal troubles are shaped by public issues and structural forces beyond the individual's immediate milieu.

Yet, this imaginative capacity is not analytical in the sense of a scientific inquiry, where processes are sterilized, segmented, and observed from afar. Rather, it is analytical in how it moves between micro and macro experiences, through the means of affect, embodied reflection and relational awareness (Hannula et. al, 2014, pp.92-97). As Hannula et al. (2014) argue—through the example of reading, and what effect reading has on the reader—this process unfolds through the immediacy of lived experience: it is how one is affected by something, and how in that affective encounter, reflection is prompted, which makes one think and feel something about who they are, where they are, and how they relate to others (pp.92-97). This process begins with the "me–me" relation, grounded in the inner, felt orientation of the self; it then extends to the "me–my surroundings" relation, where the context of the experience becomes legible; and it continues through the "me–others" relation, forming a situated awareness that is not abstracted from life, but immersed in it (Hannula et. al, 2014, pp.95-96). In this sense, the artist-researcher

does not simply interpret the world from a static point, but from a dynamic participation in it, by articulating the interdependencies between personal experience and structural conditions (Hannula et al., 2014, pp.92-97). This dynamic, reflexive engagement—anchored in a specific time, place, and self—positions the artist-researcher within the current socio-cultural landscape not only as an artist in the individualized sense, but increasingly as "catalysts for change", as observed by researchers Loots & van Andel (2025, p.).

## 2.5. The labor conditions of artist-researchers

In her critique of the academicization of artistic research, Almeida (2015) describes artist-researchers as the "artists who went back to school", highlighting the position of the "artiste pluriel" (van Winkel et al. 2012), the hybrid artist who moves between professional roles. This strategy toward pluralistic and interdisciplinary work is both a creative, and an economic one, as a response to unstable and underfunded work conditions.

As artists, they often work in a high-stress, low financial reward system, facing institutional challenges that are often related to funding opportunities. Given that long-term employment very rarely exists in the arts field, short-term hiring and project-based system of production characterize artistic labor (Menger, 2006). This short-term employment creates a precarious cycle of financial security, in the response to which artists choose to engage in multiple job holding. When self-funding through multiple job holding, although they can sustain themselves financially, artists may have their artistic work impacted negatively if they have less time or emotional space to focus on it (Lindström, 2016). Furthermore, the often overwhelming nature of multiple job holding can lead to burnout. As argued by Throsby and Zednik (2011, p. 24), it is necessary to offer students of any artistic profession the required "specific training in career management" in order to sustain a professional practice.

In the case of public arts funding, it is necessary to conform to the state-prescribed conventions and criteria, and, in that, compromise on one's own values, in order to increase one's chances of acquiring funding (Vieira & Kolbe, 2025, pp.12-15). This leads to artists strategically applying to open calls, which are not necessarily fitting their goals, but which are popularly funded at the time (Viviera & Kolbe, 2025, p.12). Likewise, the political criteria underlying the structure of short-term open calls often prevents artists from reimbursement of the

existential and emotional labor performed during the stressful grant-writing process (Viviera & Kolbe, 2025, p.9). Fundamentally, both PhD and short-term projects and residencies are granted upon extensive project proposals, which means applicants spend time finding applications on time, and designing the proposals to apply with – giving their time, attention and care to proposals which may not even be selected.

With a few PhD programs specialized in artistic research, the work of artistic research seems to be confined to the realms of higher education in arts, or activating in invisible, yet increasingly more public, creative and cultural networks. Researcher Grau-Perez (2025) investigated how these networks facilitate the development of artistic research, finding that they operate as arenas, generating "debate and consensus", which enable the artist-researchers and the network participants to re-define artistic research (p.6). Drawing on Nonaka's SECI model of knowledge creation (Nonaka et al., 1996, as cited in Grau-Perez, 2025), she shows how these networks enable the exchange, articulation, integration, and embodiment of knowledge, shaping a connected, shared and evolving artistic research ecosystem (Grau-Perez, 2025). By fostering collaboration, diversity, and cross-disciplinary dialogue, they actively support methodological innovation and the "upskilling of artistic research practitioners" (Grau-Perez, 2025, p.9), offering frameworks for ethical practice, interdisciplinary cooperation, community impact and social impact evaluation (Grau-Perez, 2025, p.8).

While Grau-Perez (2025) highlights how creative and cultural networks contribute to the development of artistic research by fostering collaboration, accountability and methodological evaluation, it is also important to acknowledge their limitations. These networks, despite their critical role in supporting the development of the practice, often function as closed-loop systems, focused on the status of artistic research, but not the state of the artist-researcher. As a result, artist-researchers continue to navigate the unstable conditions shaped by cultural and creative labor.

By working at the interface of "artistic, academic, and scientific inquiry" (Boeck and Tepe, 2021, as cited in Perez, 2025, p.2), it is expected that the artist-researchers benefit from this position stretched between the arts, sciences and education. However, it is often harder to cross the boundaries of the professions, making it more difficult to position and move between these disciplinary professions. Most likely, the artist-researchers activate within the art-world, and at times, the academic-world, moving between the profession of the artist, or the academic.

Researcher Gill (2014) drew parallels between cultural workers and academics, to showcase how their laboring experiences closely match in precarity. As she argues, both groups are characterized by the privilege of being passionately attached to their work, as well as the "endemic precariousness" underscoring their labor conditions (Gill, 2014, p.24). She acknowledges the similarity of both groups managing the existential labor of short-term employment, the extreme time pressure and long hours of labor, as well as structural inequalities which persist across institutions (Gill, 2014, p.17-25). She argues that the notion of exploitation has been abandoned when thinking about creative and professional labour – partly, due to its more horrific representation of control and extraction within other labor practices, and, in contrast, due to not being able to capture and do justice to the pleasures of the work and the opportunities it offers for self-expression (Gill, 2014, p.25). Her research calls for a politicized vocabulary for thinking about the work experiences of academics and creatives, in order to be able to reflect about working cultures which encapsulate both experiences of privilege, and of exploitation (Gill, 2014, p.25). Regardless of whether the artist-researcher works within the arts or academia, it is possible to argue that artist-researchers face the same struggles as artists and creative workers: precarious living, project-based freelance, high-stress and low financial reward, for the privilege of following their passion of work (Gill, 2014, pp.24-25).

This tension between balancing between one's autonomy – what McNiff calls one's "authentic expertise" (2007, p.39) – with the expectations of the professional field has been a central topic in social sciences. Bourdieu (1993) described this as the tension of the field of cultural production, which is characterized by ongoing struggles between artists seeking autonomy and legitimacy and the institutional frameworks seeking control, and imposing constraints and demands.

For artist-researchers, these tensions are intensified. Not only do they face precarious labor conditions familiar to both artists and academics, but they must also navigate a continuously emerging field that spans across multiple disciplines. By attempting to emerge as a professional in the still-emerging field of artistic research, early-career artist-researchers are most impacted, having to strategically negotiate the ambiguity of their role, adapt to various work context and sectors, each with different politics and expectations, and gain recognition while working within their values. This requires not only creative labor, but also administrative, relational, and personal work, without structural guarantees or long-term recognition. These labor conditions

raise a fundamental question: how can one continue to pursue and produce meaningful work, for oneself and for others, within systems that demand constant adaptation, self-legitimatization, and compromise?

## 2.6. The sense of meaningfulness in work

Research vastly agrees that humans are inherently motivated to seek meaning (Bailey et al., 2018, p. 489), with researchers Lips-Wiersma & Wright (2009) calling it "a condition of being human" (pp.503-504). This search for meaning applies not only to life in the broadest sense, but also to work, understood as a key site through which people pursue and experience meaningfulness. Scholars argue that meaningful life and meaningful work are 'facets of the same psychological construct' (Martela & Riekki, 2018, p.2). Meaning-seeking and meaning-making are two aspects of this process, both facets of sense-making, oriented towards answering broader questions regarding one's place and purpose in the world (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003, p.311). Bailey et al. (2018) note that it may even be impossible to "avoid seeking out meaningful experiences, even if we wanted to" (p.15).

The earliest literature on the concept of meaningful work originates in the critiques of industrial society (Rostain & Clarke, 2025), where the division of labor alienated the individual from the process and from the product of their work, as well as from their human potential and from their community (Marx & Engels, 1848). Management scholarship took the challenge of researching and designing work environments in such ways that people find meaningfulness in their work (Rostain & Clarke, 2025).

Although organizational and management scholarship broadly agrees that meaningfulness is a complex, multi-dimensional construct (Bailey et al., 2019), there remains little consensus on the precise definition of meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2018). However, meaningfulness of work is most commonly associated with an inner state of fulfillment and joy associated with performing one's job, that arises when there is an alignment between an individual's aspirations and the extent to which they are perceived to be realized through work (Berthoin Antal et al., 2018, p.376; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Bailey et al., 2019). This outcome-oriented framing reflects assumptions common to project-based labor within the arts and academia, as emphasized by

Hellström (2010) and Menger (2006). In contrast, artistic research resists the limitations of project-based logics (Hellström, 2010, p.308).

The differences between the meaning of work, and experiencing work as meaningful, have been of great interest in management scholarship. Interestingly, researchers Bendassoli and Borges-Andrade (2015) investigated the two concepts in the light of artistic work, given that the work of the artist is understood to be "rich in possibilities of meaningfulness", because it enables the individual to experience more expressive modes of work, rather than the instrumental mode of work found in non-artistic, formal employment (Menger 2002, 2009, as cited in Bendassoli & Borges-Andrade, 2015, p.72).

In their research, the meaning of work refers to how people conceptualize the physical experience of work—as in, what it feels like to work, and therefore what it means to work—, while meaningfulness of work refers to how they conceptualize the impact of their work—as in, the reasons and motivations of working in the specific way they do (Bendassoli & Borges-Andrade, 2015). For the meaning of work, the researchers found that artists think about their work as flow, as creation, and as a calling (Bendassoli & Borges-Andrade, 2015, p.76). For experiencing the meaningfulness of their work, their research showed that artists derive meaningfulness greatly through the impact their artwork has on society—understood as "evoking aesthetic sensitivity or reflection" (Bendassoli & Borges-Andrade, 2015, p.75)—as well as through the process of developing and cultivating their artwork to such an extent that it is meaningful to at least the artist, by acting as a personal step in the artist's own development, if not to society at large (Bendassoli & Borges-Andrade, 2015, p.75).

Their findings thus suggest that "artists believe that their work is meaningful when they feel they are exercising their agency" (Bandura, 1986, as cited in Bendassoli & Borges-Andrade, 2015, p.75). The researchers count the phenomenon of deriving meaningfulness from a sense of agency, autonomy and authorship over one's creation, as a manifestation of the logic of craftsmanship, which governs the art and culture sectors (Menger, 2002; Sennett, 2009, as cited in Bendassoli & Borges-Andrade, 2015, p.75).

Based on this research, it is fair to say that experiencing and cultivating a sense of meaningfulness through artistic work is possible due to the qualities of artistic work: its self-expressive qualities (Menger, 2002, 2009), which enable the individual to act and create with agency, awareness, and on their own terms; and its intrinsic quality towards progress, improving

oneself in their craft, and thus contributing to society by creating something of significance to society: something "aesthetic, educational, and critical" (Bendassoli & Borges-Andrade, 2015, p.76).

Given the work of the artistic researcher, who often operates outside formal systems, institutions, or traditional workplaces, it becomes necessary to approach the question of meaningfulness of work through a different conceptual lens than the goal-focused one described by Berthoin Antal et al. (2018, p. 376). An alternative is provided by Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012), who conceptualize meaningful work as an existential phenomenon. They propose that meaningfulness at work is not just about achieving goals or finding satisfaction, but is essentially about answering core human questions such as "Why am I here?" (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003, p.311). Grounded in existential philosophy, the researchers Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) proposed a framework to understand and measure the concept of meaningful work through, which can be seen in figure 1.

Thus, Lips-Wiersma & Wright (2012, p.661) frame the pursuit and achievement of meaningful work as a dynamic process of balancing a series of needs and tensions. The first tension contrasts the need for self-actualization (orientation towards self) – such as 'developing the inner self' and "expressing full potential"— with the need for a broader purpose (orientation towards others), including the need of being "in unity with others", and being of "service to others" (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, pp.660-661). A second tension involved the pull between reflection (as in, "being") and action (as in, "doing") (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p.661). The third tension addresses the gap between one's "inspiration" and one's "reality of self and circumstances" (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p.661).

Other scholars sustained research on the basis of this framework. Researchers Rosso et al. (2010, p.114) propose a similar framework, but instead of "doing" and "being", they highlight the forces of "agency"—the force to "individuate, separate, assert, expand, master, create"—and "communion", as the force to "contact, attach, connect, and unite" (Rosso et al., 2010, p.114), as driving forces of meaningful work.

Researchers Martela and Riekki (2018, pp.2-3) identified the concepts autonomy (as a manifestation of "developing the inner self"), competence (as a way to measure "expressing full potential"), relatedness (as a way to measure "in unity with others") and beneficence (as a way to

measure “service to others”) as key pathways to meaningful work in normative, salaried labor contexts.

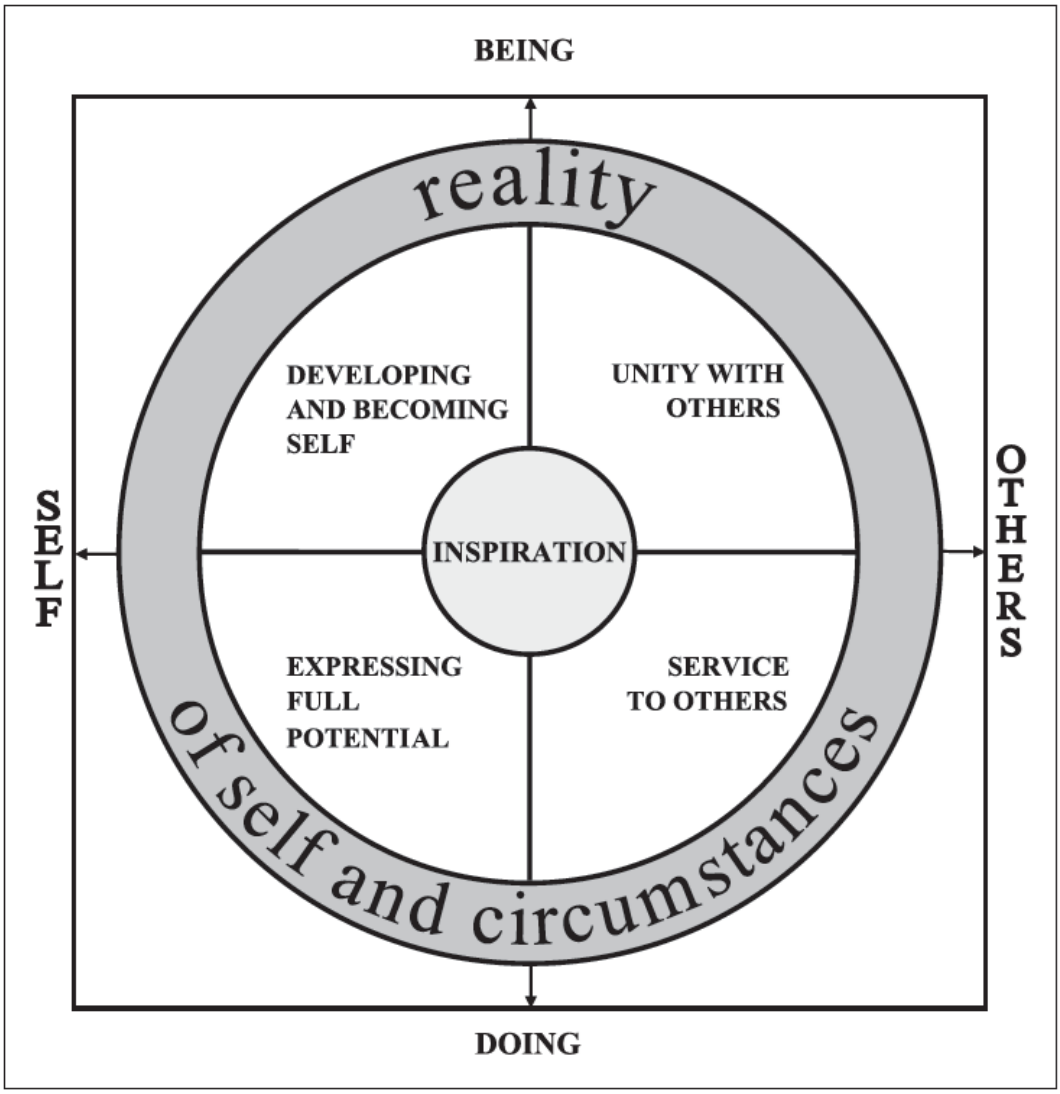


**Figure 1.**

*Framework of meaningful work.*

*Note*. Source: Lips-Wiersma, M., & Wright, S. (2012, p.660). Measuring the Meaning of Meaningful Work: Development and Validation of the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale. Group & Organization Management, 37(5), 655–685. Copyright © 2012 by Sage Publications. Reprinted by Permission of Sage Publications.

These tensions emphasize how meaningful work is not a fixed outcome, but something cultivated in the interplay between personal needs and lived realities, teasing out the dynamic relationship between one's "inspiration" and "reality" (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p.678). This offers a more nuanced view than models which define meaningfulness as the fulfillment of aspirations (Berthoin Antal et al., 2018), foregrounding instead how meaning emerges in the continuous balancing of self and other, reflection and action, within one's real-life constraints (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, pp. 659–661).

Since the quest of meaning has long animated human life (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Bailey et al., 2018), it is not surprising that different research studies identify similar dimensions to account for how people experience meaningfulness at work. What becomes interesting is how these frameworks intersect with specific types of labor, such as artistic research. Hannula et al. (2014, p.15) define artistic research as a combination of "artistic process" (the practice-based work) and "arguing for a point of view" (the "contextual, interpretive, conceptual, narrative work"). Viewed through the lens of meaningful work theory, the "artistic process" aligns with "doing" (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p.660) or '"agency" (Rosso et al., 2010, p.114), while its reflective, knowledge and narrative production corresponds to "being" (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p.660) or "communion" (Rosso et al., 2010, p.114). This overlap suggests that artistic research is especially attuned to the existential tensions at the core of meaningful work. Unlike outcome-driven labor models, artistic research foregrounds the autonomous meaning-making process itself—where work becomes meaningful not by reaching a predefined goal, but through the ongoing, situated negotiation between intention, context, and creation.

Given this, the theoretical framework positions artistic research as a reflexive, embodied knowledge production. Secondly, it understands the artist-researcher as an emerging, hybrid worker, in an emerging, contested field. Thirdly, the meaningfulness of work is seen as situated in context, is cultivated through practice and inspiration, and is continually shaped through shifting internal and internal dynamics. With these concepts clearly delineated, the research design follows.

# 3. Research design

This section provides a detailed account of the conceptual and practical choices made in relation to the research design of this thesis, which asks: “How do artist-researchers experience and cultivate a sense of meaningfulness in their early career phase?”

## 3.1. Ontology

This research is grounded in a constructivist ontological position, which posits that reality is not characterized by one single truth, but instead consists of multiple, diverse, context-independent truths, constructed individually and socially (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.81). Within this frame, the realities experienced by the participants are understood as being constructed by their specific cultural, institutional, and interpersonal contexts. Therefore, the concept of meaningfulness is not treated as something objectively measurable, but as something the artist-researchers participating in this research define through their lived experiences and ongoing practices.

## 3.2. Epistemology

Aligned with this ontological position, the study follows an interpretivist epistemology. Here, knowledge is not seen as fixed but emerges through the active construction of meaning between the participants and researcher (Bryman, 2016). In addition, in order to emphasize the participant’s subjective, embodied and emotional experiences, the research draws on a phenomenological orientation. Phenomenology encourages researchers to explore how individuals experience a phenomenon in their own terms (Van Manen, 2007, p.11), making it particularly suitable for analyzing how artists find, create and experience meaningfulness through their work. Van Manen (2007, p.11) describes the phenomenology of practice as an ethical corrective to the calculative logic of modern life – one that seeks to restore attention to the lived and relational dimensions of experience. He explains that phenomenology enables “formative relations between being and acting, self and other, interiorities and exteriorities, between who we are and how we act” (Van Manen, 2007, p.11). This mirrors the very tensions through which the literature conceptualizes meaningful work: as arising from the interplay between self and others, between personal aspiration and external demands, and between

reflection and action (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010). Drawing on this orientation, the present study views meaning not as a static condition but as something dynamically cultivated – through embodied experience, reflexive awareness, and ongoing negotiation with one's environment.

## 3.3. Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to explore how artist-researchers construct and sustain a sense of meaningfulness through their work in their early career phase. Thus, this study explores how meaningfulness is cultivated through reflexive, embodied modes of knowledge production, and how it is experienced across the multi-dimensional tensions that structure meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Bendassoli & Borges-Andrade, 2015): between self-expression and social contribution, between creative autonomy and systemic constraint, and between personal inspiration and the reality of professional life. By foregrounding the lived experiences of artist-researchers, this research aims to understand how they negotiate the complex dynamics of agency and communion that underlie their pursuit of meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010). Furthermore, by exploring how they conceptualize their work to be meaningful, and fulfilling to them, it is possible to understand what elements make artists feel like their work is "worth it", regardless of what "it" entails.

The methodological design integrates qualitative data collection through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a reflexive thematic analysis. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on criterion and snowball sampling. LinkedIn was used as a primary source for finding participants, due to its generally high usage as professional networking application. Searching for the key terms "artistic research", "artistic-researcher" and "artist researcher" allowed me to contact suitable participants. Other prospective participants were referred by these, to participate in the research. Besides these sampling strategies, one participant was contacted in-person during an artistic research event, which occurred in the Hague, the Netherlands; another participant was contacted through email, which I gathered from the alumni list of a Master program specializing in Artistic Research, located in the Netherlands, while another participant responded to an open-call I sent out on my personal Instagram account.

The selection criteria required the artistic research practitioners to either have completed a master's study in artistic research, or to engage with it through their practice, because of their educational training. Another criterion was location of educational training in artistic research – this location criterion was a strategic choice to ensure that participants shared a similar educational, institutional, social, and political context in which they experienced and made sense of artistic research. The last criterion reflected the early career of the participants, with all participants having graduated their Master's no longer than three years ago, and one participant having just started a PhD in artistic research. Thus, the sample consists of 8 early-career artist-researchers, educated in the Netherlands, who are actively engaging in artistic research to different degrees of professionalism, depending on their resources and networks. Despite their relatively recent emergence in the field, these individuals can be regarded as domain-specific experts, due to their academic and practical immersion in the field of artistic research. As Baldin and Bille (2022, p.15) note, professional recognition within the arts is linked to a combination of factors. Drawing on Abbott's (1988) theory of profession, they explain how professions are continuously negotiated, and emerge through the application of abstract, academic knowledge to specific cases of practice (Baldin & Bille, 2022, p.14) In this light, the educational background of the artist-researcher can be used as a legitimate basis for their claim to professional expertise.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility in eliciting both focused and open-ended responses. This method is widely used in both arts-based and health-based qualitative research for generating detailed accounts, and for exploring how participants construct meaning through personal narratives (Zawadi, 2024, p.61). It allows for the development of rapport and a participant-centered dialogue, especially useful when addressing subjective, emotional, and complex experiences.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was chosen as a method of data analysis, as it is a suitable method to identify patterns in and across the data, with respect to the participants' "lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices", which underscores an "experiential" research that attempts to understand "what participants think, feel and do" (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p.297). Using Braun & Clarke's approach to qualitative, reflexive thematic analysis, this analysis process requires "an organic approach to coding and theme development and the active role of the researcher" (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p.297). The analysis is, thus, an inductive one.

Although the concept of meaningfulness has been operationalized into several dimensions, it was more insightful to undergo an inductive thematic analysis, to allow for the emergence of themes and meanings which may have been overlooked otherwise. This inductive approach thus allows the analysis to be rooted in the data, and for themes to emerge in relation to the actual lived experiences of the interviewees. The choice of the inductive approach to thematic analysis was also made because the field of artistic research is continuously evolving and emerging.

The process begun by transcribing verbatim the 8 interviews. Then, each transcript was coded in the software Atlas.ti 25. Each transcript went through its own phase of axial coding, staying close to the data, which also meant creation of in-vivo codes for possibly important quotes. Once all interviews were axially coded, the initial codes were revised, and collected under larger codes. The larger codes were explored in the light of the framework of meaningful work, borrowed from Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012). This was possible by re-writing the digital codes on material post-it notes, and moving them across a material drawing of the framework used. Therefore, this part of the process of theme building was reflexive and iterative, and, through it, I produced a series of alternative, adapted frameworks of meaningful work (Appendix C). These helped me understand the data in the light of the framework which prompted it. However, this iterative and reflexive process did not influence the creation of the themes, but rather supported it by enabling a conceptual continuity on which the themes were organized on in the Results chapter. The themes were therefore built through a back-and-forth process of interpretation of the codes, and in the light of the research question. This approach enabled an interpretation that helps to “tell the story” of the patterns found across the data, to better construct evidence of collective validation (Zawadi, 2024, p.61).

## 3.4. Operationalization

The conceptual framework of this thesis advanced a framework for understanding the meaningfulness of work, developed by researchers Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012, p.661). It is a study of meaningful stories which represent the experiences, thoughts, feelings, as well as identities and practices (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p.297) of artist researchers. If making a theoretical distinction between the meaning and the meaningfulness of work, similarly to

researchers Bendassolli and Borges-Andrade (2015), these stories contain both the meaningfulness of their work, and the meaning of their work.

To understand and measure the experience of meaningful work, this thesis draws on the framework developed by researchers Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012, p.660). Their model identifies the following dimensions: "developing and becoming self" which refers to the process of growth and becoming who one aspires to be, essentially the best version of the self (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p.658). "Unity with others" refers to the sense of connection and shared values with colleagues, audiences, or communities (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). "Service to others" relates to the contribution one's work makes to the well-being of others or the broader world (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). And "expressing full potential" contains the outward enactment of skills, talents, and creative capacity (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012).

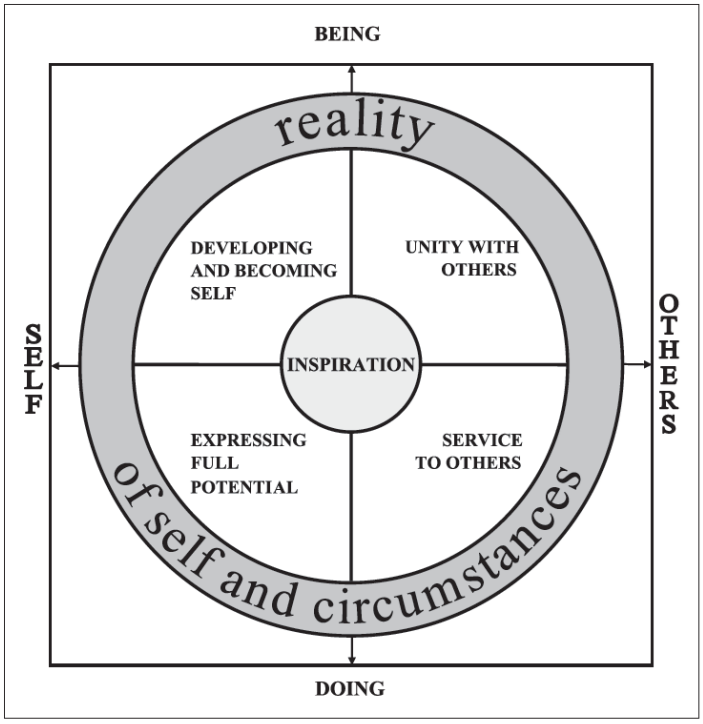


**Figure 1.**

*Framework of meaningful work.*

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Based on this framework, the interview guide (Appendix A) was delineated in terms of six dimensions. I therefore adapted the original model by Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) as it follows. Dimensions A, B, D, and F overlapped with those proposed by Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012), while C and E were additional dimensions.

The interview begun with dimension A, which allowed participants to introduce their work: what they do, and the journey that brought them to where they are in their artistic research practice – which ties into the "becoming" part of Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012, p.660) framework. To address the "developing the inner self" part of Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012, p.660) framework, question nr. 5 ("Where do you get your inspiration from?") was introduced to explore the internal sources that guide their practice.

Dimension B reflected the "express full potential" dimension (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012 p.660) framework. It focused on the participant's motivations to do their work, on the outward aspirations they hope to fulfill through their work, and the moments when they find fulfillment in their work.

Dimension C was added as an extra dimension, aiming to uncover how participants perceive their work to translate well across audiences. While the process of creation and the work itself may be inherently meaningful to the artist, once it is made public, the artist no longer has control over how it is interpreted. This dimension, therefore, examined how participants navigate that shift – from creating meaning through the artistic research practice, to witnessing how, or if, that meaning translates to others. Thus, the questions of this dimension asked about how it feels when their work is embraced, or misunderstood. It aimed to probe the participants to reflect about anticipating or desiring this audience reception, as well as tried to shine a light on the experience of sharing the meaning of one's work.

Dimension D aligned with the "unity with others" dimension (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p.660) inquiring how their practice enables the artists to belong and to connect with others. This dimension also explored the enabling or restraining role of the professional field and its structures. To prompt reflection on these broader systems, question 18 ("What could be improved to support artists to find work opportunities to create meaningful work?") was included.

Dimension E addressed the "service to others" dimension (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p.660), inquiring into the emotional and practical challenges of working with the aim of serving

others, and how the participants overcome these challenges. Thus, this dimension had more open questions, such as question nr.19 ("What are some challenges you encounter, or fears you have, in creating something meaningful: in making your work – or in making it public?"), addressing both practical challenges, and personal fears.

Finally, dimension F offered the participants the chance to reflect upon the meaningfulness of their work at the end of the interview. The question nr.25 ("If you were to give a piece of advice to a fellow artist researcher, what would it be, and why?") enabled the participants to reconsider their positionality, their past experiences and current goals, and to articulate in the form of advice what they find most important and meaningful to do in order to sustain their practice.

These dimensions included multiple questions which were intended to drop the participant into their intuitive, embodied self, and get in touch with their feelings. For example, question nr.1 ("What does a perfect day look like to you?") was added in order to help the participants connect with their values, what matters most to them, and to exercise their imagination in relation to their reality.

## 3.5. Positionality

As a researcher with a background in visual arts and a current affiliation with academic structures, I occupy a hybrid position which is similar to that of my participants. This proximity enables a deeper understanding of the type of work aims and struggles which characterize the artistic research work, as well as providing a fair support in understanding the professional field the interviewees activate in. However, my positionality may foster interpretative bias. Therefore, this proximity required a sustained reflexivity on my side, regarding my own assumptions about artistic integrity, meaningful work, and institutional realities (Berger, 2015).

My interest in the research topic emerged from my experience as an artist and cultural worker, which led me to a broader concern with how artistic labor grows out of internal aspirations, and is eventually shaped by external demands – and what it means to aim to produce meaningful work in shifting climates, where more than one's artistic integrity is as stake. Throughout the research process, I have sought to remain aware of how my values and

perspectives shape my research, from the research theme to the data analysis, the construction of themes, and their articulation in the discussion of this thesis.

Firstly, I found that my background as an artist helped me shape the research question to include not only the question of "experiencing meaningfulness at work" (often a staple of organizational scholarship), but also the question of "cultivating meaningfulness through work", given the artistic process which usually includes the creation of something, often called an "artwork", or, to use sociologist Richard Sennett's terms, the "craft" of the "craftsman" (2007). Although management scholarship often speaks of "tasks" which employees perform (Pratt and Ashfort, 2003), the language used by artist-researchers is similar to the one used by artists, who perform "work", engage in "practices", and "make" and "create" things. This change in language reflects the deep connection artist-researchers have with their work, and how much they identify with their work specifically – also due to the fact that their name is attached to their work. Due to my positionality, I was able to shape the interview guide in a suitable way, and to deeply understand the interviewees' experiences and concerns during the interviews. This level of connection led to deeper, more meaningful answers, and richer interviews.

## 3.6. Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed consent prior to taking part in the study. They were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without consequences, and how their data would be used. All interviews were audio-recorded (of audio-video recorded in case of online interviews on Teams) with explicit permission. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by removing identifying information from transcripts and by assigning pseudonyms to participants. Data was stored securely in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. As I share professional affinities with the participants, care was taken to maintain professional boundaries while remaining empathetic and responsive throughout the interview process. Given the personal and sometimes sensitive nature of the topics discussed, efforts were made to create a respectful, comfortable, and non-judgmental environment during the interviews.

## 3.7. Limitations

The study is limited by its small, non-representative sample, which reflects the niche and emergent character of artistic research as a field. While the goal was not generalizability but depth and contextual richness, the findings may not capture the full diversity of experiences across geographical, institutional, or disciplinary contexts. Although all participants studied and practiced artistic research in the Netherlands, 25% participants were Dutch, and 75% participants were non-Dutch, which may serve as a limitation. Although I noticed no difference in the experience of support between the two Dutch participants and the remaining sample, it is still possible that the internationality of the sample may explain certain experiences such as lack of institutional support. Therefore, a recommendation for future research on the meaningfulness of (artistic) work is to pay more attention to the inter-national aspect in such research. It would be interesting to compare the results of this study with a similar study focusing on nationals of the country. A study investigating internationality as a key element of cultivating meaningfulness through (artistic research) work may shine a light on this question.

# 4. Results

This thesis aimed to explore how early-career artist-researchers experience and cultivate a sense of meaningfulness through their work, especially as they emerge as professionals. This chapter presents the themes formulated through the reflexive thematic analysis performed. Once the four themes are presented, a discussion around the framework of meaningful work is presented.

## 4.1. Reflexivity of inquiry as a method of embodied knowing

Across the interviews, artist-researchers described the process of their work as a continuous process of learning about the world within them, as well as the world around them. They address their artistic research practice as often being inspired by their lived experience, but acknowledge that the knowledge generated if both "personal" and "intimate", and simultaneously "relevant" to others (Stella). All participants expressed how their work circled around open-ended questions — sometimes phrased as "What if [I did this]?" (interviewees 2, 7), "What does it mean [to do this, to be this, to exist here, now]?" (interviewees 1, 3, 5, 6), "How can we [...] engage with [issues, concerns, realities]?" (Daniel), How is what we're doing different from [other actions, people, phenomena]?" (Christina). These questions are not intended to generate concrete answers. In line with scholarship on artistic research, these questions orient the artistic researcher towards a specific space of inquiry, which limit the scope and focus of their research. These questions provide a moment of reflection for the artist-researcher along their work process. Michaela articulated this mechanism well when she described the value of artistic research as a "bridge" between the act of making and the act of reflecting on that making: "How do you make [something]? And, later, how do you look at it? How do you look at yourself for making as well?"

This reflexive loop, between creation, observation, and self-observation, is characteristic of artistic research practice. Creation, in this sense, is more than the "creation of artworks" but it is a method of creating knowledge about the self, and how one creates—essentially, how one works as both a person and an artist. The generation of this embodied knowledge, and of understanding through the felt sense, generates a recursive rhythm in which the artist both acts and attends, does and reflects. This dynamic closely echoes the meaningfulness structure identified by Lips-

Wiersma and Wright (2012, p.660; see figure 1), in which the dimensions of doing (e.g., creating, engaging, contributing) and being (e.g., reflecting, deepening, becoming) are not fixed roles or separate tasks in work, but they are interdependent processes. Artistic research, through its recursive loop of making and reflecting, offers a practical structure that sustains and animates this iterative movement between being and doing. This is perhaps what Raluca meant when she said that "art leaks into life, life leaks into art". Michaela noted the mechanism of this entanglement: "everything suddenly is important, because suddenly everything [...] is a part of what you do", pointing out the approach which she, as an early-career artist-researcher, has upon her work: "only making is not enough, but […] everything that is around the making, and also what happens through the making, what happens after, but also everything around it". Due to the reflexivity practiced in artistic research, and the perception of everything as a site of knowledge (see: embodied knowledge), it becomes difficult to separate making from living, and living from thinking.

For many participants, the process of reflecting and questioning over time leads to tangible transformation in how they think (both specifically about their work, and generally about their life and the world in general), and, respectively, how they move through the world. Daniel articulated this process when he explained how his discomfort with photography and its embedded structures of violence shaped not just his artistic research practice, but his way of thinking and seeing the world: "That's what my uncomfortableness has trained me to do – to be [precise and investigative]. Constantly asking – it's like... yeah, but why is this? Why is this, and how is this connected to this?"

A clear description of this phenomenon is put forth by Daniel, when he describes "art as a tool for thinking", explaining: "I can make art to ask questions about: how is it that we can see these things today? How can we understand them? How can we engage with them?" His line of questioning doesn't end with generating knowledge, but it extends to how knowledge can be actively used as a way to engage with the world differently.

#### 4.1.1. Practicing trust to persist in the absence of certainty

To deepen the over-arching theme, this sub-theme focuses on one way through which meaningfulness is sustained: trust. Five participants directly emphasized the importance of practicing trust in relation to themselves, their practice, and the future value arising out of their

process. This sub-theme delineates trust as a condition for sustaining meaningfulness in work, despite any fears or uncertainties, and a way to find value in one's work.

Emily particularly describes her work as a "search for meaningfulness" where she needs to trust "that everything will be worth it". She further uses the metaphor of the wandering lights—spirits of the forest that appear at night, and lure travelers into the forest, to guide or confuse them—to suggest both uncertainty and allure in her process. Similarly, Marc highlights the inherent motion present within the iterative practice of artistic research, framing it as a discovery process:

> "I had a very long process of discovering what exactly I'm doing. And the wonderful thing about a practice, is that it's ongoing, hence the word practice. But also sometimes you need to be quiet. Your practice is also a collaborator, something that works autonomously from you in a way. […] sometimes things happen in a work that surprise you, then you're like, 'Well, what is this?' "

The quote reveals two important dynamics. First, practice is an on-going process, iterative and non-linear. Second, the notion of the practice as a "collaborator" implies a form of shared responsibility with the non-living practice: the artist gives up some of his control, thus allowing the practice to "work autonomously". While explaining how he positions his artistic practice as a research method, he deepened his understanding of the practice's autonomy:

> "I think maybe it's really beautiful, in a way, it is poetic to think that there is no standard way of making this process visible, [it's beautiful] that the practice itself will determine its own visibility"

His description showcases that the artist is not all-knowing and all-directing, but works in relation with the medium, with ideas it reveals, and with what emerges through the process. The artist-researcher places trust in the practice itself to show the artist the way forward, exhibiting a way of trusting in the process. Through a form of active listening, the artist is able to "hear" the practice – this is an example of embodied knowledge, which is first felt, and subsequently understood. As he explains, "Any kind of artistic work that you do is not necessarily an outcome

– it's the process work. It's the research method in action. It's the doing". This understanding follows Hannula et al.'s (2014) conception of artistic research, where artistic works are not simple outcomes, but they are continuously informing the artistic research practice – the exhibition of artworks are "snapshots" in one's practice (Marc). This account showcases how trust is essential in artistic research practice, underlying the practice of long-term reflexivity. Trust is then a mode of working, sensing, and staying engaged, even when "staying quiet" (Marc).

If, for Marc, trust emerged as a methodological stance, for Emily, trust functions as an affective, personal infrastructure, helping her navigate doubt, sustain momentum, and reconnect to the felt sense of her work's meaningfulness over time. Emily explains how trust is an integral aspect of her practice:

> "Sometimes you don't get picked up [by a gallery, funding agency, or opportunity], and that's really had [...] to a point where I thought, 'How hard do I have to pull on something that I don't even know if it's worth it, if it's going to be something?... so you really have to trust that what you're doing is going to be meaningful, because you don't know yet".

This quote showcases the challenge that many of the participants face: persisting in the absence of professional certainty and recognition. Trust into one's own self, values, ambitions, and skills, becomes a condition for continuing to work. As she further explains:

> "And then it changed somehow, and you get out of [existential challenge], [...] but I think [getting out of the existential challenge] had to do a lot with trusting myself and the projects that I'm doing that they are meaningful to me, no matter who is going to pick it up or not, and then just follow that and trust that it, it will lead you somewhere meaningful."

The fact that the artist-researcher finds her work meaningful because it aligns with her values, regardless of how it is received by others, is suggestive of an integral core of her work, grounded in her authentic self. This integral core of her authentic expertise (McNiff, 2011) lies in the alignment between the artist, her work, and her values, which are imbued in her work. She continues to explain:

> "when everything is uncertain… I have to create more trust in myself and very practically: working out works, or walking, hiking, whatever. [...] when no other project is working out, and I get rejections all the time, I go back to projects that are very simple to me and easy to pick up, and give me meaning, give [me] this meaningfullness again."

Here, she showcases an active approach to trust: she cultivates it by returning to what she calls "simple" projects, which I interpret as projects which are simply aligned with her core values, and therefore, are easy to return to, "pick up" and continue. By returning to these closely aligned projects, she is able to restore momentum, reactivate her values, and connect with the sense of meaningfulness driving her practice. Emily mentions trust again, when, at the end of the interview, was asked about her experience of meaningfulness through work. She described it as:

> "synchronicity — that everything falls into place and everything that happened before, bad or good or in between, and everything that will happen after this moment, everything comes together. […] it's like... [mimics explosion sound], like... This is what life is about, yeah. But those moments [...] don't last for days [...] maybe it's five minutes. And then I have to trust, then I have to know that that moment will come again if I proceed."

For Emily, meaningfulness is sustained by practicing trust as her practice unfolds. The moment she describes as "synchronicity"—when "everything falls into place"—is not accidental, but rather inevitable: it arises precisely because she continues through uncertainty. It is a felt confirmation that the process is worthwhile. In that moment, she feels that "this is what life is about", suggesting a fundamental, existential experience of meaningfulness, when her work resonates with her own self. Her account illustrates what Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012, p. 658) describe as the experience of meaningfulness through "a sense of wholeness or coherence", achieved when multiple aspects of life and work are felt to be aligned. In this context, trust becomes the mechanism that allows for such alignment to surface — not by ensuring certainty, but by enabling the artist to remain present with the process long enough for alignment to occur between art, self, and life, and for coherence to surface. This is a form of retrospective coherence: a sudden clarity that the path, though uncertain, was meaningful all along. It is only

visible through persistence, and it is sustained by the quiet, continuous practice of trusting the work.

For Daniel, trust in the process is only possible under specific conditions – namely, the freedom to create and think in ways that do not conform to dominant expectations. As he argues, detachment from institutional markers of success is crucial: "[it is] a necessity in order for me to keep my mind, to keep thinking the way I want to think, and to trust in the process of that". This trust is directed at the generative capacity of "intuition and poetry to create knowledge" and to distribute insightful narratives (Daniel). His stance reflects a commitment to preserving the conditions under which his kind of thinking and kind of knowing can unfold. In this sense, trust in the process requires authenticity of method: an alignment between how he works and how he thinks. He notes: "I'm essentially making something so I can move on to my next thought", which suggests not only that his artistic research work and art making is a form of processing and thinking, but also that creation is necessary for him to continue. He explains: "I'm not chasing an idea of what art is. I am just doing, constantly [...] [my practice is] alive and organic. And it feeds back, and you make mistakes. But ultimately, it's always moving forward". His trust in his work is that it will carry him forward.

Together, these accounts show that artistic work is sustained not only by reflection, but by an ongoing practice of trust, in the process, in one's own orientation, and in the possibility that meaning will arise. A recurring theme across interviews is that meaningfulness is not located in a finished work, but in the unfolding process that sustains it. Within artistic research, trust functions as both method and infrastructure, as a way of trusting "that whatever happens will be something meaningful for the work and for [the artist-researcher]", especially under conditions of uncertainty (Raluca). Trust is a commitment to staying present with the work until it becomes meaningful somehow. While this theme traced how meaning is cultivated through inner orientation and commitment to the process, the next theme turns to the external conditions that shape how meaningfulness is not a choice, but a necessity (Daniel).

### 4.1.2. Learning from "uncomfortableness"

This second sub-theme deepens the main theme by revealing a key aspect of practicing artistic research work and experiencing it as meaningful work: using discomfort as a site for learning. Rather than being afraid, early-career artist-researchers face the things which make

them uncomfortable, not in order to stop the discomfort, but to understand it. This finding is in line with the literature that argues artistic research is employed as a "mode of discovery and understanding" (Grau-Perez, 2025, p.3), but it also reflects the mechanism of self-transformation which the artist researcher encounters through the process.

When asked about his entry in artistic research, Daniel (initially trained and worked as photographer, now artist) described it as the way through which he was able to come to terms with, and to confront his "uncomfortableness" with "the process of being a photographer". He did this by practicing reflexivity, questioning his own practice of photography, as well as questioning the practice of photography. What started with understanding his own feelings of discomfort—which he captures through the idea of "uncomfortableness"—, became an artistic research practice unfolding the invisible systemic violence present in photography and essentially across technology.

He situates the discomfort as a site of learning, where the practice of artistic research, with its persistent reflexivity, enables him to learn through the discomfort: "[my work] takes an enormous level of precision, and investigative qualities and dot connecting to be able to think on those [big] scales […] But that's what I've learned, what my uncomfortableness has trained me to do, to be" (Daniel). By additionally mentioning "to be", Daniel articulates the self-transformation which occurs through his artistic-research practice.

Four other participants describe this learning experience as a "confrontation". Emily explains she practices artistic research to learn how to navigate her double heritage, of whose two sides of the family tree have two conflicting worldviews: one, rich in stories of magic, mystery, ghosts and forest spirits, and another one, rational, flat, and evidence-based. The meaningfulness of her work is represented by her approach to "balance" – or, as she swiftly reframes – "fight between these two" parts of herself. For her, the uncomfortableness she feels is intimate and familiar, as a "battle" inside of her, arising from her faimily's different cultural heritage.

Similarly, Stella finds herself confronted with nostalgia, as a result of missing each home she lived in, as well as a result of her family's history of migration – as she reflects, "if your parents miss a place, you will also miss it" (Stella). Her artistic research becomes a way of making sense of that inherited longing of each place she calls home. In trying to make sense of it,

she wants to show that “it doesn’t have to be [a sad or negative experience]”, but it “can be a happy nostalgia”, reframing it through the practice of artistic-research.

Edwin describes how his artistic-research practice stems from his personal experience, particularly when he was personally confronted with social injustices. He recalls: “there were few moments where I faced, like some kind of racial, racially charged things, and I couldn't understand what, what […] just happened? […] my first instinct was to educate myself deeply”. By choosing to educate himself and learn more about the situation, he faced and confronted his discomfort. This story could have ended differently – but this emerging artist-researcher used it as a catalyst for his practice: “that's what drives my practice, because I see these inequalities and yeah, and, it's just wrong”.

However, as he continued to engage with these social issues through his work, his practice also evolved. He explains: “in the beginning, […] my work was really fueled with a kind of vengeful rage […] now it’s matured into more complex and more subtle understandings of these different territories of history and politics”. He connects the maturation of his work with the maturation of his own self: “the more history I study, the more I engage with these histories […] I’m not hurt by them. I just understand them. [I’m] not attached to it as much as I was when I was a bit younger”.

Because his research showed how “suffering is a fractal” (Edwin, referring to social injustice), he no longer holds a personal resentment for the issue, but he still feels a sense of duty for his community, which his research shows is often the subject of racially-charged injustices. It is this sense of duty that he is able to honor through his artistic-research work. If his artistic-research practice formed through a critical stance, and generated a series of projects founded on decoloniality, he is now also looking to incorporate more “radical hope” in his practice, in order to contribute to his community. This shows how confrontation is not a defining element of one’s practice, but an entry point into understanding, which foreshadows the possibility of connection – with someone else, with something else.

These accounts show that artist-researchers perform the work they do in order to understand their present experience of life – regardless of where it originates from, such an inherited characteristic (Stella and Emily), a personal discomfort with feelings (Daniel), or an external confrontation with someone else (Edwin) or something else (Marc). Marc clearly showcases the transformative experience of confrontation. He presents his artistic research work

as “a confrontation with something bigger than [him]”. The confrontation he describes is less of an opposition, but more of a continuous, conscious awareness of facing the limits of his knowledge (on the topic of voice): and through that, finding where the “unknown” begins. If Klein (2017, p.1) explained artistic-research as starting from “not-yet-knowing”, and Borgdorff (2012, p.3) explained how the practice of artistic-research contributes to the expansion of what human society knows and understands in general, the account of Marc showcases how profound and meaningful such a practice is for the practitioner.

In this, meaningfulness arises from being with something that exceeds oneself, and one’s capacity for understanding. Marc further explains that it is perhaps not a way to be in conflict, to fight and “push against”, but something “maybe open [oneself] up to”. This metaphor of “opening up to something” reveals the vulnerability inherent to learning, and in that highlights the humility of “not-yet-knowing”, also necessary to learning. When describing his research on voice, he explains: “Voice is both [...] your body produces it, but it's not yours... [it is] shaped by economic, political, social climates [...] it's ungraspable” (Marc). With this, he defines voice as a meta-concept, produced by various complex systems embedded in the body, as well outside of the body. By calling it “ungraspable”, he underlies the condition of learning, acknowledging that it is a process with no end.

These five accounts show that “uncomfortableness” can be approached—through artistic research—as a site for knowledge, for connection, and for transformation. As Haraway (2014) suggests in her metaphor “staying with the trouble”, these artist-researchers stay in discomfort long enough for it to become a meaningful experience to them; they response to their trouble, learning to transform in the process. This commitment to learning from “uncomfortableness” allows artist-researchers to stay present with what exceeds them, and, over time, transform it into something they can present to the world. This shows how meaningfulness arises within the process of staying with the trouble, and learning about the other, and about oneself, in order to transform the tension into a meaningful insight.

## 4.2. Navigating uncertainty in work, through coherence with the self

If the previous theme looked toward the self orientation of meaningful work, and explored how early-career artist-researchers generate meaning through the iterative dynamic of ‘doing’

and ‘being’, this theme turns outwards, and shifts attention to examine how they cultivate meaningfulness in relation to external realities. While several artist-researchers described recognition to be deeply affirming, they also revealed how unreliable and inaccessible it is. Especially Michaela showcases how, despite existing support from institutions, there is a persistent sense of exclusion, shaped not only by her stage in the career, but also by how her practice relates to institutional expectations:

> “I didn’t feel like I can be included because of how I would see my practice and how I would like to stay true to my practice. [...] I'm not there yet to feel supported, and to feel like I did something long enough to be supported by them.”

This systemic lack of inclusion enforces a personal responsibility to conform, highlighted by her attempt to explain the exclusion: “Maybe I didn't try enough times” (Michaela). Michaela further elaborates how the need for recognition can distort artistic intention, leading to strategic self-adjustment in order to be institutionally legible: “Still the language of institutions is a barrier […] I can see already people like changing the way they write or think about their art, because it won’t fit into the categories [...] that’s difficult”.

Her observations expose the invisible paradox within the professional field: institutional support is needed for professional growth, yet their normative frameworks pressure open call applicants to compromise the integrity of their voice (Vieira & Kolbe, 2025, pp.12-15), in order to fit “categories” (Michaela). In contrast, Edwin evidences the importance of institutional recognition: “Curators carry so much of the responsibility and power. […] You get invited, and then you're exhibited. […] That's a form of receiving validation, and it’s a form of saying, ‘Damn, you're in. You can do it.’” Marc also illustrates how recognition of a “job well done” in artistic (research) work goes beyond mere acknowledgement for the work, but extends to the self:

> “I made a really nice Excel sheet, and my boss is like, good, good job. […] But it doesn’t fill me, you know… it’s not fulfilling. This was like great, I did a nice thing. But because it is an artwork, and it is an art practice… and then usually artworks, Artistic research, also comes from a place of the personal, then, yeah, recognition for this is extremely fulfilling.”

The external validation described by Edwin and Marc is not experienced as shallow feedback, but as a deeply affective confirmation. As Marc articulates it, "[the recognition] validates my everything" (Marc). These experiences showcase the paradox of meaningfulness in the practice of artistic (research) work: meaningfulness is subjectively felt, but also shaped and legitimated by external contexts (Bailey et al., 2018, pp.491-493), not because the external recognition shapes the content of their work, but because it enables the artist-researchers to pursue their work further.

Recognition can also originate from audiences, who engage directly with the work. Marc attests to this, and explains how he experiences a sense of appreciation, validity and meaningfulness when his audience recognizes his work, regardless of the way: "interacting with the piece in real time […] snapping or nodding their heads or vocalizing some way […]. And silence is also like wonderful recognition, especially after performing a piece". However, if here "silence" is a marker for deep appreciation and successful work, other participants see it as a marker for a work that failed: "being received [by the audience] with silence, with, you know, no reaction, because that means that I'm doing something wrong, in the sense of, I'm not putting anything meaningful in what I'm doing" (Raluca). Similarly, Emily fears "that people will not really engage with it".

These accounts reveal a key insight: while external recognition can be deeply affirming, it is also an unpredictable and unstable form of relational validation, because it may also take the form of absence, taking the form of silence, exclusion, or misrecognition. Thus, it cannot reliably sustain the the artist-researcher's sense of meaningfulness in their work.

As an alternative, the participants describe a continuous effort to "stay true" to themselves (Michaela). Raluca clearly explains: "what creates meaningfulness in my work […] is the fact that I try to be honest in […] the way I work, and what I propose, and […] the methodology I follow […] kind of trying to be being coherent in what my values are". Her account puts forward the idea that cultivating meaningfulness through work is possible when there is coherence between her work and her intentions, which are reflective of her values (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Whereas trust in uncertainty helps artist-researchers stay with the unfolding process (see chapter 4.1.2.), coherence reflects a trust in oneself, a commitment to one's values even when external recognition is lacking.

This is clearly exemplified by Marc, when he describes a situation when the audience was unable to react in an appreciative way. He re-framed the situation to focus on what the experience can teach him about his work, what it means to its development: “OK, well, […] this didn't land. Cool. Great. That's perfect, actually. How can I make this so it does? Or how can I make it so it lands even worse, like, “What's my goal?” – I love those moments”. This account showcases how the artist-researcher’s sense of meaningfulness is not passively granted by institutions or audiences, but actively sustained through the labor of practicing commitment to the development of one’s work, especially when the external reception misses its meaning. Similarly, Edwin is emphasizes how institutional rejections helped him clarify his internal alignment and find a sense of coherence in his work, as well as refine a future direction for it:

> “The first few rejections that I received helped me build that clarity [...] A lot of these rejections help you build clarity as to what the industry expects from you, what you are able to offer, what you want to research, and find that sweet spot, like ikigai.”

These accounts show how coherence—between the artist-researcher’s values and purpose and work—is revealed through the artist-researcher’s reflexive relationship with the lived-world. At the same time, recognition from others carries distinct value. As Emily explains: “So when I get feedback that people are thinking about it […] that’s nice feedback — to know that your project is living in other people’s minds”. Here, “to know that your project is living in other people’s minds” suggests the artist-researcher’s desire that the work’s meaning and value are understood not only by its maker, but also by others.

This desire, however, comes with emotional risk. As several early-career artist-researchers pointed out, the fear of nonrecognition of work is not abstract, but it mirrors the fear of being misunderstood as a person – being misread by an audience is not only a failure of communication, but is received as a form of personal judgment (Christina).

This points to a deeper phenomenon: when artistic research draws heavily from lived experience, the boundaries between life and work begin to dissolve. Raluca articulates this entanglement clearly: “care is always a bit at the base of what I do […] it's part of how I think in general, not only as an artist, but as a person”. Edwin similarly remarks: “there is no difference between my practice […] and my own personal life, breath, and other spheres of my living”. In

these accounts, the stakes of making are existential – to be misunderstood in one's work is to risk being misunderstood in one's being. This finding further reinforces the idea that work and life are experienced as the two facets of the same coin (Martela & Riekki, 2018, p.2).

When Stella says "you also have to let people get into your head", she means that the act of exhibiting her work is like opening herself up to the audience, in what she describes a "a very sensible way". She recounts how she could not watch others encounter her work, and had to leave the exhibition room: "because I couldn't handle for people […] reading it, and then seeing my face, and the things I'm thinking" (Stella). Exhibiting work is "very tough for artists" (Stella), precisely because of how exposed one becomes in that moment of reception.

However, this space of vulnerability is not only characteristic of the artist-researcher, but it extends towards the audience. An example can be found in the experience of Michaela, who practices artistic-research to "learn more about her brain" through the means of drawing, writing, reading and collaborating with other artists. She has mentioned how collaborating with others also enables her understand herself more. It can be observed that her artistic-research work, whether independent or collaborative, enables Michaela to see herself more clearly. However, this relational aspect of seeking and generating knowledge through making is not limited to collaboration between artists – but it also opens a space for others, from the audience, to learn and understand more about themselves. This became clear when, after a performance, an audience member informed Michaela that her words made them feel understood. Although not intended speak about someone else's experience, her work opened up a space for others to see themselves reflected in, thus revealing it as a site for connection. As she describes it: "It's a very underestimated aspect of making art, that it's not only about learning, but also like feeling understood and feeling understood by yourself, as well, and by someone" (Michaela). This mutual recognition which the artist-researcher shares with the audience through the means of reciprocity showcases that meaningfulness in work arises not only by orienting towards the self, but also, by orienting towards others – it arises relationally.

This mechanism is reflected by Daniel, when he says: "I offer a huge part of myself for a small bit of you". With this, he acknowledges that he applies himself to the most of his capacities, in his work as an artist-researcher. However, his metaphor also reveals that his work is not static, but that is a relational process of giving and receiving: knowledge is offered by the artist, but it is up to the audience to engage with it, to tune in, and to absorb it. Daniel uses the

metaphor an art-critic peer gave him, positioning artists as a “metabolism for knowledge”: a being that chews, processes, and passes on knowledge in unfinished form. In his view, the audience engages in the same “digestive process”, co-creating meaning in their reception of art. This focus on the audience as having agency in the “metabolism for knowledge” foreshadows the following theme.

### 4.3. Resonating: how personal insights are carried to world-building

If the previous theme illustrates how early-career artist-researchers cultivate meaningfulness by creating work in alignment with their values, this theme moves on to highlight how artist-researchers experience the meaningfulness of their work as amplified when their work resonates affectively and experientially with others. Therefore this theme showcases how the embodied knowledge generated through personal, situated practice, is transferred, translated, and received by others – not as a static output, but as a relational practice. In this view, the work of the artist-researcher becomes meaningful beyond the self when it takes form in a way that others can feel, being moved by it (through affect), and relating to it (experientially), similarly to Hannula et al. (2014, pp.92-97)’s description of the sensuous and multi-modal effect that reading has on the reader. It is not simply about recognition or validation, but about generating the conditions for shared understanding—for something personal to become legible and affective in the lives of others.

Therefore, this theme marks a shift from internal reflection to shared understanding, from meaning-for-self to meaning-with-others. Within the Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012, p.660) framework, this movement corresponds to the axis between developing and expressing “the self” and uniting with and serving the “other”.

Several artists described sharing their work with others as essential, not only for professional visibility, but as a way of understanding what the work does in the world. Raluca noted that she can see how “it speaks” to people, suggesting that audience reception reveals aspects of the work that are otherwise inaccessible, learning from the encounter similarly to Marc. Other artist-researchers portray the importance of their work from the angle of contributing to others: Edwin describes it as a duty; Daniel describes it as a metabolism for human knowledge; Stella and Raluca describe it as a way for people to engage with and to

understand feelings. In each case, the act of sharing extends the meaning of the work beyond the self, positioning it as a relational practice.

This emphasis on sharing reveals within all interviews the question of how embodied knowledge can be made accessible to others. Stella reflects on this ethical and methodological challenge, asking whether it's "fair of me as an artist to talk about myself, about my family". Her concern points to the movement between honest, coherent self-expression, and an equally honest, ethical responsibility to the other, when transforming personal experience into public knowledge. The artist-researcher's task, then, becomes one of articulation: how to make the specific process of personal practice visible, and usable for others. Marc explains this approach using his friend's research as example:

> "how to jump? […] What does it mean to leave the Earth and come back down? […] this research on how to jump, which is so particular to [Marc's friend]'s history […] is so particular to his practice, but is fundamental enough for you to take away" Marc explains that artistic research enables him to research and create "something so particular to his practice, but [which] is fundamental enough for you to take away".

This points to the possibility that even the most specific inquiries, personal to one's lived experience, can contain something "fundamental enough for you to take away". In the light of meaningful work research, this example touches upon Paradox 2: "meaningfulness arises in the context of self-fulfillment and self-actualization, yet it is dependent on the 'other' for its realization" (Bailey et al., 2019, p.490). Here, meaningfulness is not dependent on the other, but it can be relationally constituted; as the other has agency to "take away" the fundamental essence of the artist-researcher's practice. The meaningfulness is certain for the self, in how the personal, embodied act of one's experience, is distilled into a transferrable methodology. Thus, by asking "What is it about voice […] that reveals something?", Marc investigates his own voice, finding in his embodied experience the method of voicing – specifically voicing "as a means for radical resistance" (Marc).

This aligns with Stella's claim that working from personal experience "doesn't mean that other people can't relate". She is reflexive in looking for "the right way of doing, of showing"

her embodied knowledge: “I have to figure out a way of conveying it so other people can feel the same emotions that I feel when I approach it” (Stella).

While this may appear to imply a direct transmission of emotion, it is more accurate to interpret it as a desire to enable *affective resonance* – meaning, the creation of conditions for “felt intensities” and relational attunement, which are felt by the audience and simultaneously amplified by their presence (Pais, 2016, p.10). As Pais (2016, p.3) argues, “affect is a concrete, felt phenomenon of social atmospheres at work in the shifting ‘sensorial and affective continuum’ shared by performers and audience”. Affective resonance is “a mode of tension and attention” (Pais, 2016, p.7) which occurs when the audience becomes part of the affective and energetic circuit of the artistic work (Pais, 2016, p.10). Meaning, the audience engages in affective resonance, not necessarily when understanding the artistic work in cognitive terms, but when resonating with the work’s presence, rhythm, emotional or atmospheric charge.

This is what affective resonance looks like in practice: a subtle dynamic in which the artist’s embodied experience becomes available for others to attune to. Raluca, for example, describes her work as a “spark”. A spark that initiates her work—she begins working by “following what makes [her] emotions spark”—and, simultaneously, a spark that sets something in motion for others, when it “sparks a conversation” with them. Tracing his metaphor of the “spark”, it we can observe how personal, affective and embodied insight (what “sparks”) becomes communicable, not through explanation, but through resonance. She further describes it as: “this feeling of […] a surprise and expectation that is like… ‘What is gonna happen?’ […] it is like having…yeah, having something in your hands and then opening your hands to others” (Raluca). This image captures the idea of artistic research as both intimate and shared, as an offering that invites response by creating the conditions for affective engagement. Like Daniel’s metaphor of “offering a big part of me for a small part of you”, this account highlights how the meaningfulness of artistic (research) work begins as an internal, embodied spark, which subsequently becomes receivable for others.

Some artist-researchers showcase an active approach to creating the conditions for resonance to occur. Both Stella and Daniel explain how they create both a “lock and key” for people to use in order to “unlock something else” (Daniel). Daniel explains that both “an aesthetic property and a conceptual property” are needed in order to create a suitable “key” for people. By “an aesthetic property”, the artist-researcher referred to the visible, aesthetic,

affective and immediate aspects of an artwork: its form, its shape, its presentation. By "conceptual property", the artist-researcher referred to the deeper meaning of the artwork, the concept it stands for or expresses. In this way, the artist-researchers cultivate meaningfulness through their work by designing it as both a lock and a key, which prompt the audience to use the key and unlock the underlying idea of the work. By offering a lock and a key, the artist-researchers are able to maximize the audience's engagement with the work, as well as, maximize the chances they would engage, tune in, and resonate with it.

### 4.3.1. Embodied resonance: making something available for others to inhabit

If the main theme explicates the concept of resonance through its affective facet, this sub-theme aims to deepen it through the concept of embodied resonance: when the audience is not only touched affectively, and moved through affective resonance – but when the audience begins to embody the "conceptual property" of the work.

This is evident in Edwin's reasoning for reconfiguring his artistic research practice. While his earlier work, focused on critique—revealing injustices and institutional failures—, was "well received" by audiences, institutions, and funding agencies, given his numerous exhibitions, he grew disillusioned by this positive reception: "People come in, engage with it. […] Some are moved by the work. […] but I don't want the exhibiting of my work to be the end". He realized how the art-world system appreciates and exhibits the representation of critique, but it does not support the resolution it calls for. As he put it, audiences "come in, watch and weep", but the encounter stops there.

Therefore, he begins to reconfigure his practice, shifting from a critical stance, to "a practice of radical hope", in which his "art making and exhibiting" becomes "the facade" for deeper engagements with "sensitive subjects and communities" (Edwin). This reorientation reflects his desire to create both a context for affective resonance, and a context for embodied resonance, where his art-making serves as a conduit for affective resonance—the moment of shared intensity—, and his "deeper engagements" as a conduit for *embodied resonance,* in which the audience is not only affectively moved, but is also guided into action. As Edwin argues: "artistic research has the capacity to activate or to transform." His aim is no longer to affect audiences emotionally, but to engage them so deeply that his embodied knowledge resonates as

action, prompting them to transform their circumstances. In this sense, embodied resonance is not only about what the audience receives, but about what the work enables them to do.

This focus on transformation is also evident in Raluca's approach to work, who sees her work as "a way to stay hopeful for the future". As a facilitator for workshops, and curator of "spaces for conversation", the question of how to make the process of her work visible, was very important, as she does not require her work to produce any type of artworks, or "artefacts" (Raluca). To make the process of these workshops visible, she introduced a tablecloth "where people can write on" during her workshops. This material object functions as "a sort of communication between different groups of people that will never really meet, but have this object as a connection". By carrying the tablecloth from one setting to another, the tablecloth accumulates traces of the participants' thoughts, and gives new participants the opportunity to engage not only intellectually, but affectively and bodily. Through reading other participants' thoughts, processing them through conversation and writing, they enter in resonance with who wrote before, and therefore embody the knowledge the tablecloth carries.

She highlights this herself, explaining how she recognizes when people resonate with her work when she notices "the opening up of a conversation" through her work. For her, that resonance is not sustained by the start of the conversation, but rather, by the "dialogue that happens" – signaling to the embodied process. She connects this with the role and relevance of artistic work, expressing that "why we need to create art is because we have a very profound need to communicate that cannot be fulfilled by words" (Raluca).

Edwin explains the process of embodied resonance with an anecdote received from a former mentor. When asked to describe inspiration—explain what it means to inspire someone—his initial answer was "influencing someone in a positive way". His mentor reframed it, not as an act of outward influence, but as induction: a kind of internal coherence that radiates outward. Edwin explains: "there is a particle that vibrates at a very high frequency on its own axis [...] it's able to create a resonance amongst particles around it, that start vibrating at a higher frequency". The capacity to move others, then, does not arise from trying to influence others directly, but arises from the intensity and clarity of one's own alignment: "just by its own vibration, on its own frequency, and in its own axis" (Edwin). In his view, resonance begins with inner transformation. As Edwin explains:

> "I realized that most of the process, the transformative process, is internal, is an internal work. And the second that there is that internal work, and you gaze upon the external world, you've created the space for transformation. That's it. That's the work."

He later elaborates on the ethical implications of this view:

> "the world is an incredibly big place we cannot even understand. [...] If your process begins by being a transformative process for you within yourself, it changes the way that you see the world, then that's a success. If, by any grace or luck, you're able to influence one life outside of yourself, that too is huge success, and like that, that is transformation."

Similarly, Daniel expresses how sharing knowledge and generating transformative resonance cultivates a sense of meaningfulness not only for him, but for humankind: "You feel fulfilled as a species, as a human species, when you're vibrating with other atoms, so when your thoughts hit other people's thoughts, it's very exciting and that could be very rewarding". These accounts suggest that artist-researchers experience their work as meaningful not because it is received or recognized (as discussed in chapter 4.1.2.) but because it has the potential to generate embodied resonance: to affect others through the depth of one's own transformation. In this light, artistic research is not just creative labor, but it is a form of world-building.

## 4.4. Growing what is missing

As the previous theme explored how artist-researchers experience meaningfulness through the resonance of their work with others, this theme moves further into the domain of co-creation, showing how meaningfulness is actively cultivated through efforts to build what is missing – either networks of support, platforms for visibility, or setting models for others. This theme traces how artist-researchers cultivate meaningfulness by building the worlds they want to inhabit.

Before showcasing how the artist-researchers construct these worlds, it is important to first acknowledge in what ways they are missing. Multiple accounts describe the "post-graduation void" (Michaela), which the early career artist-researchers meet once the "fantasy" of art-school education ends (Christina). Christina especially describes her formative years as "kind of

[remaining] in the fantasy", firstly because her study was "still very separated from the real thing", which prompted her to wonder, after graduation "oh, so now what?", and, secondly, because she had realized the irony of art education. As she recounts, there was a distinction made between artists who worked full time as artists, and those who had jobs on the side were referred to as "field artists" (Christina). Only to later realize the irony of her teachers also having side jobs as artists, revealing the structural norm, and not the exception. This realization exposed a dissonance between the ideals projected in art education and the practical realities of sustaining a career in the field. Raluca also delineates the institutional lack of support when she says: "At the very beginning of working [professionally], uncertainty was something that I quite couldn't cope with because it's something that nobody prepares you for".

The early-career artist-researchers express the difficulty of finding a way to continue post-graduation: "suspended into a bit of nothingness [...] I've been studying art for the past eight years [...] that leaves a void now. [...] I find it hard to start again" (Stella). Christina exposes the systemic issue of the post-graduation void, explaining that the educational institution fails to prepare the students for the professional field, and instead, "just motivate [the students] to continue" (Christina). However, such belief is not enough for early-career professionals: "continue, how to continue? [imitating her mentors:] 'Yeah, work at a cafe and then continue.' Like, what? Well, how do we continue? [we are] kind of thrown in the deep" (Christina). She continues: "But that's also the one big problem, I think, is how you never learn how, or where, to start. You just have to kind of have a good connection, I think, and just hop along a project…but I wouldn't know….any, any like, any option how to continue" (Christina). Despite studying artistic research at PhD level, Marc experiences the same uncertainty in work opportunities, to which he responds: "I don't even want to think about that" – underscoring the same post-graduation anxiety.

The uncertainty over how to continue practicing one's work once the artist-researchers lose the "institutional shelter" (Edwin) they previously had through their educational institution reflects a serious systemic gap in these artist-researchers' professional journey. Emily confesses that the biggest challenge is "to find a structure for your life after leaving systems as the academy or your masters", showcasing how dominant the educational program is not only in the artist-researcher's practice, but also, in their life.

Christina navigates this systemic gap by structuring her work as a “field artist” – as she explains: “I don't like that uncertainty [of not having a stable income]. So that's why I find jobs” (Christina). However, although her employed contracts provide her with a structured, monthly income, she experienced being “sucked in” the stable job. As she explains: “And you forget that you're actually… you'd have an artistic practice [if there was no commitment of an external job]” (Christina).

Similarly, Edwin calls attention to the extreme fragmentation and individualization of artistic labor: “you're walking through this independent, like isolated field”. Without any form of “institutional shelter”, early-career artists are expected to manage everything themselves, functioning like advanced entrepreneurs: “you have to understand the business, the entrepreneurial aspects of it, the finances, the social media, the networking, the projection of your work outside,[…] the grant application, writings” while also sustaining a critical and reflexive artistic research practice. As Edwin acknowledges, “that's a tough field to navigate”. With this, he indirectly confirms that the weight of this responsibility is not a temporary phase, but is embedded in the structure of this labor.

The experience of uncertainty does not finish once the artist-researcher receives institutional support. Daniel highlights a deeper ethical tension, expressing how the conditions under which support is offered can also compromise the integrity of the work – and, the integrity of the artist respectively. He prefers non-sponsored work, as it “means that you don't have voices dictating what it is that you're saying or where you're saying or how you're saying it” He cautions that “you can get into bed with the devil”, referring to institutions dependent on problematic funding sources which may intentionally avoid politically sensitive topics. “Artistic integrity tries to push away from that, when people are conscious of it”, he adds – underscoring how the pursuit of meaningful work can involve choosing between alignment with one’s values and professional viability. This also points to the need for forms of support that do not instrumentalize, nor censor critical stances in artistic research work.

As many participants argue, these challenges could be preempted within art education, if it included more sustained preparation for institutional navigation, rather than a “one hour chat at the end of the year”. The current gap between art education and the field is not only a lack of business skills, as Christina explains, but a missed opportunity to build real networks beyond the academic bubble. Emily also recognizes how disconnected art academies are from each other,

showcasing the lack of responsibility for the students is prevalent across art education institutions. Christina advises: “Just go outside of the building more. And meet other people that can actually help you, because in the end it's also about the network, the people and making projects together.”

The effects of these missing structures are not just logistical, but are existential. Raluca clearly articulates this:

> “[this] uncertainty that is created by the precariousness of being an artist and in general working in the art field… Yeah, it's something that I think will never really abandon me. In a way this feeling of… ‘Everything you do, might change super quickly’ and I think that is something that I also talking with friends that work in the same field. I do recognise that a lot and this feeling of ‘yeah, now I'm here. I don't know where I will be in one to five years’. It's um…. Of course you make projects, but most of the times there's nothing that is really certain. While people that work in other fields can have this certainty much– or is much more common that they have this kind of certainty.”

Her account expresses a continuous sense of instability, which is normalized in the field. What helps her is “sharing experiences of uncertainness with her support system, which allows her to make sense of her situation, and receive the confirmation that she is “not the only one”, she describes: “I'm not crazy. I'm not inventing these things in my mind”.

#### 4.4.1. Activating social thinking through art and poetry

As the main theme circles around the support which is currently lacking in the careers of emerging artist-researchers, this sub-theme traces the collective imaginaries which the artist-researchers are working to bring from the realm of “inspiration” to the realm of concrete, material “circumstances of the self and others” (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p660).

With the exception of the PhD student, who argued his educational program offers the level of support he requires, all early-career artist-researchers experience a deep lack of institutional support (see chapter 4.4.). Regardless of the institutional shelter received, all participants express how their work is oriented towards a better future, where there is more understanding, and with that, willingness to co-exist. An example for how artistic research can

generate knowledge which, when shared, enables the audience to cultivate more understanding, is found in the work of Raluca, whose artistic-research work is to facilitate spaces for conversation. Although she is uncertain on her long-term job opportunities, Raluca argues that the value of this artistic type of work lies in its capacity to "to make our society grow". As she sees it, such type of work enables people to "enter in connection with art". She hopes that, in guiding these workshops where she handles with care a diverse group of people, each bringing their own views and interpretation, she can help create "more welcoming spaces", where discourses can emerge from "this connection between people and art". Although she cannot control where the conversation will go, she hopes she can suggest the idea that:

> "we don't need to fully understand something in order to accept it. But we can also just accept that something is different than us, and then just live with it. And I think that a lot of problems we have nowadays, they are really created by the fact that there is a huge intolerance of something that is different than us."

By this, she connects the core of her work as a way to engage with contemporary societal issues. Similarly, Daniel explains how it is possible that artistic work can help activate and move societies forward:

> "art, I think, and poetry, is a very great place for that to happen because it can surface so much… and we're a species who work through narrative or storytelling. So it's really about reconstructing a different narrative… About where it is we are today"

By surfacing so much, he refers to the capacity of art and poetry to unearth, and to reveal, the parts of reality which have been designed to be hidden. He argues how necessary it is to perform such artistic kind of work: "[because] we're missing sometimes the bigness of some things". As he sees it, "the slipperiness tool of capitalism, in my understanding, is the invisible qualities, the aspect that is meant to be hidden". By looking at photography as a device which relies on the visible, but whose entire systems are based on the invisible, he underscores the educational and critical value of the revelatory role of art, arguing: "this is where art becomes a very good tool […] to ask questions […] because a lot of these things, systems and networks and

infrastructures, particularly in the world of tech, are made for us not to play with, but to become invisible and then to be a part of our lives, invisible in invisibleness".

Daniel uses "art […] as the kind of process in thinking"—characteristic of artistic research practice—, to ask questions, and invites society in the questioning: "I believe work is a way for people to become a part of the conversation". The conversation, here, refers to the space where people have the agency to speak about the circumstances of their life. To do this, he actively constructs such conversations through his work. As he recalls, one of the projects from his residencies was "based on invitations or public people walking in", because he "wanted people to be a part of [the conversation]". This work not only showcases his commitment to his purpose of reconstructing a different narrative in conversation with other people, but it also showcases how he does this on the local level. As he explains it: "I like to think on a local scale, because my work is global thinking". Daniel notes that he is essentially "just seeking for more life" through his work, which suggests a desire for creating a better world, "or at least a reality where we have a little bit more control" (Daniel).

Christina similarly wants her work to "activate people's thinking". Although her artistic-research work conveys her findings that all people are landscapers, and therefore have an inherent duty to treat the environment with care, she finds it difficult to express this without talking about her work. The fact that she holds a different day job to support herself, and that she reached burnout through it, make this more difficult. This is evident when she explains that what would make her feel like her work is meaningful would be for people to "just to realize what's going on around them. […] just understand the world, just understand what they're doing and their impacts" when they are engaging with her artistic-research work. Because her current employment prevents her from feeling this kind of meaningfulness through her work, she is trying to reorient herself towards a job which is closer in purpose to her artistic research way of working and thinking, perhaps "join in one of those research projects", which has been her desire since graduating, but she doesn't know "how to get involved in those", reflecting the lack of institutional support showcased in the main theme.

Christina's account showcases that it is not enough to create in alignment with one's values and purpose (creating from coherence), but one also needs to find strategies (such as the lock-and-key, employed by Stella and Daniel) to appeal to audiences and engage them in such a way as to resonate both in an affective and an embodied way, to "activate people's thinking" to the

extent for change to occur. Furthermore, her account exemplifies a pattern found across the interviews, where artist-researchers can well envision solutions and improvements in their work and in their field, but are unable to pursue them without external support.

### 4.4.2. Reimagining a culture of collective embeddedness

As the previous sub-theme contoured how artist-researchers experience a sense of meaningfulness by creating work which engages people to the extent of changing them, this sub-theme focuses on how early-career artist-researchers experience a sense of meaningfulness in their work by cultivating support systems. All artist-researchers expressed their longing for more tightly-knit communities of artists, artist-researchers, and audiences. In particular, they speak of artist unions (Edwin), promote non-transactional mentorship programs (Stella), rely on community-based support (Michaela and Emily), and create inter-connected artist communities (Christina).

Community-building emerges as a deliberate practice of creating what is structurally missing. For example, Christina saw a gap in her community: “I started a little initiative [...] because the community is quite small —or big, but like little islands—and I want to bring the islands together”. She built a digital platform to connect what she saw as a dispersed art community. She believes that the most important thing to do as an artist-researcher is “to continue sharing, but also to continue to share with other artists”, adding that “the strongest thing that you could build” is community: “doing it all together, making projects, making something, sharing and getting inspiration”.

Emily shares this view, expressing the importance of connecting with other people, in order to avoid becoming “an island” – meaning, producing work which isn’t very well connected to its publics. However, she also mentions that opening up to others in sharing one’s work should be a second phase of artistic research work – as the first phase is the beginning of the work. As she explains: “because it's something sacred and something you have to embody yourself, and carry yourself first, before feeling certain enough to share it with others”. Similarly, Stella stresses the importance of grounding one’s work in personal interest, especially as an emerging artist-researcher, when it is easy to be influenced by mentors and teachers. Raluca acknowledges this as “the fear of being contaminated” which, she argues, can come from different sources, such as “the awareness of… the necessity of protecting one own’s expression”, but also, the fear

of the unknown, or simply, the fear of the other: “being educated in not accepting what is different than us”. Raluca explains that collaboration with other peers is crucial:

> “[an advice] would be to…look at the people around you as allies, not as enemies. If you know like in in the sense of like peer, artist and peer cultural workers. Because I think that using this point of view helps in creating connections and collaborations and from those, like, be really open to being contaminated by others, rather than closing others off… because of fear of being contaminated […] I feel like contamination is really important to make things develop, to bring things farther, to… even just allowing life to continue in a very biological sense.”

Raluca explains that one’s creative expression will remain intact, even if people “contaminate” each other, because, as she argues, “we all have our own way to process and elaborate things”, and therefore, the result of contamination is just being different than prior to it. In other words, Raluca uses the metaphor of “being really open to being contaminated by others” as a different way of saying “opening oneself up enough to resonate with other things, with others”. Contamination seems to be, for the artist, what resonance is, for the audience. In this way, both contamination and resonance are conduits for collaboration: whether collaboration between the artwork of an artistic research project and the audience of an exhibition, or collaboration between artist-researchers and peer cultural workers.

If seen as separate things, collaboration as contamination, versus collaboration as resonance, the account of Stella can be a suitable example. If, initially, her mentor—a more experienced artist who had given her drawing lessons—could clearly recognize his influence in her work, this changed once she studied abroad. She recognizes how their relation evolved from mentorship, to now being more of a “parallel thing, supporting each other, advising each other”. In a way, it can be argued that the mentorship and experience studying abroad enabled the style of collaboration as contamination, meanwhile now, as she has changed and developed her style and way of working, they can now resonate, being on the same level.

This example showcases how important cross-generational mentorship relations are for the development of emerging artist-researchers. Stella’s account highlights the value of being mentored by a local artist whom she “clicked” with. This mentorship was not part of a formal

program, but a generative, non-transactional relationship, built on mutual respect. This peer-mentor dynamic helped her feel supported and understood. Her account points toward the possibility of a more sustainable culture of mutual uplift: “people want to help you — especially if you’re young, and they know how it feels”. The uncertainty faced by early-career artist-researchers, particularly post-graduation, could be significantly alleviated by cultivating a culture of generational mentorship. Instead of isolating artists in the precarious void between education and professional success, this culture could offer continuity through a web of shared experience and informal guidance where value and knowledge are shared.

Stella’s account clearly articulates the value of support being relational, and not transactional – support “without expecting anything in return”. The idea of relational support appears across all interviews. Edwin suggests it as a form of institutional support, too, when he asks:

> “what if every museum, every gallery, every art exhibition space, has three open spots for like artistic researchers or artists, to develop long term format projects […], to have this kind of circulation and invite artists into a kind of institutional shelter for some time?”

Daniel similarly condemns the transactional culture within arts and education, which he attributes to the institutional business model. He argues that in transactional societies, “everything requires today to [….] have some kind of convincing agent in it, a seductive quality like somebody having a PhD”, referring to the legitimization process characterizing art worlds. Daniel therefore insists on the creation of more porous, interdisciplinary spaces, where different types of thinking can meet, “contaminate” and inform one another. This openness reflects a broader call for playful, horizontal infrastructures of support, as he argues: “we really have to learn again to be a lot more playful and open” (Daniel). His perspective reflects a deeper concern that something essential has been lost. Not only critical and independent ways of thinking and doing, but also intuitive, poetic ways of knowing, and the collective, affective and embodied support systems which sustain them. As he warns, “it's important for us to tune back into what's been missing, because it's taken out of our hands constantly, and in bigger ways than we can think” (Daniel). Taken together, these accounts express a shared desire to reclaim collective agency by cultivating independent, relational infrastructures – spaces where knowledge

circulates informally, support is freely offered, and artistic research can unfold beyond institutional constraints.

### 4.5. Meaningfulness as indicator of value

A broader insight emerged through the iterative process of assessing the four themes in the light of the framework of meaningful work. That is, early-career artist-researchers are not simply looking to experience a sense of meaningfulness in their work, but they are actively constructing value through it. This value is not originating from institutional recognition or the consumerist art market, as theme 2 showcases. Instead, it is formed through the artist's own practices of art-making, resonance, and relational engagement. Theme 3 details this: when Daniel says "I've never made money from my exhibitions… I'm essentially making something so I can move on to my next thought", he reveals his motivation to be the generative act of thinking, and the necessity of sharing that knowledge. As he says, "I offer a huge part of myself for a small bit of you", value emerges from giving, rather than any monetary reward.

Similarly, in theme 4, when Raluca calls for a different economy of art: "I would like art to not be a market anymore and to just be something that we appreciate and value in a different way that is not monetary…but as an artist, you have to survive", she underlies the impossibility of the contemporary artist to exist in a world where the non-monetary value of work prevails. She explains how "what we share is knowledge… it multiplies by sharing". These reflections are not abstract idealism but direct responses to the absence of recognition and support. As Edwin bluntly states, "Artists create the value. Why the […] are they at the bottom?"

Even if traditional systems assign value to their work, these artists are not satisfied with the limits of material valuation characterizing contemporary, consumerist art worlds. Similarly to how Edwin became disillusioned with exhibiting work for a weeping audience, so Daniel realized that art fairs and exhibitions may bring his work on "someone's bathroom walls". Disillusioned by the art market's instrumentalization of artistic work, both artist-researchers decided they gained more value by "continuing to think". Rather than being assigned their value by these systems, the artist-researchers redefine what their value is by constantly cultivating it through reflection, resonance, community-building, and a future-oriented creative imagination.

By cultivating this meaningfulness through their work, they are able to enact alternative systems of value rooted in contribution, coherence, and care.

This process can be further understood through the three analytical currents that emerged through the application of the meaningful work framework: coherence, resonance, and generativity (Appendix D).

Artist-researchers firstly cultivate a sense of coherence when their internal experience— their values, their interests, their authenticity and integrity— aligns with the work they produce and the contexts in which the work is situated (Hannula et.al, 2014, p.15). Specifically, this alignment between their inner values, their work, and its context, help the artist-researcher to cultivate meaningfulness through the practice of artistic research, through both the making-stage of their work, and through the 'contextualization'-stage of their work (Hannula et al., 2014, p.15). This alignment allows them to work with a sense of groundedness, intentionality, and trust.

When coherence is achieved, it opens up the possibility for resonance: the moment when the work not only makes sense to the artist but can be felt, received, and meaningfully engaged with by others, whether audiences, collaborators, or peers.

From the interplay between coherence and resonance arises the possibility of generation: or, a generative quality, which characterizes the approach of the artist-researchers in both their work, and their life. This generativity does not simply refer to producing more work but to the capacity of the work to spark transformation, carry forward energy, and contribute to new ways of thinking or relating. As Daniel put it, it is the desire to "feel more life"—to extend the meaningfulness of the work into life itself.

These three senses—coherence, resonance and generativity— are interwoven qualities through which artist-researchers cultivate and experience meaningfulness. Together, they form an alternative system of value, rooted in authenticity, relationality, and care.

# 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study effectively answers the central research question: “How do artist-researchers experience and cultivate a sense of meaningfulness in their early career phase?” The research focused on the ways in which meaningfulness is constructed in artistic-research practices in the Netherlands, particularly within contexts of professional precarity and limited institutional support.

The findings of this thesis demonstrate that work is not only a pathway to experience meaningfulness, but also a pathway to cultivate it. Especially when early-career artist-researchers do not experience a sense of meaningfulness in their work, often due to professional constraints or absence of support, they begin to construct meaningfulness through their work. As shown across the four themes, they cultivate meaningfulness when navigating professional precarity through reflexivity, which is characteristic of artistic research; they experience meaningfulness through cultivating contexts where resonance can emerge across affective and embodied registers; and they experience and cultivate meaningfulness in building communities meant to support them. The research shows that meaningfulness is a process, experienced both subjectively through one’s lived-experience, and relationally, in the shared contexts between self and others.

The framework of meaningful work designed by Lips-Wiersma & Wright (2012, p.660) proved highly suitable for the research on meaningfulness through work. It functioned as a flexible, yet grounded conceptual lens for analyzing how artist-researchers negotiate both internal and external tensions. This enabled the methodological approach in both collecting and analyzing the data. While the framework originates in organizational studies, its existential perspective allowed it to be applied in the context of artistic labor, where the internal tensions highlight the inner challenges of creating work as an artist-researcher, and the external tensions emphasize the outer constraints designated by the state of the milieu. As a result, three currents emerged, underlying the results: coherence, resonance, and generativity, which were identified as ways through which artist-researchers experience and cultivate meaningfulness through their artistic-research work.

Methodologically, the research was grounded in qualitative, reflexive thematic analysis, based on in-depth interviews with eight early-career artist-researchers. This method was appropriate for capturing the lived, affective, and processual nature of meaningful work in

artistic research. It also made space for participants' metaphors, tensions, and hesitations – elements crucial for understanding meaning-making in creative work. Thematic coding and interpretation allowed for capturing how the participants articulated their sense of value, purpose, and transformation within their work.

One key insight is that meaningfulness, in this context, also functions as an indicator of value. For early-career artist-researchers operating largely outside of market validation or stable employment, cultivating meaningfulness becomes a way to construct value where external recognition is absent. This value does not originate in monetary reward or institutional approval, but in acts of artistic creation, resonance, and shared knowledge. For many participants, the work's value is measured not by impact metrics but by what it enables: dialogue, attention, insight, transformation. In this way, meaningfulness itself becomes a method of world-building.

This redefinition of value aligns with non-instrumental notions of art as a space of contribution, care, and coherence. The concept of Ikigai, mentioned by one participant, encapsulates this idea: artistic research sits at the intersection of what the world needs, what one can do, and what one feels compelled to explore.

Furthermore, while Lips-Wiersma & Wright's framework emphasizes dynamic tensions between "self and other," "being and doing," and "imagination and reality," this research suggests that meaningfulness can also be sustained even when one axis is absent—such as institutional recognition or public understanding. In such cases, artist-researchers ground meaning in inner coherence and relational intent, extending Bailey et al.'s (2019) discussion of paradoxes in meaningful work.

When it comes to the professionalization of artistic research, it is clear there is a critical need for inclusive, independent spaces and structures for artist-researchers, as well as non-transactional mentorship, founded on mutual interest and shared values, to rely on in times of professional "voids" phases such as the early-career phase.

The findings point to both the potential and pitfalls of the ongoing professionalization of artistic research. On the one hand, artistic research enables alternative models of meaningful work: authentic, embodied, relational, and generative. On the other hand, without sufficient infrastructures of support, it risks reproducing neoliberal ideals of the autonomous, self-responsible worker (McRobbie, 2018), who must continually create value without guaranteed reciprocity or recognition. This disconnection raises ethical questions about the demands placed

on creative workers: to generate resonance, visibility, and public good, without receiving sustainable support. As Gill (2014) argues, we urgently need a politicized vocabulary for naming the hidden injuries of academic and creative labour: injuries that bind workers to exploitative conditions through affective attachments, self-blame, and internalized responsibility (pp.28-30). Furthermore, there is an urgent need for a different ecology of practice: one rooted not in transactional logic, but in relational, collective, and care-based models of work.

## 5.1. Recommendations

The study was limited by its focus on a specific cultural-institutional context (the Netherlands). While diverse in nationality, the small, non-representative sample may reflect particular institutional, socio-cultural norms, which may not have been accounted for. Therefore, further research can investigate the difference in how experiencing internationality shapes the experience of uncertainty in the creative sector.

Future studies could examine how meaningfulness evolves over time, to examine how it is sustained, or transformed across different stages within the artist-researcher's career, or in response to shifting institutional landscapes. Comparative studies between national contexts may illuminate how funding models or educational infrastructures shape the cultivation of meaningfulness. Other possible research avenues are to explore how artist-researchers engage with non-arts audiences, to examine how resonance travels across domains.

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# Appendix A

## Conceptual Guide for Interview

**Dimension A** = explaining the work, and how the artists are 'developing their inner self' through their work

**Dimension B** = how they aim (or not) to 'express full potential' through their work

**Dimension C** = how and if this meaning(fullness) of their work is translated to others

**Dimension D** = how their work allows them to 'belong with others', and to what extent (opportunities and constraints in the professional field)

**Dimension E** = how they experience working with the aim of 'serving others', what are the negatives of striving for meaningfulness and how they are overcoming them.

**Dimension F** = how they experience the meaningfulness of work: as a metaphor, and as advice.

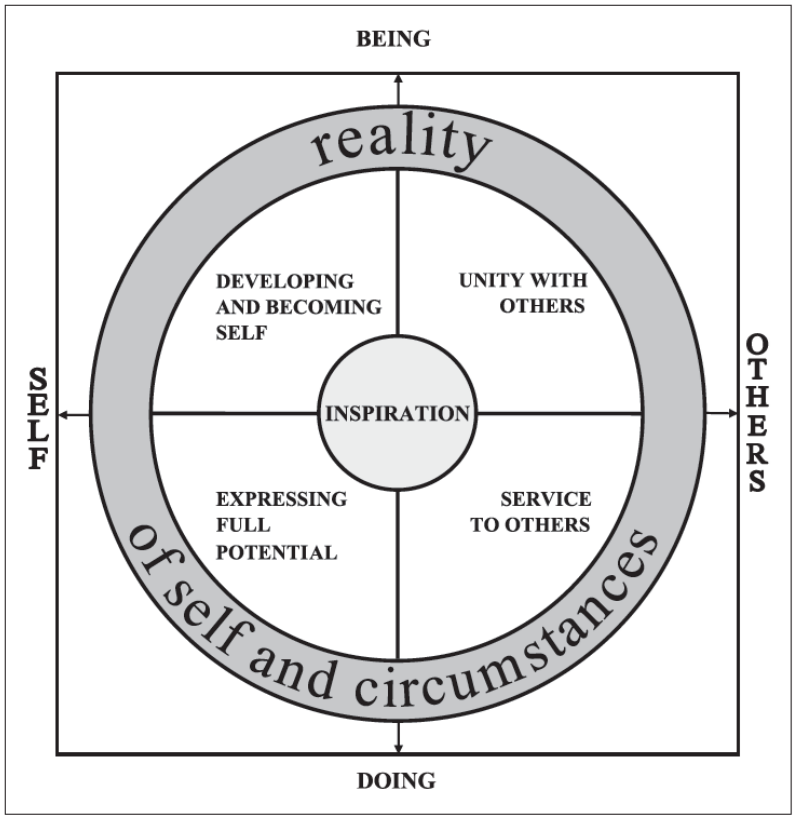



**Figure 1.**

*Framework of meaningful work.*

*Note*. Source: Lips-Wiersma, M., & Wright, S. (2012, p.660). Measuring the Meaning of Meaningful Work: Development and Validation of the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale. Group & Organization Management, 37(5), 655–685. Copyright © 2012 by Sage Publications. Reprinted by Permission of Sage Publications.

**Interview guide**

**A) Dimension**: **entry into artistic research practice**

1. What does a perfect day look like to you?
2. Can you tell me a bit about yourself, and your artistic research work?
3. Can you tell me about the path that brought you here — how has your career taken shape so far?
4. Where do you get your inspiration from?
5. Can you walk me through your artistic research process?

**B) Dimension**: **experiencing meaningfulness = embodied authenticity (inner meaning) & impact (outer meaning)**

6. Is there a project you've done that you really identify with – something that feels like it describes you in some way? In what parts of it do you recognize yourself the most?
7. Is there something in the way you work (in your work process) – maybe how you handle materials, ideas, spaces or people – that feels especially meaningful to you?
8. What drives/motivates you to do this kind of work in particular? (is it the community, the creativity, the cross-collaboration, the finished results, the audience's reaction?)
9. What do you hope to achieve with your work? / Do you ever think to yourself 'I want to make something meaningful? If so, what does that mean to you?
10. Is there a project in particular which made you feel fulfilled by your work? Why?

**C) Dimension: translating meaningfulness to others**

11. Now, you've told me about the meaningfulness of your work for you — and I was wondering, do you feel you are able to convey and present the meaning of your work to others, to audiences, peers?
12. Have you ever had the feeling that your work didn't quite land — that it wasn't received, understood, or responded to in the way you hoped?

- What was that like for you?- Did it change how you thought about your work — or how you approach it now?

13. Have there been moments in your career where you felt recognized — not just in terms of success, but in a way that felt meaningful to you? What was that like?

14. When does it feel like your work makes a difference? Or is meaningful to others, or it makes a contribution? Can you give me an example?

**D) Dimension: artist's connection with the field**

15. How would you describe your position in the professional field? (art-/research world)
- (if needed) Where do you feel most 'at home,' and where do you still feel like an outsider?
16. In what (meaningful) ways do you feel supported by the professional field? And, where there times when you did not feel supported?
17. Have you ever had opportunities to co-create, and to help shape the professional field? To give back, in a way?
18. What could be improved to support artists to find work opportunities to create meaningful work?

**E) Dimension: overcoming the challenges of striving for meaningfulness**

19. What are some challenges you encounter, or fears you have, in creating something meaningful: in making your work – or in making it public?
20. Have you had moments in your work where you didn't know what to do next?
- What was that like for you? Where do you think it was coming from: the nature of artistic research, the academic and peer pressure, the desire to create something, the bureaucracy? - Did it change how you thought about your work – or how you approach it now?
21. Do you have any routines, habits, or practices that help you stay grounded in your work – especially when things feel uncertain or overwhelming?

**F) Dimension: artist's experience of meaningfulness**

22. If you were to visually map out your journey of finding or experiencing meaning in your work, what would that map look like? What key moments, emotions, or shifts would stand out along the way?
(if not possible to draw:) can you use a metaphor to describe your experience of meaningfulness through your work?
23. Now, at the end of this interview, what do you think about meaningfulness in your work?

24. Do you have any other insights regarding the interview topics? Anything else you'd like to share?

25. If you were to give a piece of advice to a fellow artist researcher, what would it be, and why?

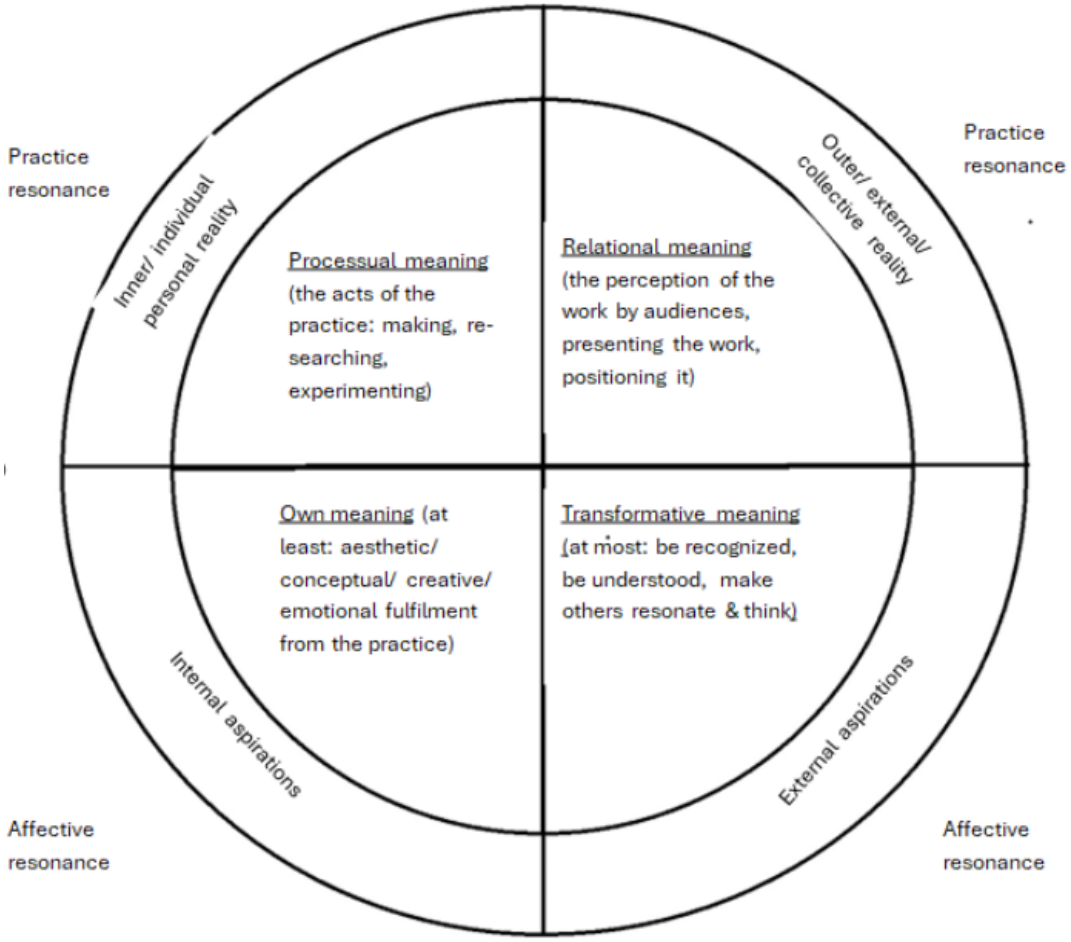
# Appendix B

Overview of participants and length of interview.

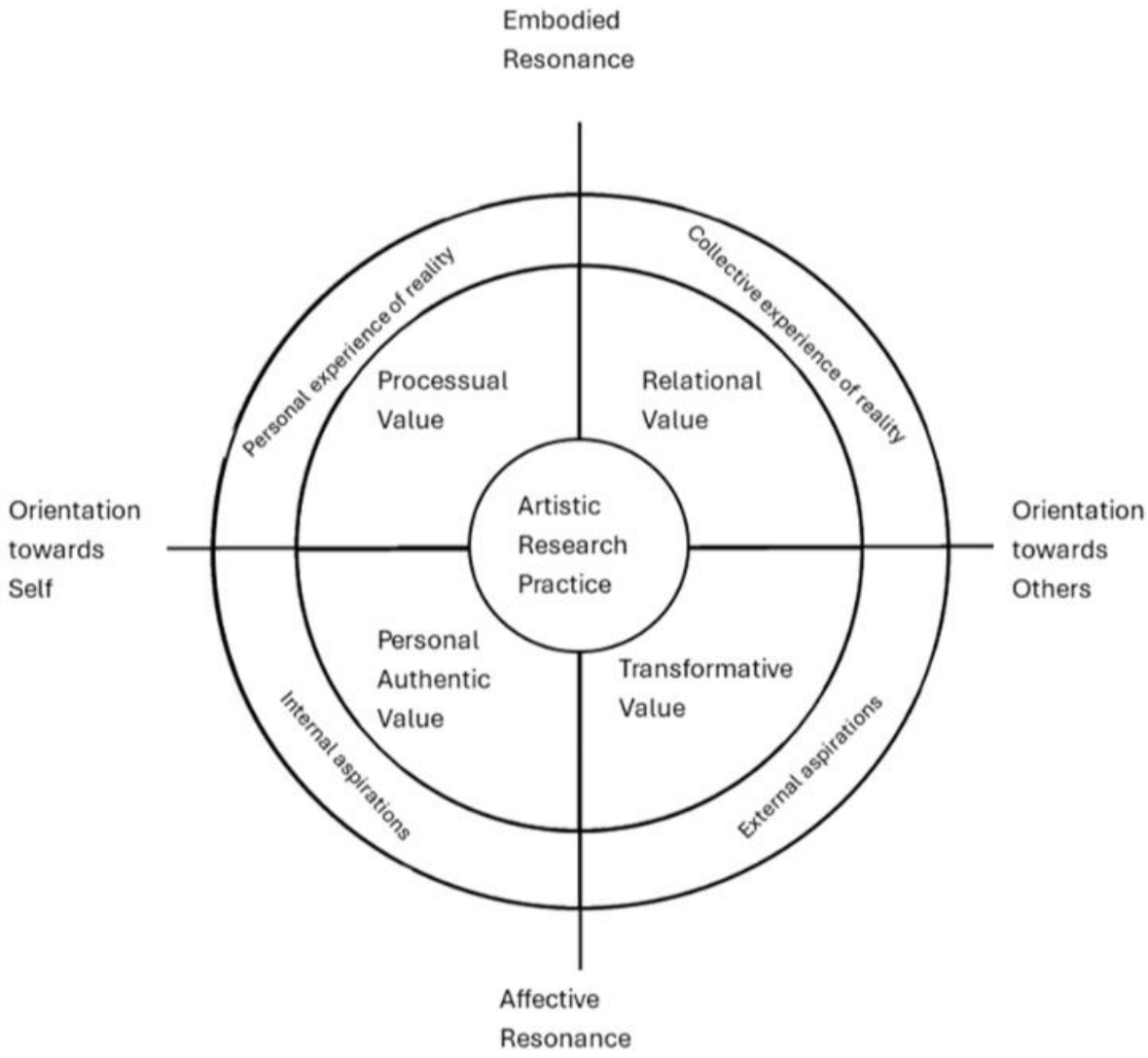
| | Pseudonym | Gender | Education level | Occupation | Interview length |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interviewee 1 | Marc | Male | PhD level | Spoken-word performed | 90 minutes |
| Interviewee 2 | Stella | Female | Master level | Artist | 60 minutes |
| Interviewee 3 | Edwin | Male | Master level | Artist, designer, artist-researcher | 90 minutes |
| Interviewee 4 | Michaela | Female | Master level | Spoken-word performer and community-builder | 75 minutes |
| Interviewee 5 | Daniel | Male | Master level | Artist-researcher, educator, photographer | 120 minutes |
| Interviewee 6 | Raluca | Female | Master level | Facilitator of spaces for conversation | 60 minutes |
| Interviewee 7 | Emily | Female | Bachelor level | Photographer | 80 minutes |
| Interviewee 8 | Christina | Female | Master level | Artist, acurator | 60 minutes |

# Appendix C

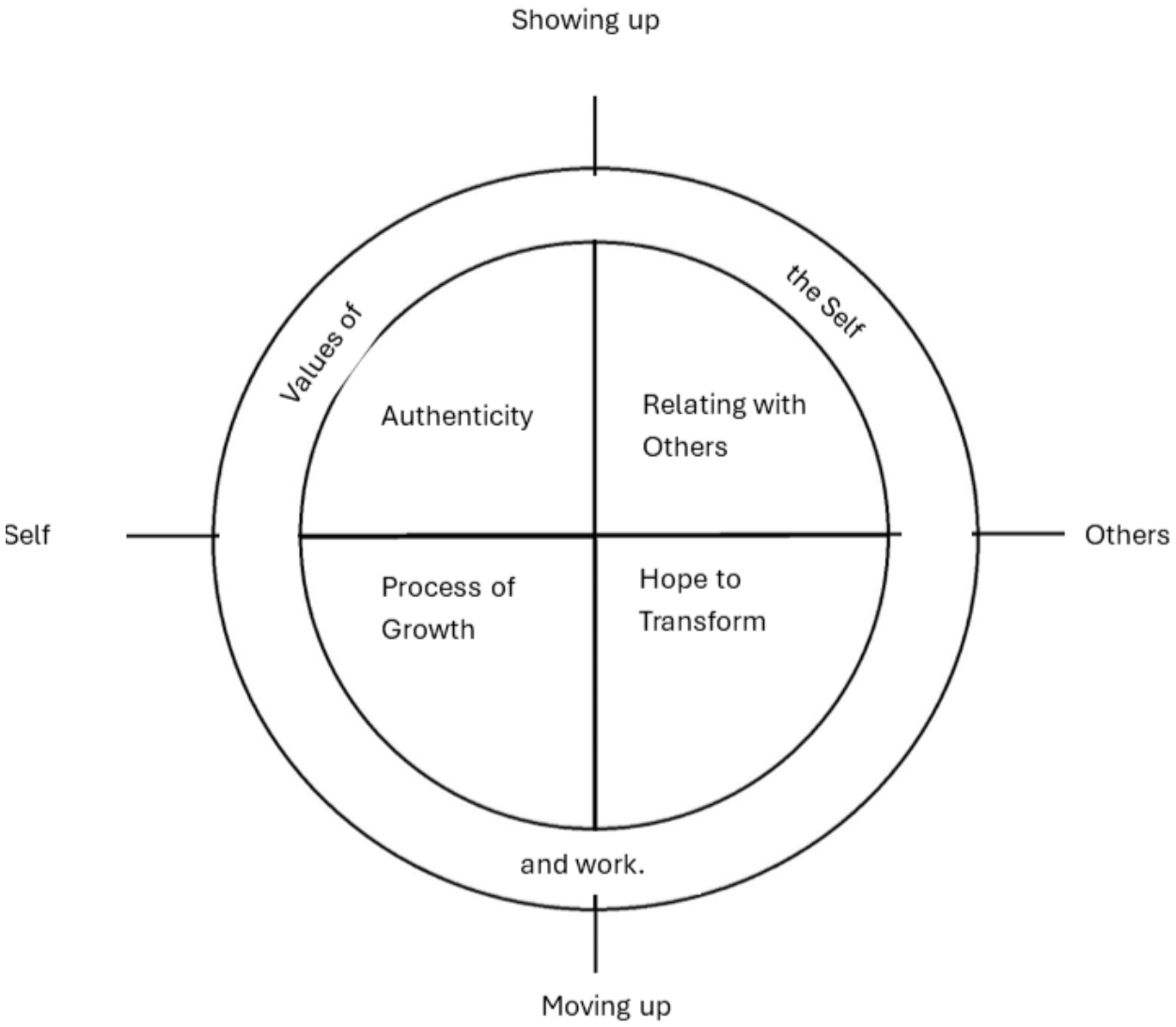
Adaptations of the framework of meaningful (Lips-Wiersma et. al 2012).




1. I drew out this framework to better understand the data in relation to the theoretical framework. Initially, the core four dimensions were observed arising in relation to the axially-coded data. The outer edge and resonance aspects came in as subsequent reflections. The internal/external aspirations and the internal/external realizations still followed the Berthoin Antal et al. (2018, p.376) view of meaningfulness.



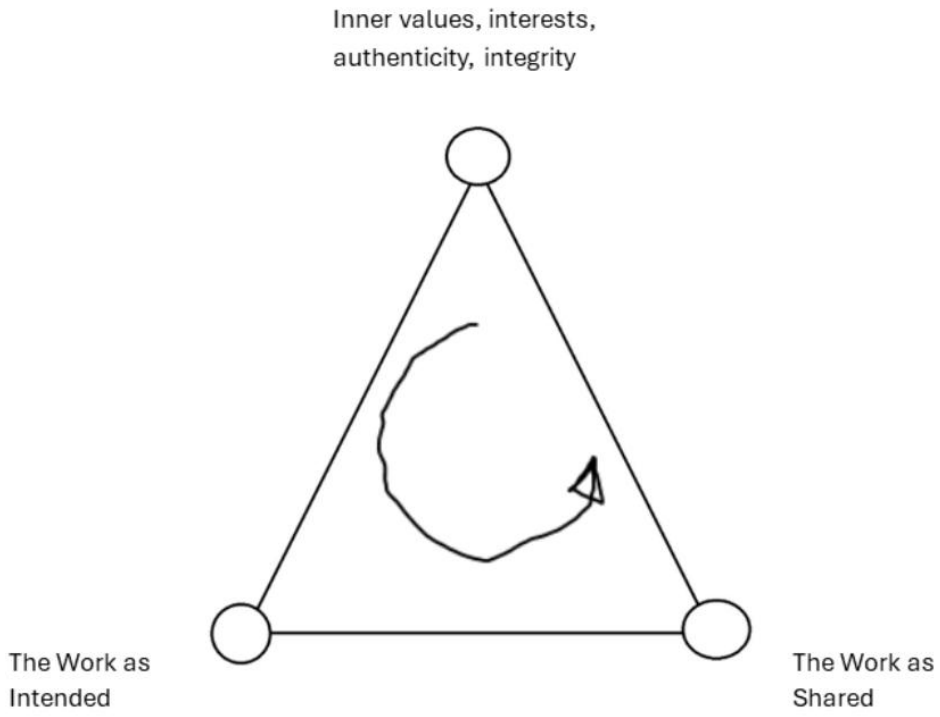

2. As I continued to analyze the data, I re-adapted the framework to include any new connections and patterns I recognized in the thematic analysis. In this adaptation, I centered the artistic research practice, and positioned it in between the self and the audience. Here I recognized the I drew out this framework to better understand the data in relation to the theoretical framework. Initially, the core four dimensions were observed arising in relation to the axially-coded data. The outer edge and resonance aspects came in as subsequent reflections.



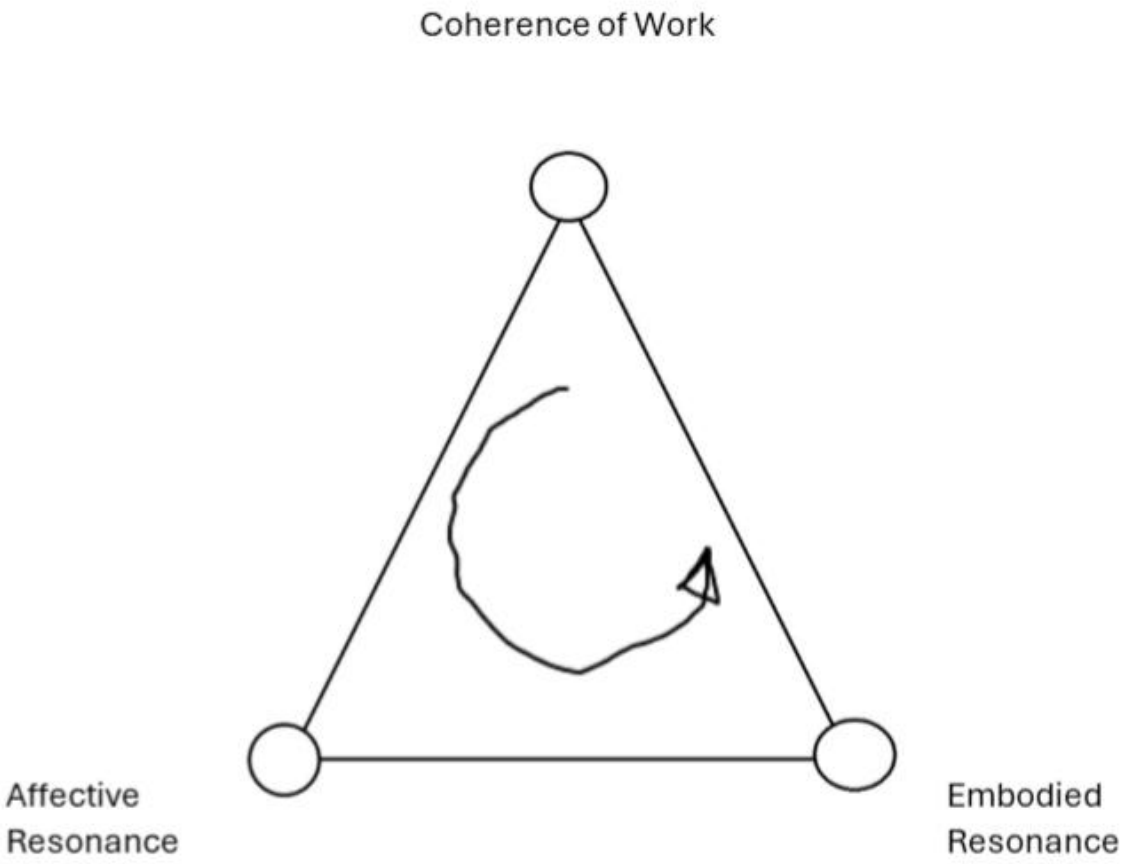

3. The final version of my adapted framework of meaningful work as indicating value in artistic (research) work. It is possible to notice that the two left quadrants have been inversed – I did this shortly before creating this version, to reflect the original framework of meaningful work. Given that the division between reflection and doing are not rigid in artistic research, the initial inversion of the two poles (being and doing) was a conscious choice, aimed to challenge my understanding of the topic and the themes at hand.

# Appendix D

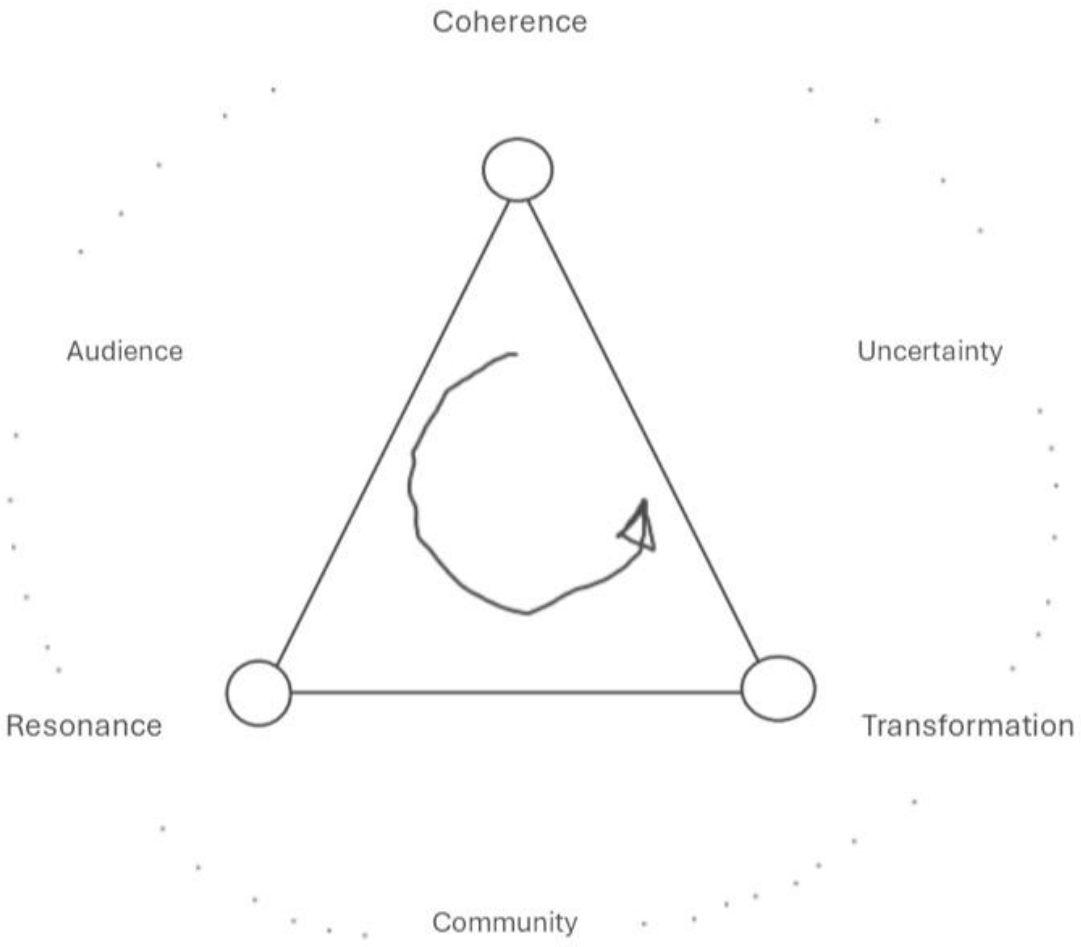
1. Visual diagram depicting how the sense of coherence is recognized.



2.Visual diagram depicting the sense of Generativity / Transformation.



3. Visual diagram depicting the cultivation of meaningful work in and through artistic research.



# Appendix E

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

| | |
|---|---|
| Project Title and version | Artist researchers: Experiencing meaningfulness in uncertain professional contexts |
| Name of Principal Investigator | Oana-Beatrice Popescu |
| Name of Organisation | Erasmus University Rotterdam – Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication. |
| Purpose of the Study | This research is being conducted by Oana-Beatrice Popescu. I am inviting you to participate in this research project about how artist/researchers experience and create meaningfulness through their practice. The purpose of this research project is to gain insight into how artist/researchers pursue their work and present it in ways that feel meaningful to them. In the same time, this study also considers how artist/researchers relate to their environment and to their material practice as tools in creating meaningful work, investigating how they position themselves within these processes. |
| Procedures | You will participate in an interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, with breaks taken whenever you require. You will be asked questions about your artistic/research practice: what you do, how your work has developed, and when/how/where you experience your work as meaningful.<br>Sample questions include: “Can you tell me about your current practice and what drives it?” and “When is the last time you thought your work is meaningful?”<br><br>You must be at least 18 years old to undergo this interview. |
| Potential and anti-cipated Risks and Discomforts | There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Potential Benefits | Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. As a result of participating you may find value in reflecting on your practice and you may better understand the processes through which you generate and share meaning in/through/with your work.<br>The broader goal of this research is to shine a light on how artist/researchers construct meaningfulness through their practice, and how that process is shaped by (or unfolds within) current professional and institutional landscapes. |
| Sharing the results | This thesis will only be published in the context of the university. You may request the findings of this research after the 13th of June 2025, when the assignment has been submitted in order to fulfill the Arts, Culture and Society Master course. |
| Confidentiality | Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request.<br><br>As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researchers password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study. |
| Right to Withdraw and Questions | Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.<br><br>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator:<br><br>Oana-Beatrice Popescu, +31685095284<br>oana.beatrice.popescu@outlook.com |

<table>
<tr><td>Statement of Consent</td><td colspan="2">Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.<br><br>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Audio recording<br>(if applicable)</td><td colspan="2">I consent to have my interview audio recorded<br>☐ yes<br>☐ no</td></tr>
<tr><td>Secondary use<br>(if applicable)</td><td colspan="2">I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis<br>☐ yes<br>☐ no</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Signature and Date</td><td>NAME PARTICIPANT</td><td>NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR<br>Oana-Beatrice Popescu</td></tr>
<tr><td>SIGNATURE</td><td>SIGNATURE</td></tr>
<tr><td>DATE</td><td>DATE</td></tr>
</table>

# Apendix F

Code tree