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# From an Embodied Understanding to Ethical Considerations during Creative Practice

## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper discusses material-based creative processes in the context of higher education. The focus is on the ethical aspects related to material considerations during the iterative phases of personal projects. We explore how personal feelings and an embodied understanding of the material world influence decisions on how and why we engage with different materials during creative processes. Recent trends in material-based research aim to explore the relationships between humans and materials, examining them as equal members in research and thus challenging the top-down perception of materials as mere resources for human needs. However, this kind of approach to research and material-based creative practices requires ethical considerations that reach not only the human but also the non-human world. In this paper, we open this discussion by examining design students' creative processes, which unfold an understanding of ethics in relation to non-humans. We build on data consisting of documentation, reflections and outcomes derived from the creative processes of four MA-level students and discuss a number of complementing ethical guidelines for art, culture and earth systems. The paper uses 'ethically disturbing moments' as an analytical tool for looking into students' material choices in their creative processes. The four selected processes open up a personal connection to materials that results in ethical considerations during the creative practice and thus reveal the need for discussing material-focused ethics in the context of craft, design and art education. Personal aspects related to materials are discussed as embodied understanding and are seen to affect the ethics of engaging with materials.*

## **Keywords:**

Creative processes, ethics, design education, material-based practices, ethically disturbing moments.

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a growing interest in artistic research that recognises the importance of acknowledging and gaining a better understanding of the non-human world to establish a sustainable relationship between humans and the environment. From this perspective, there is a need to horizontalise the stance between the human and the material worlds (Aktaş, 2020; Falin, 2022; Fredriksen & Groth, 2022; Mäkelä & Aktaş, 2022). However, from the perspective of research ethics, the current ethical guidelines (e.g. Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK], 2019) focus their attention on the human participants, while somewhat overlooking the dimension of interactions within the more-than-human world.

In the European (All European Academies [ALLEA], 2023) code of conduct, the consideration of ethics beyond the human is incorporated in one of the fundamental principles of research integrity. Research is expected to be carried out with ‘Respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage and the environment’ (p. 5). In practical terms, this translates into observing legal and ethical compliance with the code of conduct and avoiding unnecessary harm. Additionally, the recently published Ethical Guidelines for the Art and Culture Sector (Forum Artis, 2023) in Finland are built on the principle of responsibility for society, people and nature, which requires consideration of the ecological, social, economic and cultural impacts of art. This demands that the artist aim to utilise the most ecological solutions possible. In the context of ceramic art and practice, a connection to the larger framework of geoethics (Di Capua & Peppoloni, 2019) can be recognised in the attempt to raise ethical awareness related to the use of geo-resources.

Although the more-than-human is explicitly present in the published ethical principles, the consequences of these principles for material-based creative practices and research remain unclear. As the ethical principles for respect, responsibility, care and avoidance of harm have not been clearly processed into practical guidelines, a gap exists within environmental and material-focused research regarding the role that personal and individual decisions play in whether to consider ethical aspects within material-based research. When and if such ethical evaluations are conducted, they often remain confined to the level of personal preferences and opinions.

In order to investigate the matter of material-related ethics, this paper discusses a university course, Personal Exploration, and particularly four student processes that unveil issues related to ethical considerations on material-based creative processes. The course has been discussed previously from different perspectives in several publications (Groth & Mäkelä, 2016; Kosonen & Mäkelä, 2012; Laamanen et al., 2023; Mäkelä & Löytönen, 2017). One recent publication discusses how the course integrates the natural surroundings in the learning environment and actively shapes students’ creative experiences (Mäkelä & Aktaş, 2023).

In this paper, the analytical focus is on the students’ material choices throughout the creative processes and especially on the aspects that question the ethics of engaging with materials. These personal evaluations are considered to build on the embodied understanding that ‘constitutes our most basic way of being and engaging with our surroundings’ (Johnson, 2015, p. 1). Students discuss their personal connections to materials, which reveal an embodied understanding that displays the ethical dimension of particular materials. The overall discussions reflect the need for a better understanding of material-related ethics within higher education in design and art schools.

### **Ethics in relation to working with the environment**

During the past decade, artistic practices and the field of artistic research have increasingly started to evolve from the typical human-centred views and acknowledge the Anthropocene as our planet’s current state (Arlander & Elo, 2017). This is evident in research that focuses on the non-human world and seeks more sustainable approaches to human actions and our integration within the world (Latva-Somppi et al., 2021; Lindström & Ståhl, 2020; Rynning, 2023). The imbalance caused by humans perceiving the world from an elevated standpoint rather than recognising their interdependence can be rectified through a better understanding of materialities. This includes a more nuanced understanding of ourselves as matter, wherein our bodies constitute ‘a nested set of microbiomes’ (Bennett, 2010, pp. 112–113) instead of being confined to the mere physical limits of our bodies.

As the discussions aim to acknowledge human beings as part of their surroundings, there has been an increase in ethical discussions that extend beyond the human sphere. In her doctoral dissertation, Finnish performance artist and educator Tuija Kokkonen (2017) defined the idea of ‘weak action’ as the method of her artistic research. Weak action is defined as an ethical attitude that allows one to perceive soft voices and signals while paying attention to the present moment (p. 85). By ethics, she refers to an attitude that takes into consideration other voices and holds space for others, human and non-human alike (p. 86). In this context, the basic foundation of ethics—do no harm—takes on another dimension in which action allows others to flourish; it is a bettering approach instead of settling for doing no harm.

When it comes to research recognising the ‘uncomfortable ethical encounter [...] with multiple materialities’ (Kinnunen & Valtonen, 2017, p. 6), recent research has drawn inspiration regarding ethical considerations from *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in the More than Human Worlds* by the feminist science and technology studies scholar María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). An ‘uncomfortable ethical encounter’ refers to an unexpected situation in which one has to make a choice based on a personal ethical evaluation. Kinnunen and Valtonen (2017) also introduced the concept of ‘living ethics’ while bringing together various discussions that aim ‘to develop ethics that decenter human’ (Kinnunen & Valtonen, 2017, p. 7). The authors proposed that the key to detaching from the human-centric ways of thinking about ethics can be found in the often intricate corporeal encounters of living and thinking together with the more-than-human by being ‘open to the ethical potentialities’ of these ‘disturbing moments’ (Kinnunen & Valtonen, 2017, p. 8). In this paper, we utilise the idea of ethically disturbing moments as an analytical tool when we examine the descriptions extracted from students’ material processes.

## METHOD

Personal Exploration is a course offered for master-level students at Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture. The course is a seven-week intensive course that focuses on supporting and nourishing explorative work with varied materials and techniques. One of the methods used extensively in the course is reflective writing, which happens in three formats: the students keep a personal diary, report their progress to teachers in their weekly reflections and reflect on their learning outcomes and the overall creative process in their final reflection. The material produced was used as data for this paper. Although the course emphasises the importance of documentation during creative processes, the guiding pedagogy relies on studio work and material exploration. The main objective of the course, which relies on material work, is the self-management of creative processes. Two of the authors became very close to the students and their processes during teaching. This level of closeness is understood as at-home ethnography (Alvesson, 2009; Mäkelä & Löytönen, 2017) and part of the analytical reading of the students’ processes.

In 2023, the course took students north to Inari in Lapland, Finland. The journey took place during the wintertime, right after the polar night (Kaamos) ended. The selected theme for the course was ‘Local’. The students had the freedom to interpret the theme from their personal perspectives, which resulted in their own creative processes. The inspirational journey affected the understanding of the theme, as well as the discussions and lectures during the journey. One of the lectures was given by Sámi craft and design teacher Samuel Valkeapää. His talk was about Duodji, a Sámi craft (see more in Gaski & Guttorm, 2022) and the historical aspect of Sámi culture and the Sámi way of living as survival in nature. Being in the north, understanding current discussions of indigenous peoples’ rights and the scarcity of materials around us affected the students’ discussions involving materials.

The data used for this paper were collected from four students, who, through their reflections on the choice of materials, provided insights into and developed rich processes around the associated materialities. All students were asked for their consent to participate in the research and signed informed consent forms, granting permission for the use of their creative processes and produced materials for research purposes.

## STUDENTS' MATERIAL PROCESSES

In this section, we will present four students' creative processes developed during the course. The focus is on material choices and personal considerations throughout their creative processes.

### Harvey Shaw

One of the students' creative processes was influenced by two locations. Harvey Shaw also travelled to Marrakech after our journey to Inari (Figure 1). In both locations, he found a strong connection with leather in his creative process. In his final reflection, Harvey is contemplating his interest in materials:

It's no secret that I have a fascination with materials, and so I knew it would be a great way to interact with the locality of these places if I found a material that shared common ancestry with the two places. Leather filled that role. (Harvey's final reflections, 2023)

In his reflections, he felt that extracting leather from its origins was unethical and revolting. He continued reflecting on the choice of materials, deeming it insufficient to consider the material's potential in the design; one must also consider the context of the material, resulting in a decision on whether using it is the right choice or not.



**FIGURE 1.** Two very different locations connected by one material: leather. One of the students' choice of material revealed cultural connections with the place of origin, as well the consideration of feelings towards the material itself. Images: Harvey Shaw, 2023. Left: Marrakech, Morocco; right: Inari, Finland.

After a reading group session during the course, Harvey reflected on one of the readings, which was Tim Ingold's (2013) *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. In this work, Ingold discusses the flow of materials (p. 21), introducing the idea that there is a process inherent to all materials and things: materials have a life before and one after being shaped by a maker. As humans, we take part in these material flows when we are working with them and creating objects (Aktaş, 2020).

Harvey decided to continue working with leather and accepted all the negative and positive feelings that came with the material. The result of his work was to try to connect his reactions towards the material by adding words such as ‘tradition is’ and ‘veganism is’ to provoke positive and negative associations with the material (Figure 2).



**FIGURE 2.** Harvey decided to work with leather and add messages that communicated material-related aspects. Image: Harvey Shaw, 2023.

### **Jule Timm**

Jule Timm wanted to work with human teeth. Her reflection on the topic ‘local’ was based on the thinking that the human body is the closest reference point when feeling local. At the beginning, she wanted to pursue real human teeth and even visited a dentist asking for access to removed teeth. During her process, she noticed that the tooth as a material is perceived differently depending upon whether it is in its place within the human mouth or removed from the mouth. A similar change in perception also applies to human hair and nails. In her reflection, Jule compared these human materials to animal skin, which is culturally considered normal.

As an outcome of her process, Jule created a brush with porcelain teeth and a video artwork. With her work entitled ‘Somatotopic Landscapes’, she contested the current understanding of our human bodies in relation to the world (Figure 3).





FIGURE 3. Jule's final work in which she used porcelain teeth in substitution for human teeth. Images: Jule Timm, 2023.

### Samanta Kajènaitè

Samanta Kajènaitè began her process by asking how one becomes more connected to nature in our modern world. The Finnish environment was new to her, and she felt that she had lost her 'scale', which she regarded as her main tool for understanding her surroundings. From the beginning of her journey, she began walking to surround herself with nature, seeking locations and measuring what she had discovered using her body as a measuring tool. Her intention was to reach out towards nature and contest whether she was able to extend her body (Figure 4). In the end, the tool she created during the journey became an extension of her body through which she was able to relate with and connect to nature (Figure 5). In her final reflection, she asked:

Can I extend my body? Can I become a part of the forest by every walk? I had a feeling that every time I got closer... My body is getting used to the forest, spaces, materials, and scales... The rock is the length of my 2 bodies, and lichen becomes a part of my skin. Focusing on the smallest details helped me to realize how small and how big I am. I contain multitudes—significant experiences, spaces, forest textures, and creatures. (Samanta's final reflections, 2023)

In her final reflection, she also noted that, in fact, her material choices were also explorations into materialities:

I've never thought that holding a pebble could make you think about the material and its origin. Holding a piece of reindeer bone made me think a lot. It's mostly about the process you have to go through before having this bone in your hands. (Samanta's final reflections, 2023)

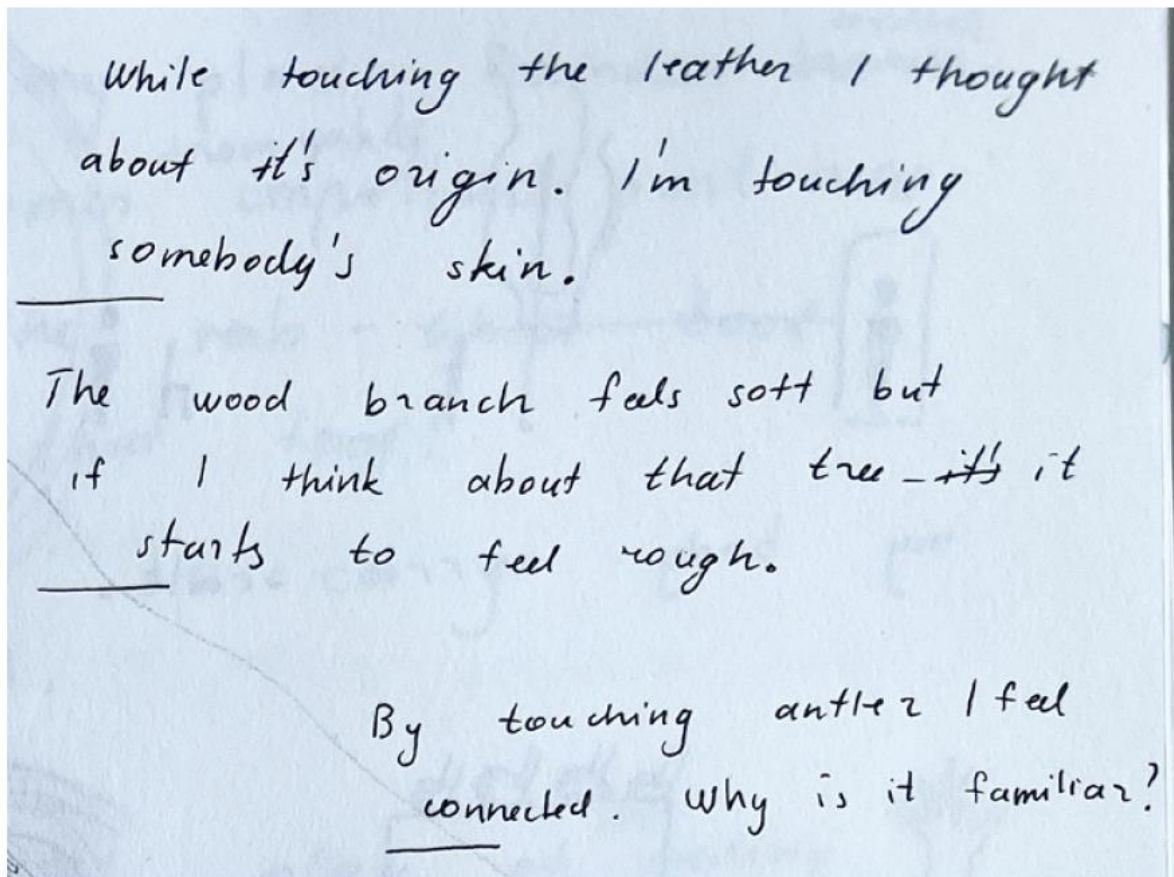


FIGURE 4. A snippet from Samanta's diary notes in which she explored materials and feelings. Image: Samanta Kajėnaitė, 2023.

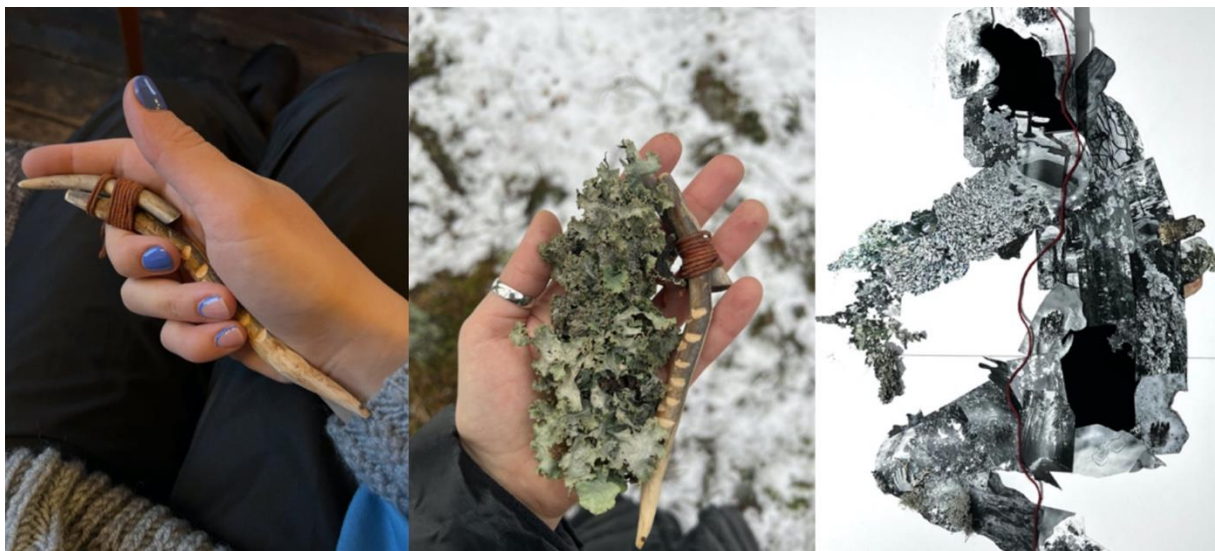


FIGURE 5. Samanta's explorative process using natural materials. Samanta created a tool for exploring her bodily scale (image on the left). She explored the found natural materials, and at the end (image on the right), she made an installation consisting of a human figure created from the found materials and images and videos taken during her walks. Images: Samanta Kajėnaitė, 2023.

## Fanny Kajela

In Lapland, Fanny Kajela encountered the prospect of using reindeer bone as a material for her creative process. Although the material made her feel uneasy, she also wanted to try to face the challenge of working with animal bones:

It felt like a call to try and face this difficult topic that I had been avoiding. When I went to see the materials laid out on the table, I had quite a strong reaction to them; I got quite emotional seeing different parts of different animals laid out for us to use and shape into something new. I was saddened by the sight but couldn't quite look away. I kept thinking how is this right, who am I to use these animal parts? How could I justify it? (Fanny's final reflections, 2023)

During her process, she continued to reflect on the right to use a material that originated from an animal. She reflected on the cultural connections with reindeer bone as a material for Duodji but, at the same time, questioned whether she, as a non-Sámi person, would have any right to use it for her own purposes.

During the journey, an exercise prompted the students to make a tool for themselves. Fanny decided to try to work with reindeer bone. She ended up not manipulating a found piece of reindeer jawbone but instead used it as such and introduced it to the group as a tool for conversation.

From the initial material reflections, her creative process concentrated on her sorrow for the struggle of different animal species in the Anthropocene. Her final work was a voicemail to a bird that was forced to move further north to find better living conditions (Figure 6).



**FIGURE 6.** In Fanny's final work 'We Could Have Been Neighbours', the main artwork was a voice message for a bird to which she never got to live close (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3v5UpSsdNY&t=2s>). Image: Fanny Kajela, 2023.



## Fanny's voice message to a bird:

Hey, I called, but you didn't answer  
 I heard that you left  
 I'm sorry that we didn't get to meet  
 I hope you're okay now that you've moved  
 I heard it's much nicer up in the north  
 Much cooler, better for you  
 I'm sorry, by the way, for wrecking your home.  
 We made it too warm for you  
 We cut down your forests and destroyed your swamps  
 We pushed you out  
 We weren't thinking of you, just us, like always  
 I don't think you'd recognise this place as your own, you know  
 I wish I could've seen you fly here  
 It would have been good  
 It's not the same.

**FINDINGS**

For this investigation, the students' creative processes were individually analysed, and selected excerpts were presented to illustrate the themes covered by the material. The idea of ethically disturbing moments proved to be a useful conceptual tool for identifying the potentially meaningful aspects of ethical considerations. The initial findings are presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1.** The students' material processes were analysed, from choosing the materials to the realisation of the final work.

Student	REASONING	MATERIAL CHOICE	PERSONAL CONNECTIONS	DISTURBING ASPECTS	END RESULTS
<i>Harvey</i>	Strong connection to the places he visited during the course	Leather	Traditional use within cultures, existing connections through tradition	As the skin of an animal, it can also be perceived as revolting and provide a compelling reason not to use it	He worked with the material aspects—both negative and positive—to further communicate with the audience.
<i>Jule</i>	Power in material when it is authentic	Human teeth; later, porcelain teeth	She connected to the theme 'Local' through her own body.	Teeth can be perceived as dirty/hazardous materials when they are removed from a person's mouth.	She created porcelain teeth to substitute the intended original material
<i>Samanta</i>	Extending herself towards nature, connecting to nature	Reindeer bone, lichen, bark	She felt connected by touching natural materials	She felt that she was losing her 'scale' in the new environment.	A collage of different materials and images
<i>Fanny</i>	Uncomfortable working with materials that originated from animals or were connected to cultures/places other than those to which she felt she belonged	Voice/sound	She found connection when she became comfortable exploring the forests independently, outside the existing paths.	She felt lost in the material and insecure about giving up control.	An installation consisting of a voicemail for a bird to which she never got to live close, as well as a wooden birdhouse and sound technology

The analysis is mainly textual, and it is based on the weekly and final reflections that the students wrote during and after completing the course. In addition, two of the authors partially used their understanding gained as teachers in the course when following the general flow and discussions during the course.

The analysis shows that in addition to finding connections with possible materials for their work, the students also encountered intricate situations in which they had to either accept the uncomfortable ethical aspects related to the materials or decide whether or not to engage with working with the materials.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper, ethical considerations are not focused on the dilemma of producing more goods in a world that has already exceeded its limits to sustain the current style of human living. Instead, we have attempted to illustrate the role of personal judgement and embodied, felt aspects when selecting and engaging with certain materials within higher education and material-based creative practices.

Following Kinnunen and Valtonen (2017), we suggest that an analytical focus on the uncomfortable ethical encounters with materials in creative practices could serve as a fruitful platform for a more nuanced discussion of material-focused ethics in the context of craft, design and art education.

Reflecting on ethical considerations beyond research, we also propose that within higher education, there is a need to systematise the ethical aspects when it comes to working with materialities. This ethical consideration should be reflected beyond simply personal preferences and also be discussed in the wider understanding of different dimensions that might impact material ethics. Consideration should also be given to the origins and ways of harvesting materials as resources.

Considering material flows, the ethical consideration seems even more relevant, and a more sustainable direction could be offered when considering the choice of materials in a sustainable way. At the very core of the ethical consideration is the question of whether it is ethical even to begin working with a material.

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