



# Tangentiality

## Passing Relations in the Arts, Literature, Music, and Performance

International Conference at the University of Copenhagen  
Organization and Concept: Stefanie Heine & Holger Schulze

A line touching a circle at only one point is called a tangent. Such a punctual, momentary, and passing encounter constitutes a decisive, formative relationship which differs substantially from the now proverbial existential entanglement or embodiment. Seeking to rethink relationality today, we want to trace *tangential relations* in art, design, literature, music and sound art, and the performing arts.

*Tangentiality* accounts for potentially ongoing approximate interactions (as in calculus) as well as for separation, transitoriness, loss and finitude (as in “divergent, erratic”). As a concept, it allows us to think relations of a unique kind: a coexistence of beings and things in the world as tangential rather than entangled does not deny the interdependence between human and non-human entities. At the same time, tangential relations leave entities as separated as they are connected. This ambiguity of touch and let go, of being together-apart, allows space for autonomy, singularity, discreteness, individual freedom.

Tangentiality implies “merely touching”: a gift of inattention, of being distracted or drifting. Tangentiality can ensure that one does not feel left alone, but it is not too intrusive. Indifferent gazes. Distant, muffled listening. Erratic reading. A civilized distance?

A tangential relation exists when a tool or piece of hardware is infrequently used, yet retains a crucial importance in one’s life. It prevails when a certain space or landscape is only encountered rarely, at certain times, but these encounters still play an important role in the life of this traveler. When we momentarily collide with something unknown, unfamiliar, which unsettles us and leaves an impact, in passing. Even if the encounter with a work of art, a piece of music, or a literary text is merely incidental, it can constitute a crucial relation. Needless to say, interpersonal or interspecies relations can also take the form of tangentiality. What about a tangential relation to the ecosystems we are involved in—a potentially less intrusive, less appropriative engagement with nature, which sometimes might best be left alone?

The concept of tangentiality offers a welcome refinement of the broad and often inaccurate use of notions of entanglement to describe and interpret all sorts of relationships with entities, beings and things in this world. While *entanglement* (e.g. Barad) and the related concept of *kinship* (e.g. Haraway) promote an intensive and all-encompassing condition, implying even some sort of genealogical effect on the person, the concept of tangentiality allows to focus more on punctual, highly serendipitous or even erratic and completely inconsistent effects. This relation is neither ontological nor existential; it creates bonds of cohesion that can be strong or frail, might last or be cut.

As researchers, we, the organizers, are intrigued and inspired by these qualities of tangentiality, which allow us to describe relations without having to return to the concept of entanglement. With this conference, we invite you to think with us, to experiment with us, to make a taste test: how can you use such a concept of tangentiality in your field of research? How might it support you in exploring, questioning, articulating particularly punctual, fleeting, or transitory relationships? How may it help you think a notion of ongoingness marked by discontinuity, or a notion of autonomy that is compatible with co-dependence? How might your research and academic discussions you are participating in be transformed, developed, and made more precise if the concept of tangentiality were to enter it?

*Abstract length:*

**400 words maximum** (excluding bibliography)

*Deadline:*

**Friday, December 8, 2023**

*Feedback on abstracts:*

Friday, February 9, 2024

*Conference dates:*

**Wednesday and Thursday, October 16 & 17, 2024**

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### *Background and Relevant Sources*

Tangentiality is a new concept we want to put to the test – it has been tentatively developed, with a much narrower focus, by Stefanie Heine in *Tangential Terrains: Cormac McCarthy's Geoaesthetics*. Under review at the University of Nevada Press.

We were inspired by Eva Haifa Giraud's *What Comes after Entanglement? Activism, Anthropocentrism, and an Ethics of Exclusion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019) and John Paul Ricco's work, for example, "Sex and Exclusion," *Sex and the Pandemic*, ed. Ricky Varghese (Regina: University of Regina Press, forthcoming 2024).