

Border Threads

How Ethical Dilemmas of User Involvement in Art Become a Driving Force for Developing Artistic Practice

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Abstract

The art project Border Threads was based on mobilising a collaborative art community across international borders within a time frame of five months. The collaborative community had subcommunities and individual participants in five countries. In addition, individuals participated at three open workshops in Oslo. Many among these participants were refugees in exile in Syria, Lebanon, Greece and Turkey.

This article discusses how artistic intentions and ethical issues of user involvement in art constitute a driving force for the methods used in the project Border Threads, a collaborative artwork in the form of a textile tapestry consisting of more than 300 individual textile artworks reflecting the participants thoughts about borders. Working with subcommunities encompassing school classes in Norway and Syria, a women's

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collective in Turkey, a network of women in Lebanon, and a group of women in a refugee camp in Greece, the project addresses questions about community relations, representation of others, and about contributing to something meaningful when working with participants in a collaborative art project. Discussions of these questions are based on theory from various disciplines, mostly art theory, and evolve around topics such as artistic intention, self-reflection, community building, time, participant payment, and ethics in general.

The article describes how using methods, experience and existing networks from an interdisciplinary background within art, ethnography, social sciences, innovation, welfare services and activism was important throughout the project. Following the discussion and a retrospective reflection on the process, some proposals are outlined for further development of the Border Threads project.

Keywords: methodology, practice-led research, user involvement in art, ethical dilemmas

Introduction

Border Threads is a collaborative art project across international borders in which participants from Norway, Syria, Lebanon, Greece and Turkey co-produce a textile tapestry on the topic of borders. All the participants outside of Norway are refugees living in exile and together with the Norwegian participants they form the Border Threads *community*. The construction of the community was done mobilizing already existing social communities in the five countries.

The artistic intention of Border Threads is to create a symbolic artwork that reflects a sense of human togetherness across and despite of borders, focusing on the relations between different communities and people. This is reflected in the name Border Threads, alluding to the threads of human relations. The project is an attempt to illuminate the political, cultural and mental boundaries and borders between people by organising a co-producing community which in itself can be seen as an attempt to transcend these borders. Both the art object and the art process have strong symbolic value. The artwork consists of more than 300 artworks made by 150 individuals. The project was initiated after signing up as a co-producer in the Migrant

Car project organised by osloBIENNALEN², which had set a time frame from March 2019 until August 2019.

The project is founded on a framework of democratic and activist– artistic intentions aiming at peer cooperation and horizontal user involvement. Parts of the discussion is about quality of the community relations, and the question of if whether the artistic intentions of equality may be problematic in itself. The discussion focuses on the involvement of the already existing social communities of refugees living in exile in Turkey, Lebanon, Syria and Greece as partners and subcommunities in the project community. Although Border Threads only lasted for five months, the project bears many similarities to a socially engaged art project due to the tight cooperation with subcommunities already engaged in long-term social work with refugees (Helguera, 2011). The subcommunities were invited through my existing network of people involved in solidarity work for refugees.

The subcommunities participating in Border Threads were³:

- Turkey: A craft collective of Syrian women in exile living in the city of Mersin. They were already producing and selling their crocheted products in Norway

² osloBIENNALEN was a biennial art programme in Oslo. One of the projects, The *Migrant Car*, was a collaborative project between Ed D'Souza and students from Oslo Metropolitan University and the Oslo Academy of the Arts. From May to August 2019, a reconstructed car was moved around Oslo and hosted by students contributing with individual artistic contributions. osloBIENNALEN contributed NOK 15,000 to one of these projects, Border Threads. See <https://mcprojects.blog/> and <https://www.oslobiennalen.no/project/migrant-car/>.

³ More about the project partners:

- *Solidaritetsnøster*, solidarity organisation cooperating with Syrian women in exile in Turkey and Lebanon: <https://www.facebook.com/solidaritetsnoster/>
- *Skoler på flukt*: <http://solfridraknes.no/skolepaflukt/>
- *Noah's Ark Catering*, also working with social sustainability projects in Syria : https://www.facebook.com/Noahs.Ark.Catering/?ref=page_internal
- *Drop in the Ocean*, Norwegian NGO working with refugees in Greece, Croatia and Poland: <https://www.drapenihavet.no/en/a-drop-in-the-ocean/>

through the organisation *Solidaritetsnøster* led by *Guri Vestad*. The collective in Turkey is run by two female teachers.

- Lebanon: A local coordinator from Syria mobilised her network of family and friends living in exile in a refugee camp in a small town in the Beqaa Valley. She works as a school principal and has been engaged in various sustainability projects for refugees in cooperation with *Solfrid Raknes*, the Norwegian contact person.
- Syria: A school class for internal refugee children in the city of Tartus, run by the family of *Daniel Elhomsy*, himself a former Syrian refugee who started his own company working with sustainability projects, food culture and catering in Norway.
- Norway:
 - A school class from Asker participated in one workshop at the Intercultural Museum in Oslo.
 - Friends and volunteers took part in three workshops in Oslo.
- Greece: Thirty women from several Middle Eastern countries living in a refugee camp in *Skaramangas*, outside Athens, attended two workshops in the camp. The women were part of a group that used to attend a workshop for handicrafts run by the NGO *Drop in the Ocean*.

The names of the local coordinators in Lebanon and Turkey are not disclosed due to the need for anonymity.

I am a Norwegian woman living in Oslo, Norway. I have an interdisciplinary background, with artistic practice expanded by methods and knowledge from a variety of fields. In addition to art, I have a background in social sciences, anthropology, art-based ethnography, public welfare and social service development, user involvement in innovation work, counselling work and social programming. As an artist and activist, I have experience from solidarity work for refugees in Norway.

I have worked with user involvement in art and with topics such as human rights and the refugee situation since 2016. Working with user involvement in art, and especially with participants deprived of basic human rights, raises ethical dilemmas. For instance, the constant doubt about the if participation is perceived as meaningful by

the participants or if I'm establishing friendly relations with individuals on "false" premises. The work triggers a feeling of uncomfortableness about one's own position as a privileged person working artistically with other peoples' vulnerabilities or pain; feelings which in themselves become a driving force for developing artistic practice. In order to investigate these ethical dilemmas, I seek out uncomfortable situations to search for new meaning and knowledge.

Field notes from a workshop in Skaramangas refugee camp, July 2019:



Figure 1. Skaramangas refugee camp, Athens, Greece. Photo: Camilla Dahl

Skaramangas refugee camp is situated on the docks of the Elefsina Bay outside of Athens. In 2019 the camp was inhabited by approximately 2,200 people, mostly from Syria, Kurdistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. Thirty women took part in the workshop, making individual artworks reflecting different stories. One woman made a floral artwork. This is her story about hope and expectations:

I was in Afghanistan, and I couldn't do anything, the dark is in Afghanistan. I travelled the mountains to come over here, it was war. I thought about where I'm going, I thought there were flowers and no war. I came with a lot of hope and dreams, like what I am drawing, the flower, and the trees. It's fine for us now, but I want more, I want my life to be free always. I want it to be like the flowers I draw, I like to be free.



Figure 2. Floral artwork made by a participant in Greece. (Photo: Camilla Dahl)

The woman starts to cry when she talks. The rest of the women start to cry, and I start to cry as well. We sit there together, crying. All I can do is listen and hold her hand in sympathy. It's a feeling of togetherness, of solidarity. But there is also another feeling, a feeling of uncomfortableness and ambivalence.

I feel solidarity and empathy. We are a community, working together, doing something good. At the same time, in this situation of human togetherness, the women are experiencing something together which I'm not a part of. I'm a privileged stranger visiting the camp to do fieldwork for a few hours and can leave when I want to. The same old ethical dilemma appears: is it rights to make art about other peoples' pain?

In this article I discuss how experiences of ethical dilemmas of user involvement in art become a driving force for the methods used and developed in Border Threads. The underlying questions are:

1. How to work artistically in an ethically correct manner with political topics such as the refugee crisis and violation of human rights, together with people who are personally affected by these politics.
2. How to work with these topics as an artist without ending up just promoting my own career.

3. How to contribute to something meaningful for the involved participants good.

This article discusses how the quest for a more ethical artistic practice when involving and cooperating with people deprived of human rights both initiates and contributes to the evolvement of a practice-led artistic method. The method evolves as a continuous process, where theoretical discussions and ethical reflections made in retrospect also contribute to the practice.

The discussion focuses on the relations with and involvement of the subcommunities in Turkey, Lebanon, Syria and Greece. For reasons of anonymity, names and photos of participants in this text are scarce, and the discussion must be regarded as my reflections on these experiences.

Methodological perspectives and initial ethical considerations

In qualitative research, the researcher must bear in mind the asymmetrical power relations that may exist between the researcher and the informants during research interviews and the researcher's power to analyse, interpret and present the research results from her perspective. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 52). Vulnerability is unequally distributed among people, and it is the researcher's responsibility to take the informants' vulnerability into account (Hummelvoll, 2010, p. 38).

When working with user involvement in art, the quality and the characteristics of the relation between the artist and the participants becomes important (Bourriaud, 2002). The asymmetrical relation between researcher and informant bears a resemblance to the relations within a participatory art project. To make art is about form making and about searching for meaning and possibilities. In this search for meaning, user-involving art processes also come with the risk of doing harm, and ethical considerations, self-reflection and solutions must be embedded in every phase of the artistic process (Østern, 2017).

In the search for methodologies and theories concerning the risk of doing harm, I look to Pablo Helguera. According to Helguera, artists who work with non-artists and people from various backgrounds have a lot to learn about working interdisciplinarily and using tools and methods from disciplines such as pedagogy, ethnography and design (Helguera, 2011, p. X). Knowledge from ethnography may be used to frame the discussion of the artistic practice, and was applied as a research method for the project when doing fieldwork and interviews in Lebanon and Greece.

Ethnographic methods are used to collect and analyse data about cultural conditions using qualitative tools such as interviews, observations and more sensory or visual methods such as filming, drawing, photography, making field notes and acting. The ethnographer must be aware of how her own presence and experience in the field may influence the understanding and perspective of the research results. Self-reflection is therefore a vital part of the discussion in this article (Mikula, 2008, p. 64; Pink, 2015, p. 4).

When working in the field, as in Greece and Lebanon, I used agile methods, applying the research tool that seemed most appropriate in the moment (Pink, 2015:5). In sensory ethnography the tools can be art-based, and the method applied may be creative group work similar to an artistic participatory practice (Pink, 2015; Helguera, 2011).

When reflecting on the ethical aspects of the process, it has been useful to use terms from post-colonial critique theory (Matias, 2013; DiAngelo, 2018). The account of me crying together with the women in Greece may be defined as *white tears*, a term describing how racism materialises, and how the tears of a privileged white person may take all the focus away from a person who has been traumatised or exposed to racism (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 131). It may be a useful term to enlighten reflection on this encounter where I, in sympathy, took part in the woman's sad story and the unfairness of the world, and where the women were in a totally different life situation from me. Even though the local coordinators and I are partners, and the dialogue and processes aim for equality, working for the refugee cause together with people who themselves are refugees can very quickly end up with me taking on a *white saviour* role (Matias, 2013, p. 54), meaning a privileged person wanting to help, save or articulate the needs of persons deprived of the same privileges; how a *white saviour*, by not reflecting on whether her good intentions and idealistic actions may contribute to maintaining an *us and them* perspective, empowers herself instead of empowering the person or community she wants to help

My role in Border Threads was as an artist and researcher. In the process I used my whole toolbox of methodologies and applied experiences from project management, workshop facilitation of collaborative processes, service design, counselling and information work within welfare services, studies in anthropology and art-based ethnography. How I handled this dilemma is discussed further down in the article. My strategies were mostly about stepping back in an observer role, trying not to take up

too much social space and focusing on being a good listener during fieldwork. Giving good information and dialogue about expectations and roles from the beginning and during the process was another strategy.

Why participation – and what kind of participation?

In his book *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, Pablo Helguera (Helguera, 2011) writes about different forms of user involvement in art and how socially engaged art (SEA) is characterised by social interaction with the public or participants to complete the artwork (Helguera, 2011, p. 2). Relational art focuses on human relations and their social context. Relational aesthetics is art theory that values the aesthetic quality of artwork based on how human relations are established and produced (Bourriaud, 2002, pp. 112–113).

Border Threads is a collaborative project (Helguera, 2011) in the sense that some of the coordinators and contact persons were involved in the idea and planning phase. Most of the participants, however, were not that deeply involved, but were co-producers contributing with one or more artworks, referred to as *creative participation* (Helguera, 2011).

Although the project did not initiate any long-term social practice in the local communities, practice you will find in a typical SEA project, theoretical perspectives addressing artistic intentions behind SEA projects in general, may be useful in framing and addressing the discussion. The perspectives are *legitimacy and social progress, aesthetic and processual quality* and *cultural and systemic critique* (Jonvik 2020; Huybrechts, Schepers & Dreessen, 2014; Bishop, 2006).

Legitimacy and social progress. Participation may be perceived as a value based on the idea that a society and a process improve when people work together and take part in a project that concerns them. The artistic intentions of Border Threads were based on ideas of legitimacy through user involvement, often talked about in terms of “representation” or “voice”. The intention was not to enforce the collective agency of the subcommunities as such, but rather to connect and mobilise networks already working to improve life conditions for refugees.

Aesthetic and processual quality. It was a deliberate methodological choice to work with user involvement, based on an assumption that the aesthetic quality would be enhanced when people and communities with various perspectives generated

knowledge and ideas about borders in a collaborative artwork (Sanoff, 2000). In art, the quality of a participatory art project is not necessarily based on the end product and may instead focus on the artistic process itself and how it materialises, which is of concern in the discussion in this article (Bishop, 2006; Christensen-Scheel, 2013).

Cultural and systemic critique. Participation across borders by people who themselves could not travel was deliberately applied as a method and art strategy to question international refugee politics, human rights and global asymmetrical power relations. The intention of building a community structure with already existing subcommunities was a way of symbolically re-establishing social relations and articulating collective meanings despite borders in a neoliberal, individualised society. There is an underlying system critique in Border Threads. According to Claire Bishop (Bishop, 2012, p. 19), ethically concerned artists and SEA projects run the risk of ending up as consensus-driven art, where artistic qualities such as autonomy and antagonism are pushed aside by values such as collaboration and democracy. If politics and plurality are at stake, it is important that these issues be addressed as part of the art discussion (Bishop, 2004, p. 78).

Biesta (2014) describes a bottom-up public pedagogy, based on politics and education, which resembles social and political activism where persons, communities and situations become public and achieve political visibility and relevance by combining their voices in public plurality and achieving *human togetherness*. This *public pedagogy in the interest of public plurality* is experimental, demonstrative and inventive, and is about exploring and creating new and alternative ways of living, thinking and acting (Biesta, 2014, p. 23).

Border Threads addresses both politics and pluralism by applying a form of collaborative pluralistic pedagogy with activist intentions of reflecting a worldview of *human togetherness* and at the same time questioning global asymmetrical power relations.

How? Questions of time, community and representation

When the relation between the artist and the community is part of the artwork (Bourriaud, 2002), topics such as how the collaboration is designed, the time span used for building relations, strategies for user involvement, and methods applied and developed during the art process to meet practical, methodological and ethical questions are of art theoretical interest (Helguera, 2011). When the artist becomes an

ethnographer, the question of whether the artist uses participants instrumentally to produce art and to promote her artistic career becomes an ethical concern (Kester, 2013; Foster, 1996).

Mobilising the community and building relations

In a typically socially engaged art project, the artist works with a community of participants over a period of time. The community can be established by the artist or the artist can invite already existing social communities to participate (Helguera, 2011; Kester 2013).

The process of organising and mobilising the Border Threads community bears similarities to my experience of taking part in the social media mobilisation of communities and volunteers in Norway when organising a national solidarity demonstration for refugees in 2019 within a very short time frame. These kinds of ad-hoc actions groups are based on mobilising and connecting already existing networks of local subcommunities characterised by voluntarism, activism and solidarity, coordinated mainly through easily accessible social media platforms. The same strategy was used when constructing the Border Threads community, mobilising and connecting subcommunities at the local level in various countries within a few months.

The local coordinators in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey are Syrian female teachers concerned with social sustainability for refugees and education for Syrian children. The contact persons in Norway, two of them my friends, are involved in solidarity work for refugees and are people I have been engaged with in other projects. These contact persons contributed to launching the project, and the local coordinators, including Drop in the Ocean in Greece, were in charge of mobilising and organising their subcommunities. I already had a connection with Drop in the Ocean from collaborating on previous projects.

Solidaritetsnøster is based on a collaborative model aimed at social and economic sustainability for Syrian woman in exile in Turkey. In dialogue with the local coordinators in Turkey, we agreed on a price per artwork and reused their collaborative model for the assignment of Border Threads in Syria, Lebanon and Greece. A participant payment of USD 3 per artwork was used as an incentive to mobilise the communities to engage in Border Threads.

One of the pioneers in socially engaged art Suzanne Lacy uses the term *new genre of public art* to describe an art form based on collaborative methodology such as art-led educational programmes that focus on interaction with the public and their experiences (Lacy, 1995, pp. 19–27). When working with communities, Lacy emphasises the artist's obligation to continue the work for a longer period of time, and notes *continuity* as a measure of the artist's responsibility and the success of the work (Robbins & Lacy, 2014). Short-term user involvement art projects like Border Threads are often criticised for being instrumental, using participants as means for reaching artistic intentions (Schneider and Wright, 2013, p. 7). Working with a community over time is considered a key success factor for SEA artists, since sufficient time is often not possible to achieve due to time and budget constraints set by museums and biennials (Helguera, 2011, p. 21).

In Border Threads our resources were focused on collaborative teamwork aimed at staging the final exhibition in Oslo in August 2019. In addition to the participant payment, the possibility of access to an important temporary public art platform through osloBIENNALEN was an incentive and a driving force for mobilising the subcommunities so quickly.

Discussing SEA and community work, Grant Kester emphasizes the importance of working with already existing social communities, and the vital element of political and social self - definition within the group before the entrance of the artist (Kester, 2013). He uses the term *political coherent communities* to refer to ad-hoc collectives such as women's communities. If the self-definition of a SEA community is initiated by the artist through an aesthetic experience, it will lead to a more paternalistic relation between the community and the artist, where the artist takes the lead and engages the community in critical reflection and self-exploration. SEA projects dealing with political coherent communities tend to produce more equal exchanges where both the artist and the community profit and learn from the collaboration through an experience that allows for a more empathetic relationship with others (Kester, 2013).

The activist intention of Border Threads, the time limit and the possibility provided by the osloBIENNALEN platform to *the cause* formed the main driving force behind the project but also limited the artistic methods applied from the start. Because of the time frame, our main strategy for community building was to collaborate with people

outside the art world who already were cooperating within existing *political coherent communities* engaged in education, social and empowerment work among refugees.

The Border Threads community was a decentralised community that worked together on making a physical textile tapestry. Throughout the process, fieldwork and workshops in Lebanon, Norway and Greece provided valuable insights through physical interaction with participants. Due to time and resource constraints, we never had physical meetings with the Turkish community, and entering Syria was out of the question. Digital dialogue with the local coordinators and some participants from the subcommunities through the artistic process was an important and vital part of this process. The use of digital platforms worked well with local coordinators, who also engaged in dialogue with their respective subcommunities.

When we started, however, my vision was to build a community that could grow and interact. I set up the Border Threads' Facebook group and invited participants to take part in a conversation about borders. The intention was to create a digital community that could discuss and exchange views even though we were unable to meet in real life. After several not so successful attempts at digital community building, the Facebook group was used mostly to provide information about the project. It turned out that many of the participants were not on Facebook and did not speak English.

We used the same mechanisms to mobilise the Border Threads subcommunities and participants, many of whom were living under very difficult conditions, as I would have done if they were fellow activists working for the refugee cause here in Norway. In future projects, investing more time on relation building and dialogue to find out more about local needs and interests, getting to know the sub communities better initially and throughout the project, may be a better method for community building across borders.

Resolving issues of representation and dissemination strategies

The artistic practice of producing, collecting, presenting and disseminating the participants' artworks and reflections in Border Threads is an act of representation, and demands ethical awareness or responsibility. One method used to resolve the ethical dilemma of representing others was to create a collaborative artwork with no modifications made to the participants' individual contributions. To speak on behalf of or represent others is a topic of discussion embedded in the discourse of various disciplines, such as ethnographic methodology (Foster, 1996; Schneider and Wright,

2013), post-colonial theory (Ahmed, 2000; Matias, 2013; DiAngelo, 2018), art theory (Kester, 1995, 2013) and communication theory (Couldry, 2010).

When the artworks from the first workshops in Turkey arrived in Oslo, the neatly formed needlework of human tragedy took me by surprise: they depicted families fleeing from war, children drowning and women being tortured in prison. Much of the work was clearly activist, antagonistic and much more political than I had expected. The richness of the textile artwork in terms of the materials used, visual content and excellent handcraft added extra value to the project beyond my expectations. The work was aesthetically and culturally different to my own artistic expression and made me reflect upon what it meant to relinquish artistic autonomy and share the creation of an aesthetic outcome with my fellow collaborators.

My reaction involved mixed feelings of sorrow and shame, a dilemma. I realised this was real, that these artworks were made by women and children who were telling their personal stories from one of the most horrific wars of modern time. I felt unsure whether I could present the material in any way and whether collecting and presenting it was ethically right. I chose to continue the project and became even more aware of the question of representation than I had been from the start. This sense of uncomfortableness was important when subsequently deciding what methods to use when presenting the Border Threads projects.



Figure 3. Artwork by a participant in the Turkish community.
Photo: Marielle Kalldal



Figure 4. Artwork by a participant in the Turkish community.
Photo: Marielle Kalldal

This poem accompanies the artwork depicting the little boy at sea:

In the middle of the ocean, the boat sank, and fell into the depths, for everyone to see that I am finished. My fall has stripped the spirit of this unarmed slim body, to go freely in the sky, to see the light and fly in the air.

The artworks were produced by the communities based on the knowledge that they would be exhibited in Norway. This collaborative method was applied and based on the assumption of what makes legitimate and meaningful representation. The assumption was that if participants trust the mechanisms for giving away their own meaning or contribution to a representative and can recognize their own contribution in the final output of a collaborative process, these kinds of representations would be perceived as meaningful by the participants (Couldry, 2010, p. 100).

I interpret some of the artwork material and feedback from interviews as a need to be more in charge and control of the public story about the refugees' situation and what it means to live as refugees in exile.

One of the artworks from Turkey illustrates a Western journalist filming a refugee family on the ground. The drawing was based on a press photo from 2015.⁴



Figure 5. Artwork from a participant in Turkey.
Photo: Marielle Kalldal

I interpret the image as a commentary on how the media controls the narrative: the blond journalist standing and the refugee family lying on the ground is symbolic of the power relations between them."?

Another artwork with a text from a woman in the same community articulates the need to be seen as an individual. Her own text written below figure 6.

⁴ The motif is from a press photo taken by a Hungarian journalist filming a man and his child lying on the ground at the Hungarian border in 2015. (Dearden, 2015)



Figure 6. Artwork from a participant in Turkey.
Photo: Marielle Kalldal

For criminals, it is only a matter of time before we will all die from bombs, hunger, disease or from being tortured in prison. We are just numbers. It is a painting of the pain of hundreds of thousands of families, waiting for their children in prison for years, to send them a mutilated body that did not know to whom they claim to be their son, with only a number written on their bodies. It is the peak of suffering and pain. We are just numbers to them, it's a pity.

The women I met during fieldwork in Lebanon told me that it was important for them to reach outside their local community and draw public attention to their situation. The first artwork from the coordinator consists of a piece of curtain from her children's bedroom that she brought with her when the family fled Damascus for Lebanon.

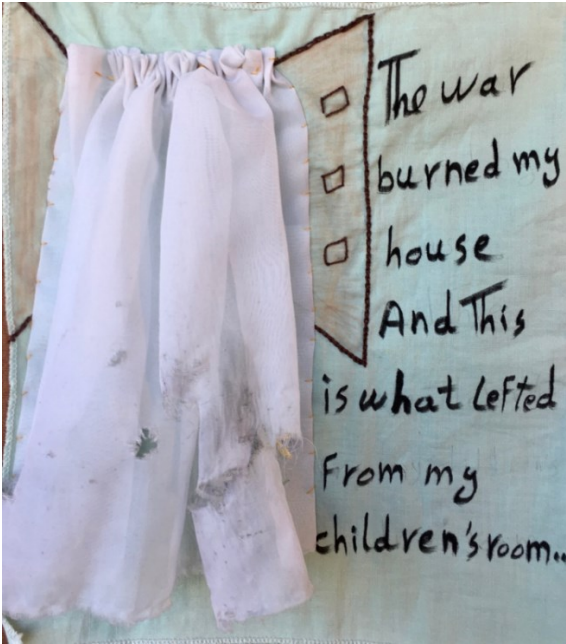


Figure 7. Artwork from a participant in Lebanon.
Photo: Marielle Kalldal

The Syrian coordinator wrote that knowing that their voice could reach beyond the Syrian border felt valuable and that this kind of solidarity work gives hope and a sense of human togetherness. Most of the motifs in the artwork from Syria deal with the war.



Figure 8. Artwork made by participants in the Syrian community.
Photo: Marielle Kalldal

In Border Threads the method of non-modifying the participants' visual expressions had two artistic intentions: to visualise a democratic plurality of voices and reflections about borders, and to reflect the intention of a collaboration by respecting the participants' artworks. My role as an artist was to combine the individual artworks into a tapestry, which in some sense gave me final artistic autonomy.

When discussing the ethical dilemma of representing and speaking on behalf of others, the intention of diminishing inequality in social relations by trying to move beyond inequality may be problematic (Ahmed, 2000; Gaztambide-Fernández & Arráiz Matute, 2014). Beneath the anxiety of benefiting from the other person is an underlying assumption of inequality, which is problematic in itself. The term *colourblind* (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 42) may be an interesting reference. Colourblind in the sense that by insisting that people are equal and that relations are equal, a privileged person's actions – in this case me as artist and researcher – may undermine the inequality between people in the project when it comes to civil, economic, and social rights.

The feminist writer and independent scholar Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2000) criticises the practice of trying to include the voice of your collaborators to obtain equality and non-othering in, for instance, ethnographic texts. She argues that the intention of this kind of practice is to try to overcome pre-existing power relations already embedded in the ethnographic desire to document the life of strangers. (Ahmed, 2000, p. 57–67). The critical questions raised by Ahmed are highly relevant to the present article; the participants are presented through photos of their works, some quotations, and descriptions of their context through observations I made during the fieldwork. I have written and edited the present article, selecting which artworks would be presented. Although fellow collaborators are presented, the presentation will be the result of my interpretation (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), and the article must be read as such.

Kester problematises the role of the artist, how the artist often establishes individual relations with the participants and end up in a representational relationship where the artist speaks “through, with, about or on behalf of” the participants (Kester, 2013, chap. 4). He calls it the problem of symbolic and political representation, emphasizing that artists have to distinguish between the ability to exhibit a given community and the artist's authority to speak up for the community in order to empower herself and her own career (Kester, 1995, p. 7; Foster, 1996).

Dissemination of Border Threads in various contexts actualises this dilemma. In the article “The artist as an ethnographer”, Hal Foster criticises artists working with social or ethnographic practice (Foster, 1996) and how the artist presenting a SEA project will find herself in the impossible place between the intention of user involvement and the promotion of her own career, in a state of so-called *self-fashioning*, caught between professional interest and an altruistic user-oriented position. Socially engaged art presented through the eyes of the artist and the museum, even if it is meant to be presenting and not representing, also runs the risk of objectifying the participants through a reinterpretation by the viewer (Foster, 1996),

In disseminating Border Threads, one method for handling *artistic self-fashioning* is to involve and credit the collaborators and work together with coordinators at presentations, presenting the artwork in the context of the communities and retelling the stories that were told during my fieldwork. Border Threads has also been presented in various contexts along with the coordinator in the Syrian subcommunity. We worked together to obtain a visa for the local coordinator in Lebanon to present the project in Oslo in August 2019. Despite having invitations and financing, the application was rejected and she presented the project by video instead.

Presentations of the project are otherwise shared in the Border Threads’ Facebook group and the local coordinators informed beforehand.



Figure 9. Syrian coordinator and participant Daniel Elhomsi covering the migrant car with the Border Threads tapestry at VIPPA, Oslo, August 2019. Photo: Camilla Dahl

Ethical considerations of how to enhance integrity and privacy during fieldwork

As an artist and researcher collaborating with participants, it is my responsibility to apply ethical guidelines for working with user involvement in research. The right to privacy and integrity must be integrated into the research methods (Hummelvoll, 2010).

Sensory ethnography regards all kinds of data from fieldwork as research material, and when used in research, the material must also be treated as embodied, emplaced ways of knowing. British social scientist and social anthropologist Sarah Pink addresses the need for a collaborative and reflexive approach to ensure ethical research (Pink, 2015, p. 68). Using methods such as observation and adjusting my research methods to the local atmosphere during fieldwork and workshops made it easier to interact and collaborate with the participants despite language barriers.

Field notes from Skaramangas refugee camp, July 2019:

During the workshop in the refugee camp in Greece, the women have their own schedule for coming and going to the workshop besides attending to their families' needs during the day. As an artist and a researcher, I am visiting their homes and having to adjust my plans. At the beginning of the workshop, I feel stupid, very uncomfortable and have to reconsider how to handle the situation. The translator handles the workshop in an excellent way, activating and organising the women. I do not understand a word. My partner has been sent away to look after the children so that the women could have some time for themselves

More and more women arrive. M (the translator) checks his lists to see whether they have registered for the workshop. Some of them bring children, who run around. The container we work in is only about 25–30 m² and is hot. M organises the women. I need to interact but have no language to communicate. The women arrive one by one over the next hour. I try to explain the work, but M is busy organising. In the end I get hold of him, asking him for help to interact. I need dialogue, that I'm there also for the conversations. We sit down and start talking with the women one by one. When they are finished with their work, we talk about what they made. M checks his list and gives them some metres of textile as payment. I wonder whether they are patient and wait to talk with me because they need the textile. I tell them it's not mandatory to talk to me in order to get the textile. The women are aged between seventeen and seventy years. They have backgrounds as students, teachers, housewives and one of them a policewoman. Most of their work and the conversations are about longing for home and a life, about loss and war or the situation of refugees. How their lives were torn apart, the contrast between how it was and how life is now. About waiting, insecurity. The room in itself becomes a room for reflection and sharing of personal stories. The scheduled focus group interview with the women in Skaramangas ends up as individual conversations about the participants' lives, humanitarian and social politics, and about how physical borders between states are influencing their lives.

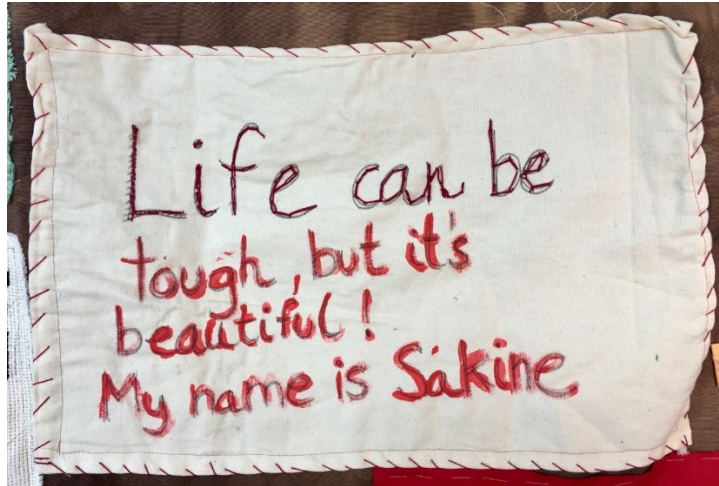


Figure 10. Artwork made by a participant in Greece.
Photo: Camilla Dahl

The woman who made this artwork tells her story:

Life can be tough but it's beautiful. We live very hard down here, but we think that in the future life can be beautiful for us. I hope that one day I can be free. I have been here for three years. I don't see what is beautiful inside the camp. One family, four persons and three single boys, in one container. I must be the mother of everyone. It's hard.

Field notes Beqaa Valley, Lebanon, June 2019:

I am welcomed as a dear friend and a guest in M's (the coordinator) home, a spacious apartment in a small town in Beqaa valley, only a few kilometres from the Syrian border. Around seven women and some children are present. They are upset by the last week's attacks on Syrian refugee camps by Lebanese military. Some of them have lost their temporary homes.

During the visit I'm trying to figure out how much to insist on my role as an artist and the original research schedule versus the role as a guest. I adjust and replan both my methods and my schedule for interviews in accordance with the social "rhythm" in the room and the host. After talking and a lunch getting to know each other better, we can start the more formal interviews. The fact that I record, ask for consent and have the interpreter by my side are practical useful methods for changing the scene from an informal social situation to a research situation. I have prepared

conversation themes. I want to know more about their motivation for participating and to hear their reflections about the project and the process. It doesn't work that way. The women are eager to present their artwork and tell me their border stories. Their artwork reflects their situation, the deprivation of human rights, loss and suffering. But also reflections on hope, the importance of free healthcare and education, freedom of movement and economic sustainability.



Figure 11. The coordinator explains about the lack of health services for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
Photo: Camilla Dahl

The fact that both the women in Greece and the women in Lebanon were so persistent in focusing on their artwork and their own stories instead of answering my questions about artistic processes gave me insight that was new and valuable.

As a research project, Border Threads must follow the official laws and guidelines for protecting research data and, thus, information about the project, how the data will be used and stored (Hummelvoll, 2010, pp. 38–40).

Information about the project was published in the Facebook group and in the workshops and meetings. The schoolchildren from Asker received written information and submitted consent documents signed by their parents before they took part. The participants in Greece received written information about the workshop in several languages and signed up as participants beforehand. I started the workshops in

Greece and Lebanon by repeating the information and asked for oral consent to record conversations with the participants. However, given the situation in the refugee camp in Greece and the coordinator's home in Lebanon, it was difficult to inform them thoroughly about consent and data protection according to Norwegian law. Most of the data material collected through Border Threads is therefore anonymous. Their artwork, on the other hand, is public and is represented throughout the text.

How to contribute to something meaningful?

To contribute to something meaningful means to try and act on the principle that your actions should be of help and use to others, and that as a researcher one can contribute to justice (Hummelvoll, 2010, p. 41).

The intention behind Border Threads is to contribute to something better through an activist user-involving art project focusing on reflections on human rights and justice for refugees. In our methodological choices, we were conscious that participation should be experienced as something valuable to the participants in the form of reward/payment and the conversations about the process.

Many artists are aware of the self-fashioning aspect of SEA and are integrating or adding different methods for giving something back to the community in their practice. This may be through working with social programming and empowerment of individuals over time in SEA projects, as well as giving something back in the form of activism for a good cause through art, voluntary work and economic donations or user payments. (Helguera, 2011; Lacy, 1995). Activism for a humanitarian understanding across borders and participant payment are methods that were applied in Border Threads to give something back or to contribute to something good.

I cannot say whether Border Threads has contributed to something meaningful for the participants involved. I conducted an evaluation among the local coordinators when the project finished in 2019. The feedback I received from the local coordinators was that the project felt important. In Greece, the coordinator said that this kind of project gives hope to women in the camp in a hopeless situation. It gives meaning. The activity, participating with other women in a communal workshop, provides a break from a difficult life and the situation in the camp.

The term *white saviour* (Matias, 2013) and Ahmed's (Ahmed, 2000) view on equality in the discussion of the Border Threads project provide new perspectives on what it means to contribute to something in a difficult context and on the risk of doing harm when working with user involvement in art (Østern, 2017). I find that the terms *colour blind* and *white saviour* enrich the language and are useful tools for distinguishing the self-reflection about my artistic practice from all the good intentions. The terms and associated theory will contribute during practice based artistic research, to recognize and identify situations where I need to give extra attention. Thereby hopefully contribute as a driving force for the development of a more ethical artistic practice.

Concluding remarks

Border Threads was an art project that operated within a short time frame and with artistic intentions of system critique and democratic, open and empathetic collaboration. I have described an artistic intention and an artistic practice addressing and discussing ethical concerns about representation and artistic self-fashioning, and how these are embedded in an artistic practice that will be applied, tested, evaluated and further developed?

If the project were to be developed further, we should look into how relation building and social interaction can be resolved under better conditions. This would demand more time and resources than those available in the first version of Border Threads.

Further developments could be:

- More time to build relations and conduct initial insight research of user needs before starting the project.
- Work out artistic ideas and concepts together with local coordinators and participants and discuss how and whether the project can or should contribute to something meaningful, something more social sustainable than one-off participation
- Setting up a digital meeting platform, facilitated by translators and commitment from the local coordinators.
- Carry out a small-scale pilot and evaluate it before inviting more communities.

- Look into new ways of disseminating and presenting the project, both artistically and academically.

Our dialogue on how we can continue our cooperation despite the unfair distribution of privileges and barriers such as time, money and language was in 2020 and 2021 overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the fact that conditions for many of the participants in Border Threads life became even worse than in 2019.

Solidaritetsnøster is still going strong and has been important for the community in Turkey during the pandemic. Due to the war in Ukraine and the pandemic, the refugees in the camps in Greece are even less visible now in 2022 than in 2019, and conditions have deteriorated. The same applies to the Syrian and Lebanese communities.

To be continued

About the author

Camilla Dahl is an artist who explores the relationship between art, the spectator and the society. She has a master's degree in Art in Society from OsloMet and works on issues such as human rights, ethics and democracy. Dahl published the book *Kunsten å flykte* (The art of fleeing) in 2017 and has also been an activist working for social and political improvement for refugees. Dahl's artistic work is influenced by her background from political science, social anthropology, innovation and user involvement in public welfare services.

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