

The stitch project

Traces of diapraxis and al masha within participatory textile projects

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Abstract

In this article, I shall discuss participation – the artist's role and responsibility in participation, and the potentials of participatory textile projects in the public space. In doing so, I will focus on *The stitch project* (2012–). This project involves public interaction through acts of tactile textile making such as stitching on a tablecloth. I have based this study within a context of understanding matter and the embodiment of participation from feminist (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1988) and new materialist (Barad, 2003; Coole & Frost, 2010; Garber, 2019) perspectives. I am interested in the interactive aspects of *The stitch project* and how these aspects relate to the concepts of *diapraxis* (Nunes, 2019) and *al masha* (Hilal & Petti, 2018). In regard to these terms, I aim to examine the potentials and challenges of participatory textile art projects, like *The stitch project*, by examining their social and material aspects as well as the complexities of inclusion and participation.

Keywords: Participatory art, embroidery, textile, al masha, diapraxis

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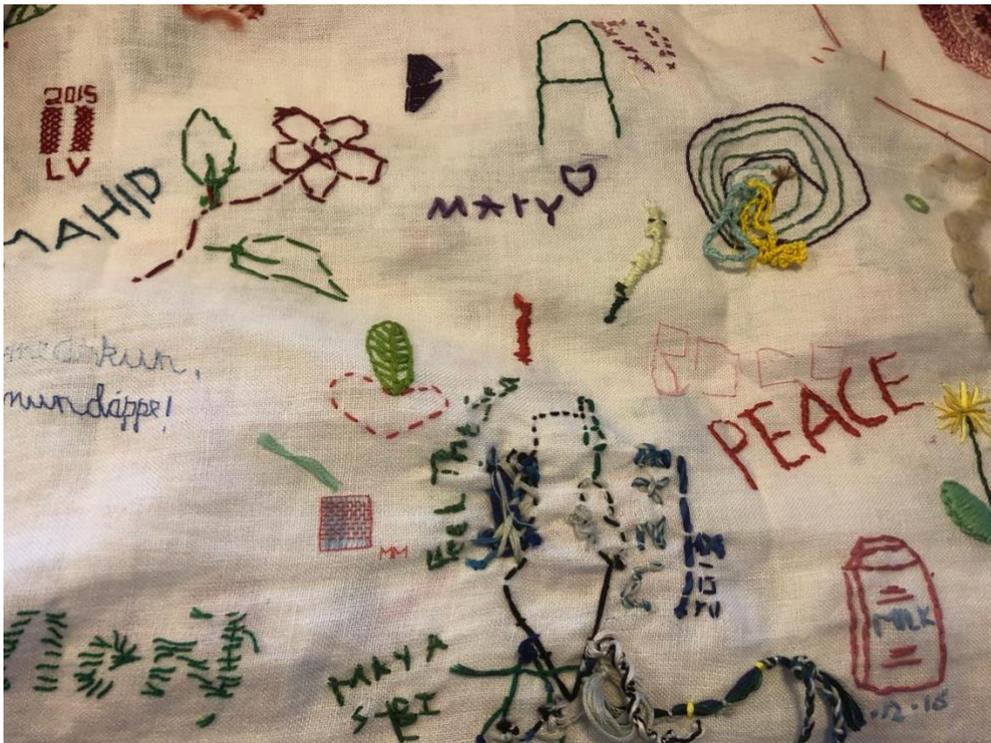


Figure 1. The stitch project (2012–), detail of tablecloth. Photo: Marie Skeie

Introduction

For the third day in a row, a teenager came back to the museum to stitch on a 10-meter-long tablecloth. When I asked him what he had embroidered, he talked about how he tried to make a tactile expression of waves meeting land. On a piece of cloth, he used a needle and thread to stitch the coastline of his homeland, Palestine. “Feel The Sea” is embroidered in green. Where the sea meets land, he tied a series of knots. When you passed your finger above them, you could sense the bumps.

This is an encounter from one of the sessions of *The stitch project*², which took place at The Palestinian Museum in July 2018 during the exhibition *Labour of Love: New*

² <http://thestitchproject.com>

*Approaches to Palestinian Embroidery*³. This was the museum's first exhibition which explored, "Palestinian embroidery through the lenses of gender, labour, commodity, and class, tracing its shift from a personal practice to a potent symbol of national heritage, to a product circulated in the global marketplace." (Deadman, 2018). *The stitch project* invited the public to take part in the durational creation of embroidery upon a 10-meter-long tablecloth. In addition, the workshop also involved making natural plant dyes sourced from plants in the museum's garden. The aim was for individuals, such as this teenage boy, to experience textile making in a collaborative setting in which traces such as hand stitched embroidery were added onto the tablecloth. Although *The stitch project* involved a variety of actions such as embroidery, plant dyeing, weaving, and spinning, this article will focus upon the sewing component – namely *The stitch project's* sessions at the Palestinian Museum in July 2018.

This article is based upon my experiences and encounters as an artist working with *The stitch project*. In doing so, I am also drawing on my position as a researcher with a background in sociology. The project uses textiles as a medium for making and communicating. It involves interaction with the public through stitching on a tablecloth, often within an institutional framework such as a museum or a library. In addition, the relational aspects of participation also extended to relationships between the matter involved and the maker (Garber, 2019) which are aspects I will also discuss later in this article.

My discussion of *The stitch project* will be examined through an understanding of matter and the embodiment of participation from feminist (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1988) and new materialist perspectives (Barad, 2003; Coole & Frost, 2010; Garber, 2019). I have chosen these perspectives to understand the relational and tactile aspects of the making process. In doing so, I will relate the social contexts of the project to the term *diapaxis* in which activities and experiences are shared despite difference (Nunes, 2019). I will also refer to the term of *al masha* which is an Arabic word referring to the possession of land through common use and cultivation. This term can be used in order to relate to the possible common space which the project

³ <https://www.palmuseum.org/ehxhibitions/labour-of-love>

creates (Hilal & Petti, 2018). Based on these concepts, I will also examine how *The stitch project* reflects the potentials and challenges of participatory textile art projects. In doing so, I will unpack the social and material aspects of these projects, as well as discuss the complexities of inclusion and participation.

The stitch project

The stitch project is an international art project⁴ established in 2012 at the Riddu Riddu Festival, Norway, that has since taken place in Palestine, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Latvia, Ukraine, and Denmark. Between 2012 to 2021, embroidery workshops have taken place in more than thirty locations. *The stitch project* invites the public to stitch textiles with artists in locations such as libraries, art museums or festivals. A diverse group of individuals then sit around the same tablecloth collectively accumulating an improvised tableau of stitches. The project was conceived in 2011 by a group of artists, including myself, in response to two devastating incidents that occurred that year- the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March and the Utøya massacre of 22nd July. We felt deeply impacted by these tragedies as two members of the group have Japanese backgrounds, whilst the Utøya massacre deeply affected most Norwegians. We discussed what artists could do in the aftermath of these tragedies and decided to experiment with the medium of textile art as a way to open up public conversations and interactions. In addition, I was also inspired by my visit to Palestine in 2011 in which I looked at the similarities and differences of traditional embroidery in Palestine and Norway. Moreover, we realised that textiles are a highly suitable medium in connecting with a wide range of people from diverse backgrounds as textiles are made and used in every culture around the world and are part of our shared bodily experience. This concept can relate to the writings of Bryan-Wilson (2017), who claims that we are all textile experts. The production of textiles also occurs both within industrial and domestic contexts and therefore can reflect a wide range of historical, cultural, economic, and social aspects. Based on these reflections, we recognised that the language of textile

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making could stimulate forms of transcultural exchange and knowledge sharing that could involve a wide variety of participants.

Participatory textile project



Figure 1. The stitch project at Riddu Riddu festival, Norway, 2016. Photo: The stitch project

As an artist, I have produced⁵ and participated in several art projects which involve participation. Some of the projects have involved a carefully selected group of participants, whereas others have been open to the general public and were situated in the public space. However, in all projects the performative and social aspects were central themes. My role as an artist in these projects relates to the perspectives of Anke Coumans who described in her article *Art as Encounter* (2017) how artists and participants examine new possibilities together in participatory projects. In doing so, the public takes on a more active role and are no longer passive spectators. At the same time, the nature of participation is different- for artists the act of creation is part

⁵ It's all for nothing (2018), Gaza (a)live (2014) and other works. See www.marieskeie.com for more information.

of their work and career, whereas most participants leisurely take part in such projects.

Textiles have been made throughout history and are an essential part of our human existence giving our bodies shelter and being an integral part of our everyday lives. In addition, textile production has often been a collective activity. For example, the process of weaving fabric involves spinning yarn, setting up a loom and the time-consuming act of weaving which was often done as a group effort. At the same time, textiles have also been used as forms of cultural and political expression such as Mahatma Gandhi's resistance to colonial power structures by spinning and weaving his own garments. In addition, textiles have been used to open public conversations about difficult subjects as seen with the AIDS Quilts made in the 1980s and early 1990s in the United States. (Bryan-Wilson, 2017).

Nicole Burisch (2016) reflects upon a curatorial view of the new forms of craft practice that focus on performative and dematerialised works. She describes these practices as moving away from an object-centred practice to instead focussing on the gestures, actions, and encounters of the creation process. *The stitch project* represents this shift by focusing on the performative potentials of textile making. The embroidery sessions of *The stitch project* occur both within and outside the art world by gathering individuals to stitch a common work. In *The stitch project*, the stitchers choose what traces they embroider on the tablecloth. The common making in *The stitch project* happens through the bodily gestures of stitching on a 10-meter-long tablecloth. The tablecloth can also be folded, placed in a bag, and spread anywhere where there is a long table. This makes the project flexible and easy to transport across borders and to a wide range of locations.

The tools involved are needles, thread and linen cloth and the action of punctures are made with each stitch by the needle moving up and down through the cloth. The word "stitch" comes from the old English word *stice*; a prick, puncture, sting, stab and used also to describe "to fasten or adorn with stitches" (Merriam Webster, n.d.). The word "action" derives from the Latin term "*actiō*" which means to do or to make (Wiktionary, n.d.). The participant's action is, therefore, the movement of the needle and thread which fastens their stitches to the tablecloth to make a mark. Victoria Mitchell (2013, p. 315) relates the action of stitching to the performative as it is "formed through the gestures of the body, the actions of sewing, and the manipulation of needle and thread." As seen in the participant's story at the

Palestinian Museum, the experience was highly tactile in which self-expression through a needle and thread left a physical imprint responsive to touch.

Participation in making art is not a new concept (Finkelpearl, 2014) and can be traced back to the participatory turn of the 1960s in which democratic practices in the public sphere were reconfigured to involve citizen participation in order to stimulate social transformation (Bherer, Dufour, & Montambeault, 2016). Participation promises inclusive involvement through being part of a project (Barney, Coleman, Ross, Sterne, & Tembeck, 2016), however, participants must also operate under the conditions set by the artist and location. For example, *The stitch project* had to adhere to the framework set by The Palestinian Museum. Therefore, artists must navigate within these institutional conditions, rather than establish completely new frameworks (Kwon, 2002). In addition, *The stitch project* only credits the artists involved and does not list each participants' name. For these reasons, the project could be viewed as ethically problematic and non-inclusive despite the original premise of active participation.

How the public participates and gains meaning from participatory textile projects often relates to their associations with textiles. For instance, theorists such as Victoria Mitchell (2013) discuss textile making's links with themes such as labour, femininity, and surgery. In some ways, these connections are incorporated into *The stitch project* which aims to stimulate public interest and enable discussions and other exchanges to arise. In addition, the process of making textiles as a form of registering messages involves embodied practices that have deeper social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions. In the following sections, I will discuss *The stitch project* in relation to the concepts of *al masha* (Hilal & Petti, 2018) and *diapaxis* (Nunes, 2019).

Al masha

Traditionally artworks are made by a solo artist. *The stitch project* challenges this by examining art as a potential space for collective processes. Sandi Hilal and Allesandro Petti (2018), artists and architects, have worked for over twenty years in Palestine with a range of community-related projects. They coined the Arabic term, *al masha*, which refers to "communal land equally distributed among farmers" (p.19). With *al masha*, the land is possessed through common cultivation and use rather than through private ownership. They argue that *al masha* is different from the public space, as it is a shared area activated through people's engagement, whereas public space can exist without people. Therefore, *al masha* only exists if people continually

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produce it. The root of the word *al masha* (المشاع) has three letters that refer to several meanings as common property or public domain (Almaany, n.d.). It relates to doing something in a space that could be both physical and immaterial space.

The term *al masha* defines the potential for artworks to be objects that only exist through the interaction and participation of people in a shared space. In addition, this concept can also extend beyond physical space as these encounters in *The stitch project* were also activated digitally through shared documentation on platforms such as social media. *Al masha* therefore requires presence and action, as does textile making. The making of the Palestinian traditional dress, the thob, is often a collective act in which different people embroider various parts of the thob which are later sewn together into a dress (Kawar, 2011). During the sewing sessions at the Palestinian Museum, some of the stitchers were experts at embroidering thobs and shared their knowledge with the others that joined the sessions. As a result, each person embroidered a part of the tablecloth that became a fragment of the ongoing project in which the stitched traces from different traditions and imaginations became intertwined in one piece.

Creating a space for a common making could unfold a temporal, shared space through working with needle and thread, colours, and fabric. In her investigation on use, Sara Ahmed (2019) writes about how the act of use shapes the world and bodies. She questions the “for-ness” of use – for who and what is the use for? Regarding tools as vessels of knowledge invests them with qualities of power in which the user possesses tools that are shaped by use, and in addition, the user also has the ability to shape the world through the use of the tools. In relation, to *The stitch project* and Ahmed’s term “for-ness”, one could ask for who and for what were the tools such as needles, thread and a tablecloth used? With regard to Ahmed’s (2019) question of for-ness, there is also a question of who exactly is “all” – who is included and excluded when a project is open for public participation?

In addition, *al masha* opens up notions that rethink the artist’s role within a community context. The art historian Miwon Kwon (2002) is critical of the nomadic artist who creates “site-specific” works through private or public initiatives. When artists and their artwork are directed towards institutional gains, their intentions may be genuine, however, often the artist’s presence becomes more important than the art created. Instead, Kwon proposes to look at the nature of site-specificity which shifts between mobilisation and specificity as well as between space and place.

Kwon also touches upon the delicate issues regarding the commitment and responsibility of art projects working within established institutions that are not part of local communities. Kwon proposes that site specific works should aim for a long-term impact and take into consideration local cultures and settings. In addition, such projects must also be aware of the possible negative effects their project could have on communities such as gentrification. The relationship to place which is inherent in the concept of *al masha* can therefore be lost in these nomadic, institutionalised projects. Consequently, in relation to participatory textile projects, the concept of *al masha* can explain a sense of common making. For example, with *The stitch project* the stories and traces added to the tablecloth by the participants and artists created a sense of shared ownership through physical participation. At the same time, as stated by Kwon (2002), such a project requires sensitivity and an understanding of broader contextual issues that may serve to involve and/or exclude participants (Ahmed, 2019).

Diap Praxis

In her article about the public art project, *Another Grammar for Oslo* by Mônica Nador and Bruno Oliveira⁶, the theatre practitioner and researcher Deise Faria Nunes (2019) discusses the concept of *diap Praxis*. This term is taken from Lissi Rasmussen who examined dialogues between Muslims and Christians through coexistence and common practices. *Diap Praxis* is defined as the sharing of activities and experiences with others despite differences. *Diap Praxis* can be a way to define the transcultural exchanges present in the project and describe how these shared experiences have been enhanced. It can be one way of understanding my meetings with the participants in *The stitch project*. This is because the project is often situated within cultural contexts different to the artists, whilst the participants who joined the projects also came from a wide range of backgrounds. Textile making, as well as art, can facilitate both notions of cultural expression and exchange. Thus, the concept of *diap Praxis* is interesting to discuss and elaborate in relation to *The stitch project* as the term contains the notions of dialogue and making across difference. Therefore, in the following section, I will draw on the architect Eyal Weisman's (2010) notions about paradoxes in participation, the feminist scholar, Sara Ahmed's (2006) notions on

⁶ <https://www.oslobiennalen.no/project/another-grammar-for-oslo-2-2/>

failed orientation and the literary and cultural critic Homi Bhabha's (1994) term cultural difference.

Applying the term *diapaxis* to *The stitch project* can overshadow some other important aspects of participatory textile projects. For instance, the project took place in art contexts that may have been more consensus-building than challenging. Eyal Weisman (2010) describes the paradoxes of participation in the introduction of *The Nightmare of Participation* and claims that participation is often limited due to the options available to the participants and the difficulties in challenging those parameters. This entails that participatory projects often have an imbalance of power, authorship, and responsibility which artists must be aware of when planning and implementing projects. In many ways, factors such as who can and cannot participate in projects may also relate to Sara Ahmed's notions of "failed orientation" in which a tool is used by a body in a way that it was not intended or when a body uses a tool in a way that does extend its active capacity (Ahmed, 2006). Therefore, applying these terms raises questions about the conditions of *diapaxis* in the project through representation, choice of contexts and the use of language.

The stitch project also has a transcultural dimension as the artists and participating public were from vastly different cultural backgrounds. In doing so, the artists were from more privileged positions that granted the freedom of travel and the possibility of accessing resources to create an international, transcultural project. Artists are often looking for in-between places to create new meanings and *The stitch project* takes place both inside and outside the contexts of the artists' cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, the project commonly occurs in familiar artistic contexts. One could talk about cultural diversity in this project, but Bhabha (1994) insists on turning the discourse towards cultural difference. The focus on differences opens up the in-between space that can be contested, both on individual and communal levels, thereby revealing underlying power relations and dominance. Bhabha criticises Western theoreticians like Lyotard, Barthes and Derrida, using the context of the Other as a "horizon of difference" in their theories. This context then becomes a one-way relationship in which those with cultural capital author their own narratives and versions of the Other. In contrast, addressing cultural differences may create critical spaces which challenge assumptions and move away from a one-sided definition of the Other. In doing so, the underlying power relations can be addressed and these differences in the relationships can be acknowledged rather than removed. As a

result, instead of viewing participants as the Other, the artists instead could be defined as the Other, aware of the cultural differences.

There are potentials for *diapaxis* in participatory textile projects as it creates contexts in which meetings across cultures occur through the making and exchanging of knowledge and experience in a shared space. Textiles are found in every culture and part of society and are, therefore, transcultural (Bryan-Wilson, 2017). Furthermore, as participatory textile projects are an embodied praxis, they can create transcultural understandings through words, stitches and patterns thereby creating new narratives. The work creates a new fabric of experience and audience by bringing people around a temporary activity. At the same time, it must be taken into consideration that not all the experiences in the project were necessarily shared. For some participants, involvement in the project's group process may have caused a sense of discomfort rather than feelings of togetherness and shared experience. (Boomgaard, 2017). Due to its aesthetic dimensions, *The stitch project* can express beyond the verbal through material interactions such as the teenager in which threads may come to represent a tactile shore of waves meeting the land.



Figure 3. The stitch project (2012–), The Palestinian Museum 2018. Photo: Marie Skeie

Material relations

Theories surrounding new materialism bring matter to the foreground as we live our lives surrounded by matter and we, ourselves, are matter. This emphasises the complex materiality of bodies in social relations and as living parts of the material

world. Matter is seen as active in shaping the world in unpredictable ways (Coole and Frost, 2010). Material-discursive practices move between discursive practices and material phenomena. In doing so, matter plays an active role and is brought to the foreground. According to the post-human theorist, Karen Barad (2003), this embodiment shifts focus to the performative practices of doing and making. In this sense, embroidery sessions in the museum could be connective and relational with matter – both human and non-human. This means that the physical space, materials, and tools available effect the session and influence what is created and discussed.

Looking at making in an embodied way brings matter and the body, which is matter, into the focus. Artist researcher and teacher, Elizabeth Garber (2019, p. 12), introduces the concept of smooth space, which she borrows from Deleuze & Guattari and Massumi. The smooth space lies between matter and making as well as matter and the maker. In this in-between space, matter, and the maker both shift in their interactions. The maker changes the matter, and the material alters the maker. Participatory textile projects facilitate this in-between space. The tablecloth facilitates a smooth space where meaning and making are stitched simultaneously in a common, material discursive space, gathered around the woven fabric. In this way the tablecloth itself can be seen as a common public space, like *al masha*. The participants leave their marks and take part of cultivating the cloth. Even if someone stitches on top or continues the stitching, the mark that the person left is there. The tablecloth with the participation of more than 500 makers can be read and continued in multiple ways.

Al masha moves away from the private and ownerships to engage a common, active public space. This does not erase the singularity of the persons engaged. The individual is participating in *al masha* with its differences in relation with other humans and non-humans in a commonness. As we see in the case from the stitching session at the Palestinian museum, the boy is in a common space around the tablecloth, in a material relation; with the needle, thread, cloth, and with other humans; around the table and by the marks left by others on tablecloth. He is engaging both with his own material expression and in a common action with others. In the case of The stitch project the collective making process is material based, open-ended and ongoing. As the posthumanist writer Rosi Braidotti writes in talking about a “we”, a common, which corresponds to the concept of *al masha*, it is important keep “grounded locations, complexity and a praxis-oriented, differential vision of what binds us together” (2019, p. 37).

The act of stitching and embroidering objects derives meaning from the makers' past experiences. Sara Ahmed (2006, p. 44) gives an insight into our relationships with objects as she suggests that "objects not only are shaped by work, but that they also take the shape of the work they do." Thus, the shaping of an object also depends on the actions of creation and use rather than just the object itself. This then raises questions about the reciprocal relations between the participants' choices in embroidering the tablecloth and how the form of the tablecloth influenced these decisions. As a result, the piece is deeply reliant upon the participants' orientation and engagement towards the work as well as the practical boundaries set by the stitching implements and chosen fabric. For instance, with the example of the teenager, there was an encounter between a teenage boy, a needle, thread and fabric within the context of an embroidery session.

In doing so, there was both a familiarity and unfamiliarity in this meeting, where previous experiences of stitching were juxtaposed with new possibilities. It is common for many people to have had some experience with hand sewing such as within domestic or educational settings. At the same time, the act of stitching is connected to history as what bodies tend to do relates to a repetition of gestures and memory (Butler, 1988). Therefore, a familiarity with embroidery is informed by the past, class, gender, identity and status.

The notion of *diapaxis* is embedded first in interpersonal dialogue across cultural and religious differences. Including a material understanding, the *diapaxis* is comprising the dialogue taking place in The stitch project also through the tablecloth and all the traces left by the embroiderers with their various backgrounds. The participants are situated in the smooth place, in between the tablecloth and all its marks, the surroundings and its context, others around the table and their making of the not-yet expressed. Expressed through the needle and threads one finds on the tablecloth everything from a satanic cross, and Bible quotes to references to Allah on the tablecloth. The tablecloth has crossed the border to Gaza, it has stitches from embroiderers in Gaza and the Westbank who cannot physically meet due to siege and closed borders. It also has stitches from refugees from Donetsk, Ukraine and from migrants living in Kyiv. They are stitched into the same woven structure and materially entangled with each other with all their differences and in a materially expressed *diapaxis*. The tablecloth accumulates tactile stories that fill the fabric's blank spaces such as in the example of the teenage boy. These objects become activated and therefore, continue to carry and accumulate stories.



Figure 4. The stitch project (2012–), The Palestinian Museum, 2018. Photo: Marie Skeie

Conclusion

Using textiles as material and methodology in participatory art practices can bring the artwork closer to participants. Textiles are part of everyday life, moving between the private and the public and entangling a social dynamic within its making. It can challenge the binaries of "high" and "low" art as well as amateur and professional artists. Nonetheless, situating participatory art practice within institutional art frameworks that have been initiated and directed by artists can exclude potential participants.

I brought in the concepts of *al masha* and *diapaxis* to think with concerning participatory artistic practice. *Al masha* focuses on the common shared public space through the common activation and *diapaxis* on the relations across differences which is important for a possibility of sharing and meeting across borders through the stitching. The tablecloth has accumulated traces across time, now for 10 years, and witnessed many different places and contemporary contexts in an ongoing changing world. The tablecloth itself, with traces from the participants' marks, is one large piece of expression with multiple readings and directions. Making and using textiles is part of complex, collective history and as mentioned our everyday life. This makes a participatory textile project like *The stitch project* a potential part of *al masha* and *diapaxis* through a material-discursive practice. The common textile-making project

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opens multiple ways of doing, knowing, expressing, dialoguing, and meaning-making because it is based on a material praxis in an in-between, *smooth space*.

There are differences in power, authorship, and responsibility within the participatory nature of these projects which is important to consider. In turn, questions can be raised about the forms of *diapaxis* and *al masha* in the project through elements such as representation as well as the choices of context and language. The words “collaboration” and “dialogue” are often used when describing participatory art projects. The exchange of values, meanings and priorities are not always collaborative or conversational and instead may be adversarial, conflictual, and inconsistent. However, these conflicts and transformations enable a culture to create new understandings and meanings (Bhabha, 1994). Furthermore, as participatory textile projects are an embodied practice, they can create conditions for *diapaxis* and *al masha* that allow new encounters and narratives to be made in the public space through these sensorial, material, and spatial presences. In doing so, these meetings and stories are not just reliant on words but are also interwoven by the dialogue of stitches and patterns which represent part of a larger social, cultural, economic, and political fabric.

About the author

Marie Skeie is currently a PhD candidate at the University of South-Eastern Norway in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts Education. She holds an MA in Art and Public Spaces from Oslo National Academy of the Arts and a BA in Sociology from the University of Bergen. For many years she has worked as an artist, curator and producer within the public space often using textiles and a variety of materials and mediums in her work. Skeie’s interest in collective processes and artistic collaboration has led her to initiate and/or participate in projects such as *Her og der*, *(F)jorden*, *The stitch project* and *Gaza (a)live*.

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