

# Participation within the NIVA TO NENETS Project: Three Methods to Communicate, Share and Transfer Knowledge.

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## Abstract

Participatory art practices can moderate circumstances for people, opinions and traditions to meet. With human relations and social context as a possible point of departure, artists can handle a varied range of skills, methods and tools to create space for shared activities. Artists working with participants can adopt (elements of) existing methods or develop their own. When (participatory) art practice is studied within academia as artistic research, these methods are applied more consciously and the sharing of reflections on their usability is aimed for. In this context, I share some experiences build up from an artistic research project called *Niva to Nenets*, in which a Lada Niva is driven from Belgium towards the Nenets people in Arctic Russia in order to make an interactive road-movie. Focusing on three stages within this project, I describe how I approached, adapted and applied existing methods to stimulate knowledge sharing. First, I made probe kits for the participants who drove parts of the long road trip with me. This probe method was used during the preparation stage of the project. Secondly, I designed a strategy for public events departing from the format of a television quiz. This strategy is called Picnic-Quiz and was carried out during the road-trip. And thirdly, after the road-trip took place, I reflected on what happened through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This material-semiotic method proved meaningful during the design stage of the road-movie.

KEYWORDS: participatory practices, media art, cultural probes, Actor-Network Theory

## Introduction

In my artistic research, it is my goal to create favorable circumstances for combining and communicating knowledge. Knowledge exists of insight in certain situations or practices that take place in history, present or future. The process of going through experiences, building up skills or the creation of a certain point of view can lead to knowledge, just as the sharing of memories, thoughts or experiences. As a qualitative, unmaterialistic commodity, knowledge can be owned,

shared and transferred. Knowledge can come in many forms and shapes. Artistic knowledge, for example, can be intuitive, sensitive, specific, personal, tacit, indescribable, dreamy, spontaneous, and intertwined. As probably every artist in academia recognizes, artistic knowledge is not always easy to communicate. In a similar way, indigenous knowledge, local knowledge and situated knowledge hardly fit in Western scientific knowledge traditions. This forms a challenge for those who wish to include local knowledge in their (artistic) research.

I believe that artists have valuable tools at their disposal and work in suitable conditions to accept this challenge. Less restricted by empirical thinking and often trained to think outside the box, artists are able to bypass the burdens of ruling knowledge structures through creativity and artistry. In this context, departing from the wish to include and combine different kinds of knowledge, I search for inclusive approaches and methods. In my PhD in media art, conducted at KU Leuven in Belgium, I therefore research how shared activities and media use can create favorable circumstances for the sharing of experiences and knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

For one of the art projects I work on during this practice-based research, the interactive road-movie *Niva to Nenets*, I have driven my Lada Niva from Belgium to Naryan Mar in the northwest of the Russian Federation during the summer of 2013. An interactive road-movie about this journey, which will share the outcomes of this road-trip in an art installation and on a website, is scheduled to reach its final stage in 2015. It was my intention to give this car to the Nenets, who experience difficulties in sustaining their traditional reindeer-herding livelihood in times of globalization and accelerated climate change. However, the fact that I am of Western-European origin makes my wish to support an indigenous people questionable, as I encountered during earlier projects that included Arctic peoples.<sup>2</sup> Hence the *Niva to Nenets* project discusses what lies behind my urge to do ‘well’, in order to share thoughts about decolonization processes. For this purpose, the car had been transformed into a small mobile film studio, equipped with seven GoPro cameras. Situations and conversations on the road were recorded simultaneously from different view angles, while participants were driving with me to discuss possible side effects of my intentions. Also local people were invited to participate during public events in Hasselt, The

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about this PhD research, see [www.towardstogetherness.org](http://www.towardstogetherness.org).

<sup>2</sup> For example the Food Related project, that reached the proof-of-concept stage during this PhD ([www.foodrelated.org](http://www.foodrelated.org)).

Hague, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Helsinki.

Within the participatory strategies of this project, three methods were essential. First I worked with the probes method to communicate with my co-drivers. During the road-trip towards Russia I used the Picnic-Quiz strategy to structure the five public events. After that I used Actor-Network Theory to reflect upon the road-trip and its recordings, which helped me to design the interactive interface of the road-movie. Altogether they give some insight in my experiences as an artist working with these methods, which I believe can be inspirational to those who design or moderate participatory practices, and for knowledge sharing projects in and beyond the field of art.



**Filmstill 1: Leaving Copenhagen with Iben Mondrup and Kulunnguaq Petersen.**

## Probes to deepen the relationship with participants

The first method that I adapted and applied for *Niva to Nenets*, is the cultural probes method. Within the preparation stage of the project I wanted to get acquainted with the people that agreed to travel part of the road-trip with me, and to start imagining possible topics to discuss on the road. These people were all but one foreign to me, living too far away to meet on forehand. Cultural probes, sometimes referred to as design probes, are small creative tasks that invite participants to think imaginatively about certain topics or matters of concern. Like devices that are sent into deep

oceans or outer space, probe kits are sent to households and other territories where it would be (too) difficult or interfering for researchers to go themselves. For example notebooks, illustrated cards, maps, stickers and other materials are used to form open-ended, provocative and sometimes weird exercises providing empathy, impetus and enrichment for mental processes (Mattelmäki 2006). The probes method is often used within user-centered design and other design-based research in order to evoke emphatic responses. Besides artistic inspiration, the first probe study by Gaver et al. (1999, 2004) valued the possibilities of the probes to create relationships with their participants. Hence, I was convinced that probe kits could strengthen the bond between my co-drivers and me before we would spend a couple of days together, driving to unfamiliar places in foreign countries.



**Cultural probes for the *Niva to Nenets* project.**

A specifically for this purpose designed package of eight probes, which I soon nick-named ‘Getting-to-know-you-probes’, was sent to the co-driving participants a couple of weeks before departure. A booklet in which responses could be expressed accompanied the probes. In this booklet I also wrote useful travel information and explained my intentions with the project. One probe consisted of a DIY-cardboard for building a small Lada Niva, in order to imagine how it would be like to drive it to Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki or St. Petersburg, respectively. For another probe, I attached a small gelatin sperm whale with a big head full of bath oil to an invitation card, saying one could take this whale for a swim in the bathtub in order to let go of all worries related to the trip. This task also inquired how much luxury one needed on the road. The probe kit also contained a handmade handkerchief with prints of typical Dutch icons: a windmill, tulips and wooden shoes. It came with a wrapper with the words ‘I am sorry’ written on it. The

booklet described how this probe was linked to our colonial past, inquiring if there is anything I can do to compensate for my ancestors' mistakes. Because listening to music is usually a pleasant activity during long road trips, and a possibility to bond, I also added a memory-stick with a selection of songs about travelling. All songs that participants added to this stick, could be played in the car and prelude certain topics, if they wished. And because I am often asked why I feel so attracted to the Arctic, I also added a set of earplugs. This came with the suggestion to try them for a while, while acting as normally as possible. My experience of Arctic environments is similar to the feeling one can have after removing the plugs, I explained, that's why I feel the desire to be up north again and again. The cultural probes kits also contained very salty Dutch licorice candies, informing about food habits, diets, or what one dislikes eating. And last but not least, a set of labels to choose from in order to label oneself.

The 'Getting-to-know-you' probes were an artistic preparation for a long road trip. During the making of these probes, I focused more on the purpose and aimed responses than on the usability of the returns. Although there is no clear-cut formula for probing, Boehner et al. (2007) found that many practitioners take a *probes-as-recipe* approach (Lee 2012, p.62). Tasks are often generalized and uncertainty in outcomes is frequently limited in seeking scientific validity (Lee, 2013). Gaver, one of the initiators of the earliest probe kit, criticizes the analyzing of probe results as "they blunt the contact that designers can have with users through probe returns" (Gaver et al. 2004). Feeling more related to the initial artistic use of cultural probes as presented by Gaver et al. (1999), which had a stronger aim at the sharing of imagination than the gathering of raw data, I feel satisfied with the ambiguity in which the probe kits helped preparing the road-trip. Through the neatly assembled probes I portrayed myself as a caring person: in getting to know the person who takes you driving in an old car, for two days on a row, this trait was experienced soothing. More tangible, some of the probe subjects were brought up by the co-drivers during the road-trip. For example, Iben Mondrup introduced the label-yourself topic twice during our joint trip from Copenhagen towards Stockholm. And Svetlana Usenyuk, who drove with me from Helsinki towards St. Petersburg, shared her earlier described concerns about the car gift again during one of our recorded conversations.

## The Picnic-Quiz as a method for sharing

The second method that I worked with during the *Niva to Nenets* project is called Picnic-Quiz. Just

as the probes method established during the preparation stage, I searched for possibilities to strengthen and structure the communication with, but also among, participants. This time I focused more on the people that I would meet during the road-trip, for which I organized public events. It was important for the *Niva to Nenets* project to map out possible courses of action and to include different voices on the premise of the road-movie: the fact that I wanted to give an old car to an indigenous people. Such a gift is questionable and comes with difficult conditions, which I wanted to discuss as an important part of the road-movie. To cover the need for a structuring and guiding method to optimize the events that I had scheduled to take place during the road trip from Belgium to Russia, I designed the Picnic-Quiz as a format for sharing. The success of (artistic) participatory practices depends deeply on the setting and the atmosphere the initiators are able to provide, as participation is often motivated by curiosity, the possibility to be heard, and the prospect of a good time. Hence, the aimed conditions of the Picnic-Quiz include coziness, playfulness, a feeling of togetherness and an openness to contribute.

Instead of departing from existing methodologies within the field of participatory design, I found inspiration in the entertainment value of television quizzes. Combined with debate, dynamic showbiz elements can form a strong structure for the participation of groups of people. This is often the approach of the British art collective The People Speak<sup>3</sup>. For example in their project *Talkaoke*, people take place at a round table with integrated lights and speakers to discuss any topic they like. A talk-show host democratically facilitates conversations and builds an entertaining but comfortable atmosphere during these performative events. In *Who Wants to Be?*, another of their projects, the audience generates ideas for spending a certain amount of money and decides through a custom made voting system which idea should be executed after the show. Also in this format, the entertaining showbiz elements work persuasively. Therefore, it inspired the design of the Picnic-Quiz method strongly. But instead of the participants' freedom to introduce 'whatever kind of topic or idea', posing specific questions was preferred for the *Niva to Nenets* project. This becomes possible within the setting of a quiz.

Because food has the proverbial ability to break the ice during conversations and can literally bring people together, I considered commensality (the act of eating together) to be a useful feature of this participatory event in development. Claude Fischler defines commensality as one of the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://thepeoplespeak.org.uk>

most striking manifestations of human society (Fischler 2011, p. 529). Drawing on Georg Simmel's analysis of the shared meal (Simmel, 1910), he describes the sociological power of commensality as being magic, because it turns "the exclusive selfishness of eating into a habit of being gathered together such as is seldom attainable on occasions of a higher and intellectual order", into a collective, social experience (Fischler 2011, p. 541). Thoughts and emotions are indeed shared easier and less restrained during the shared activity of consuming food, whether it is among friends, family, business partners, or even complete strangers. Combined with the showbiz feature, the possibilities of food to bring people together and spice up conversations therefore became another strong element of the Picnic-Quiz.

The strategy lies in the combination of shared snacks and playfully posed questions within a casual but entertaining setting. There are usually three questions posed during a Picnic-Quiz, after a short introduction of the relating dilemma. Three colorful picnic blankets, one green with blue, one yellow with orange and one red with purple, are matched with three possible answers. People are invited to position themselves on the blanket that matches the answer of their choice. Picnic snacks in corresponding colors are then served at each blanket, and people are asked to discuss their position with those who choose the same answer/blanket. After a while, the participants are invited to share snacks with the people from the other two blankets, while sharing the outcomes of their discussion. For example, I shared my concerns about possible side effects of gift-giving, such as a disturbed power balance between the giver and the receiver. I then asked the participants what I should do:

- Green/blue: Don't worry about possible side effects too much and just give away the car;
- Yellow/orange: Only give the car away under certain conditions, for example as a trade;
- Red/purple: Don't give the car away at all, because it may do more harm than good.

I then explained how the colors of the picnic blankets symbolized these possible answers and people started to move around to take their position. A tranquil lentil salad was served on the Green/blue blanket, tradable cubes of cheese and slices of yellow and orange paprika were served on the Yellow/orange blanket, and red wine was served on the Red/purple blanket. When the participants finished discussing their viewpoints among each other, and later also with people who choose different positions, I introduced the next question. This question also offered three possible answers, each served with its own snacks. And so on.



**The Picnic-Quiz in action during the Participatory Design Conference 2013 in Roskilde, Denmark.**

The Picnic-Quiz was tested between April and August 2012, starting with an artist-in-residence working period at Extrapool in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. The method was refined during an artist-in-residence working period at Danish Art Workshops in Copenhagen, where the Picnic-Quiz was held as a public event during International Indigenous Day. Later that summer the method was put in practice again with minor improvements at the Participatory Design Conference at Roskilde University. After these three occasions to test possibilities and restrictions in practice, it was implemented in the recording stage of the *Niva to Nenets* road-movie in 2013. Camera holders were made for each blanket, in matching colors, to motivate participants to record their and each others' opinions.

Five Picnic-Quizzes took place during the road trip from Belgium towards Russia. Although they were not all well attended, the outcomes were always meaningful. Responses to the colorful picnic snacks were sometimes striking, as it so clearly added cheerfulness and joy to the atmosphere. For example, often laughter was expressed when people pretend to quickly change their position when desired snacks are served on a different blanket. The moving around from blanket to blanket, followed by the (re)grouping with other participants, made the event dynamic. The format turned



out to be strong in turning the audience into participants, and originated many interesting and useful discussions. Some conversations were valuable three times: during the moment itself, as an influence on my course of action, and as a scene within the road-movie. As the participants recorded themselves with small action cameras, most recordings are too turbulent or too fragmented to become part of the road-movie. Some of the recorded responses, however, add a valuable extra layer to this interactive story. But if I would pinpoint the most important outcome of the Picnic-Quiz, seen from my perspective, it would definitely be the mental support it gave me. For example, one of the quiz-questions concerned the bureaucratic difficulty of importing a car in Russia. Remembering all the words of advice giving to me during the several Picnic-Quizzes motivated me to keep on searching for creative solutions when Russian bureaucracy turned out to be less flexible than expected. I felt supported by the earlier expressed concerns and compassions, as if I was no longer alone in the decision-making. On the other hand, if I would pinpoint the strongest weakness of the method, it would certainly be its preparation time. As the whole travelling took an enormous amount of energy, and schedule was tight, it was a big challenge to prepare all the different snacks, in matching colors, on time. This sometimes exhausted me even before the start of the event. For future purposes it is therefore advisable to either schedule more time, or to transfer some tasks to others. Altogether, I consider the Picnic-Quiz an attractive and successful method that can structure dialogue in a joyful way.



**The Picnic-Quiz in action at Gallery Augusta in Helsinki, Finland.**

## Actor-Network Theory as a method for reflection

The third and final method that I discuss within this article is more an intellectual approach put into practice. Understanding that it is academically unconventional, but nevertheless meaningful, I applied Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a method for reflection after I finished my road-trip. Within the third stage of the *Niva to Nenets* project I had to evaluate over 350 hours of recorded film footage in order to select possible scenes for the road-movie. While (re)viewing this overwhelming amount of footage I reflected upon the journey in order to find out what and how things actually happened. Using ANT as a practical tool for reflection, the realities of participants in the *Niva to Nenets* project became clearer in relation to the topics and contexts that influenced them. This was useful in the discovering of possible storylines, and also influenced the design of the user interface that allows viewers to explore the selected scenes interactively. Inspired by ANT, this design aims to transfer the knowledge collected during the road-trip and the Picnic-Quizzes as holistic as possible.

ANT is considered a theoretical framework or ontology that helps exploring relational ties in between things and concepts. Although the name suggests otherwise, ANT is referred to as a material-semiotic method and not a theory. Its approach offers a set of tools for telling interesting stories about, and interfering in, relations (Law, 2007). One of these tools guides our view through the process of translation and thus makes visible how actors are changing when becoming part of a network (Callon, 1986). As the role or function of the Lada Niva often changed within the project, I was particularly interested in reflecting upon the multiple identities of this car. For example, because the whole *Niva to Nenets* project departed from my wish to give my beloved car to a Nenets family in order to support them in times of accelerated climate change and modernization, the Niva was considered a gift. But in the eyes of some participants, the car was, amongst others, also the embodiment of a mobile film studio, an object of camp<sup>4</sup>, a Soviet icon, a contributor to CO2 emissions, and even a piece of garbage. The fact that this specific car was driven to the high north of Russia often triggered the imagination and adventurousness. From all these associations, the car gave rise to many interesting discussions. Besides that, the car influenced the course of action during the road-trip by breaking down three times. Overall, the Lada Niva functioned as the center of the project, both as object and as subject, and influenced many other actors. To analyze the role of the Lada Niva within the participation processes of the *Niva to Nenets* project, I made

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<sup>4</sup> Camp as an aesthetic, see Susan Sontag (1964) and Marc Booth (1983).

use of ANT's translation tool. Latour (2004) worked out four general rules or chronological phases to help structuring this process. In summary:

The first rule focuses on perplexity and surprise (Latour 2004, p. 109). Potential actors need to be notified and should get enough space to join. For the participants, the characteristics of the Lada Niva, such as its design and its origin, triggered interest. Also the motivation to bring the car back to Russia, in order to give it away to an indigenous people, stimulated engagement. The second rule focuses on consultation (Latour 2004, p. 109). Different viewpoints are made explicit and discussions take place to consider possible strategies. Within the *Niva to Nenets* project, the ideas, opinions, questions and concerns that were triggered by the perplexity of the first phase, were discussed during public events and while driving the car. This process clarified the characteristics of the related actors. The third rule focuses on hierarchy (Latour 2004, p. 109). New actors find their position in the existing structure, which influences and alters the network. For example, concerns about giving away the car, consulted during the second phase, are now positioned within the network and thus influence its characteristics. The fourth and final rule focuses on the institution of agreements (Latour 2004, p. 109). That what has been agreed upon during the previous phases, should be fulfilled. When, for example, an agreement was made concerning the conditions of the gift-giving, I had to act upon that. However, according to the first rule, one should always preserve enough space or openness for potential new actors to join the network. Both in theory and in practice, the new situations that arrive with new actors change the course of action continuously. New locations, new participants, and new circumstances in the course of the *Niva to Nenets* project indeed changed the agreed proceeding related to the gift-giving continuously.



**Filmstill 2, breakdown near St. Petersburg**

While analyzing these four steps, I simultaneously realized that relational influences between actors go in all directions. It was not only the car that had influenced the participants, but the participants also had their influences on the car. And so had Russian bureaucracy, the road, and even the weather conditions. Working with ANT taught me how truth is usually holistic or rhizomatic in essence, and changes as soon as one changes the view angle. Departing from Latour's metaphor on ANT as a travel (2005), I followed different trails through the recorded film footage and draw a map of the encountered material and social relationships. For example, during the selection of scenes and the writing of possible voice-over reflections, associated connections were mapped out, clarifying diversities in opinions, influences and initiatives that were recorded. A rhizomatic network of influencing aspects, conditions and circumstances resulted in collections of related scenes, a variety of actor-networks, now forms the base of a navigational design that enables viewers to explore the content interactively by following certain actors or storylines. Viewers can choose and follow their own path through the extended collection of scenes and focus on specific passengers, locations or (sub)topics. Like actors within a network, these interests can be followed as trails throughout the road-movie.

## Conclusion

Within this article I have discussed the use of three methods for the *Niva to Nenets* project. The probes method was put in practice during the preparation stage, to strengthen the communication

and relation building between the co-drivers and me. The Picnic-Quiz method was put in practice during the road-trip between Belgium and Russia, to enable other participants to share their knowledge. And Actor-Network theory (ANT) was put in practice after the road-trip, to support reflection on the recorded film footage and to inspire the interface design of the road-movie.

The way these three methods were adapted and applied within the art project, are typical for how artists (should) make use of methodologies: always arrogate and convert the methods towards the concerning project. In contrast with conventional research projects within academia, every artistic expression is inimitable and not repeatable in similar conditions by others. Naturally, the applied methodology should too. In relation to their probes method, Gaver et al. (2004) expressed their worries about the way researchers appropriate the probes into a “scientific” approach. They deliberately refused to analyze the results of their probing because “the Probes embodied an approach to design that recognizes and embraces the notion that knowledge has limits” (Gaver et al. 2004, p. 53). In working with the probe method myself, I recognized the uselessness of a strong focus on its results. That what the probes brought into movement could easily stagnate if I too early or too strongly put my finger on it, I feared. Trying too hard to make creativity fit into the restricted knowledge structures of western-scientific reasoning, limits or even excludes the non-verbal, the intuitive, the uncertain, and the spontaneous responses. Trying too hard to carry out a methodology is obstructing as well. During the five Picnic-Quizzes, I occasionally felt the need to deviate from the earlier approved strategy. For example, following the flow of the activity it sometimes felt too arbitrary to dictate when the participants could eat certain snacks.

In general, I noticed that the concerned adaptation and practicing of methods was above all time consuming. For example, I spent more than four weeks on the design and the execution of the Getting-to-know-you probes. During the road-trip, which was a heavy load on my energy level in itself, every minute that I spent on the preparation of picnic-snacks was a big investment. And although the reading of theoretical books sometimes was a pleasant distraction from watching the endless amount of film footage, getting to understand the philosophy of ANT was a time investment too. It is impossible to know how the project would have evolved without using these methods, and thus it is pointless to scale its value in relation to the time spent. This is probably irrelevant in the creation process of all art works. But I can conclude that in the case of the *Niva to Nenets* project, I found all three discussed methods strong in stimulating engagement and

imagination. As such, they assisted and supported my artistic approach to communicate, share and transfer knowledge. I therefore conclude that it is meaningful to invest time in methodology, with the remark that within the art field, methods should always serve the creativity and not become an academic restraint jacket.

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