CONJUNCTIONS • TRANSDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION • VOL. 9, NO. 1, 2022

https://doi.org/10.2478/tjcp-2022-0003

Threads of participation: Crafting female agency in a collaborative art project in Denmark

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Abstract In 2020, Trapholt (a Danish museum of modern art, craft and design) and textile designer Iben Høj launched a grand collaborative art project involving almost 800 embroiderers. The project, named *Stitches Beyond Borders*, was part of the centenary celebratrions of Denmark's reunification with Southern Jutland, and participants were asked to embroider their personal vision of borders. By using a mixed method approach we firstly analyse how *Stitches Beyond Borders*, as a collaborative art project, created a strong sense of community and cultivated creative agency. Secondly, we focus on the discursive nature of the female public created by the art project. Taking into account the rich and complex history of embroidery as an underestimated female activity tied to repressive power mechanisms, we discuss whether the project ends up merely (re)creating an innocuous female public by favouring a personal take on the border theme.

Keywords Museum 2.0, participatory art, intimate female publics, cultural participation, arts and craft, craftivism, creative agency, the participatory museum.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, 778 citizens participated in the ambitious collaborative art and embroidery project *Stitches Beyond Borders* (referred to here as SBB) in commemoration of the centenary of Denmark's reunification with Southern Jutland. The project was organised by Trapholt, an acknowledged Danish museum of modern art, craft and design, and co-funded by national and local funds created to celebrate this event. Citizens from all over the country were invited to contribute by embroidering their own vision of borders/boundaries[1], and the artistic design was developed by knitwear and textiles designer Iben Høj. While the participants were given a relatively free rein in terms of embroidery style and choice of motif within the given thematic frame, Høj issued the formal artistic guidelines: participants were asked to sign their embroidery, keep loose threads hanging, and only use materials handed out by Trapholt and chosen by Høj. The materials and instructions were given at two opening nights at Trapholt in early January, and Trapholt also organised an additional six embroidery evenings at the museum, as well as co-organised ten workshops in various other locations together with local citizens, associations and institutions. The final artwork was assembled by Høj, who transformed the 717 embroideries into a six-metre high mobile for exhibition at Trapholt from 27 June 2020 to 7 November 2021.

Even though SBB did not formally set out as a *female* embroidery project, the vast majority of participants were women. And our study of the empirical data we gathered and produced during the project reveals that the project reactivated an inherently female collective memory of embroidering (the passing down of skills from older women to younger, embroidering in school, with family members and so on) and generated a strong sense of female community. Moreover, the creative task of embroidering a personal interpretation of the contested political topic of borders/boundaries led the women to consider, express and share their thoughts on the creative process of

Fig. 1. Participants choosing materials at the opening event at Trapholt. Photo credit: Kenneth Stjernegaard, Trapholt

self-expression. Not least in the Trapholt-hosted Facebook group 'Grænseløse sting – et kunstværk vi skaber i fællesskab' (*Stitches Beyond Borders* – an artwork we create together), which functioned as an important platform for support and communication between the participants.

This article investigates the way in which *Stitches Beyond Borders*, as a collaborative art project, activated the collective female memory of embroidering, created a strong sense of community and drew attention to female self-expression, as well as giving a voice to the women behind the stitches.

Firstly the article explores the participatory dimensions and values of SBB by outlining how the project placed itself in relation to the current norms and ideas about engaging the users of art and cultural institutions in the production and decision-making processes. Inspired by David Gauntlett's ideas of the power of making and theories on cultural participation (Jenkins, 2006; Simon, 2016, 2006; Sitzia, 2020), we examine how the project facilitated creative agency through the process of artistic creation, but also created a strong sense of community that can be understood as a mediated affective and communicative experience (Kelty, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015).

Secondly the article briefly explores the rich and complex history of embroidery as both an underestimated female activity tied to repressive power mechanisms and a counter-cultural practice (Hackney, 2013). The aim is to examine whether the project in line with current activist movements succeeded to reflect and perhaps even renegotiate the status of embroidery as an unobtrusive and reticent female practice.

Thirdly and finally, we investigate the nature of the female public created by *Stitches Beyond Borders* in order to define more precisely the way in which the project gave women a voice. Following Lauren Berlant's theoretical work on *intimate female publics*, we discuss whether the project ends up merely (re)creating innocuous female publics by favouring a personal and intimate take on the border theme. This, combined with the use of embroidery – a historically reticent and undervalued medium tied somewhat to female repression – might risk reproducing the status quo by creating a juxtapolitical female public that are prevented from gaining a voice and political validity among the general public.

METHODOLOGY

In order to gain insights into the diverse interests, practices, outcomes and values of SBB, we chose a mixed-methods approach combining fieldwork, written and visual material produced by participants, and a survey designed in collaboration with Trapholt. Our fieldwork was conducted at seven events (five events at Trapholt, including the launch of the project and the opening of the exhibition, and two local workshops in Billund and Padborg), and was comprised of observations as well as short semi-structured interviews with 38 participants (Kvale, 2007). In addition to this, we conducted more comprehensive interviews with the local workshop organisers in Padborg and

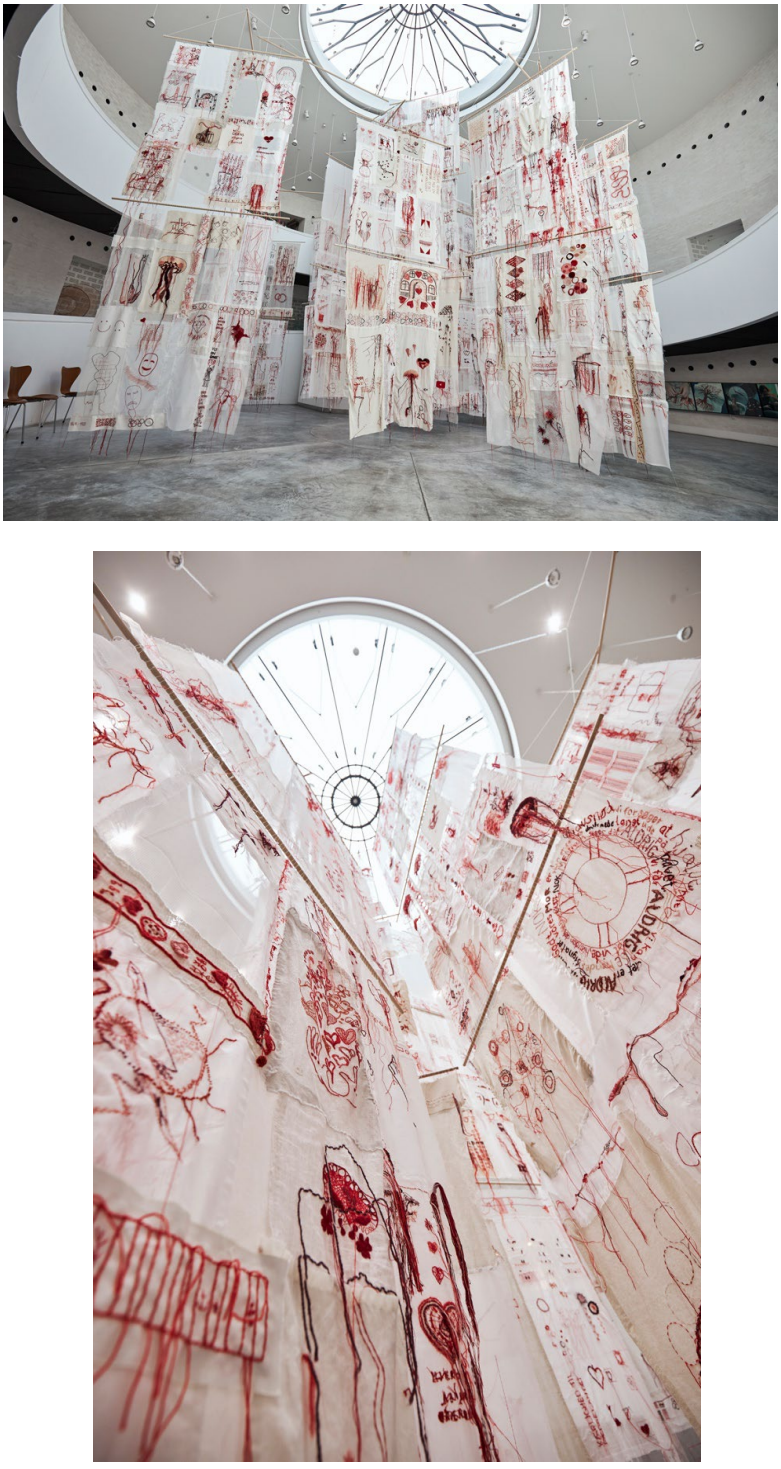

Fig. 2. The final art work exhibited at Trapholt. Photo credit: Kenneth Stjernegaard, Trapholt

Billund, and had several individual talks with the artist Høj and the two main organisers at Trapholt, museum director Karen Grøn and project leader Nina Schrøder. The interviews were designed to give us in-depth knowledge about the participants motivations and expectations as well as the values and meanings experienced thought the collaborative creative practice.

One important source of data is the survey which we designed in collaboration with the organisers at Trapholt. By using a combination of open-ended questions as well as questions with countable answers, the survey ensured us a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. This survey was sent to all the participants after they had delivered their embroideries, and 327 out of 778 participants responded.

In addition to the above-mentioned researcher-initiated data, we also made use of other sources of found data such as Trapholt's website, the embroidery guide, a radio interview and Trapholt's Instagram profile. One important source of found data is the Trapholt-hosted public Facebook group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/436609453936796/?ref=group_header (*Stitches Beyond Borders* – an artwork we create together), which attracted 529 members (19.05.2020) and became an important site for sharing and debating photos and personal accounts of the creative process and final embroideries. Another important source of data, which can be characterised as found creative data (Manney, 2015), was the 713 embroideries and the accompanying texts in which the embroiderers explained or in other ways contextualised their contribution.

By applying both qualitative and quantitative methods and combining researcher initiated data, found data and found creative data we ensured a comprehensive and rich collection of research data that offered nuanced insights into the complex set of agendas, values, motivations and experiences generated through the collaborative social and creative practices in SBB.

EMBROIDERY 2.0

SBB used embroidery as the creative and artistic medium for citizens to celebrate and reflect on the reunification, making it a good example of the current revival of embroidery and hobby crafts in general. Historically, embroidery has been considered an unobtrusive and reticent medium tied to the female and domestic domain; but as the professor of fashion and textile theories Fiona Hackney points out, this discourse is now being thoroughly challenged (Hackney, 2013). This is evident with new terms and practices such as 'craftivism', 'guerrilla knitting', 'Yarn bombing,' and the emergence of Facebook groups such as 'For a more aggressive cross-stitch embroidery' (translation of 'For et mer agressivt korsstingsbroderi'), which seems to lift formerly reticent crafts into a more confrontational and activist modus. However, it is important to note that the current revival of embroidery is a manifold tendency that comprises both the use of embroidery as a mindful and immersive practice, and a more activist and feminist 'craftivism' which revitalises embroidery as a political weapon by utilizing the connective and mobilizing affordances on new media. Furthermore, this craze for crafts is also to be found in art and cultural institutions, e.g. *Edderbrodermig* (2020) and CoviDesign (2020-21) at Greve Museum, *Im hideng indart the ligt* by Gudrun Hasle at Copenhagen Contemporary (2020-21), and *Units of Possibility: The Reknit Revolution*, by Amy Twigger Holroyd at Rugby Art Gallery & Museum (2017).

One important backdrop for understanding this current re-emergence of craft practices and their engagement with political agency is the advent of web 2.0 and the subsequent rise of online D.I.Y and D.I.W.O culture. By allowing internet users to produce, share and comment on content, web 2.0 technology has radically changed the distribution mechanisms and with it the social communication structures and opportunities of the internet. Media theorist Henry Jenkins has described this change in distribution and communication as a shift toward a participatory media culture in which former media consumers are now producers (Jenkins, 2006). This participatory media culture undoubtedly

plays a central role in the re-emergence of hobby craft. With the online global craft market Etsy.com, online communities where users share a common interest in a certain craft practice (e.g. Facebook groups such as 'Dogma embroidery', 'Embroidery without fucking flowers and bunnies!' and 'Modern and Snarky Embroidery'), and online movements such as the #pussyhatproject, it is evident that new media platforms have generated new opportunities for not only sharing patterns and creative interests, but also for mobilising what can be considered a new brand of connective craft activism using Bennett and Segerberg's concept of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

This relationship between craft practices and new media has been examined by sociologist and media theorist David Gauntlett (2011), who like Jenkins takes a positive stance in relation to the empowering opportunities of web 2.0. However, his main focus is not creative online practices as such, but rather a broader discussion about the social meaning of creativity in the light of web 2.0 and participatory culture. He argues that "the Web has played an important role in offline real-world activities, as a tool for communication, networks, and organization" (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 13), and that because of this we "are seeing a shift away from a 'sit back and be told' culture towards more of a 'making and doing' culture" (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 8). But at the same time, he reminds us that we also have to understand this current craze for crafting against the background of a rich cultural history of creative practices: "[…] people have been making things – and thinking about the meaning of making things – for a very long time." (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 1).

In the following, we aim to incorporate this focus on the rich tradition of embroidery as a feminine practice and the current ways in which it is being revived in the light of participatory culture in our analysis of *Stitches Beyond Borders* as a participatory embroidery art project.

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY IN *STITCHES BEYOND BORDERS*

Involving 778 citizens, *Stitches Beyond Borders* is a very ambitious participatory art project that fits right into the current norms and ideas about engaging the users of art and cultural institutions in production and decision-making processes (Eriksson et al., 2019). On the one hand, this participatory turn can be linked to the social and democratic crisis in the Western part of the world, which is facing pressing issues such as polarisation and a declining faith in democracy. This has been described by critic and art historian Claire Bishop (2012), who argues that the current crisis of democracy has led art and art institutions to take on the task of repairing the social bond by involving ordinary citizens in a more participatory and hence democratic way. On the other hand, this move towards more participatory practices and user involvement clearly echoes the ethos of the online participatory culture that Jenkins describes in relation to new media (Eriksson, 2019). For instance, the museum director and consultant Nina Simon has suggested that the modern museum can apply and learn from the philosophies of web 2.0, and her popular books *The Participatory Museum* (2010) and *The Art of Relevance* (2016) – as well as her blog, aptly named Museum 2.0 (http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/) – have been crucial guidelines for many cultural institutions for the past decade in the shift towards what she calls 'a participatory mindset'. This mindset is not so much about involving citizens with a view to fixing democratic shortcomings and broken social relations. Instead, it is an approach that, inspired by online participatory culture, looks at users as potential producers; as a potential resource that museums can cooperate with and learn from (Simon, 2010; Eriksson, 2019).

To a large extent, Trapholt has incorporated this participatory mindset, and in addition to SBB the museum has initiated four artworks involving citizens since 2014: *Maskernes Monument* (monument of the masks) 2015-16 by Isabel Berglund and 700 knitters, *Waste Time* 2016-17 by Anja Franke and citizens who painted porcelain and embroidered, and *Tingsted* (thing-place) 2019-20 by Rasmus Bækkel Fex and 300 woodworkers. In parallel with *Stitches Beyond Borders*, during the 2020

corona lockdown, Trapholt also organised *Lighthope* together with Rasmus Bækkel Fex, Hanne G. and more than 600 crotchetiers. SBB is thus one in a line of art and craft projects that involve citizens in creative processes.[2]

In line with the ideas of Simon, the participatory practice in SBB can be described as being collaborative with a co-creative dimension in the sense that local actors such as workshop facilitators participated to some extent in designing the programme and thus co-produced some of the project's goals. Nevertheless, SBB is primarily collaborative in the sense that "visitors are invited to serve as active partners in Simon, 2010, p. 187 the creation of institutional projects that are ultimately controlled by the institution" (Simon, 2010 p., 187). Trapholt and Høj established the overall guidelines and goals for SBB with a thematic frame and a fixed set of materials, but interestingly the creative task of embroidering was not given a predefined set of rules. Besides a few instructions (e.g., not to fasten the threads), the participants were free to choose their own embroidery style and form of creative expression and interpretation of the border theme. In this way Trapholt sought to achieve a collaborative practice that entrusted a big part of the creative process to the participants; and according to Høj this ceding of artistic control was one of the most challenging but also fruitful experiences of the project. On the opening day of the exhibition, she disclosed how her attitude towards the contributions had changed during the course of the project:

> At the beginning I was a bit uncertain whether the contributions would be good enough for the final artwork, but actually seeing how amazingly beautiful people's creations were made me very humble and appreciative. In fact, I started to feel obligated to do my best and to honour this impressive amount of work – in this way it has been an interesting balancing act. (Høj, 2020, our translation)

This reciprocal exchange of mutual trust and learning unfolding between actors in collaborative practices was also expressed by museum director Karen Grøn on the opening night of the project: "we want to inspire you – and to be inspired by you".

Simon has noted that the value of inviting visitors to do work that contributes to an institution can provide three kinds of value: 1) learning value, 2) social value, and 3) work value (Simon, 2010, p. 195). Work value relates to the value of participation from the perspective of the institution concerned – the participants quite simply produce useful work, and in the case of SBB this involves an embroidered artwork to be exhibited and kept at Trapholt. Learning value and social value concern the benefits of participating as a visitor. Both these values relating to the participant outcome have clearly been incorporated in the design of SBB, which according to Trapholt aims to both encourage creative practices (learning value) and strengthen a sense of community (social value) (Eriksson & Sørensen, forthcoming). According to the survey data, these objectives were achieved with great success, with most of the participants underlining that the social value of participating was both a significant motivation for participating and a crucial outcome. When asked why they chose to participate, 57% chose 'being creative with others' as a reason (closely followed by 'I am particularly interested in art and art museums': 56% and 'I am particularly interested in embroidery': 57%). And when asked to describe what the art project had meant for them, it is striking that a large proportion of the respondents mentioned 'being part of something bigger' and 'being part of a community', indicating that the participants in SBB felt a strong sense of belonging and community.

Our data thus clearly indicated that the participatory practice of SBB had a strong collective and social dimension, which is one of the two fundamental understandings of participation. According to media scholar Christopher Kelty, the participatory process is often either understood as a matter concerning power, agency and discursive impact, or a practice that concerns social cohesion and being part of something bigger than oneself (Kelty, 2015). Both dimensions, the

Fig.3. Participants showing each other their embroideries and sharing thoughts about the creative process at an embroidery event at Trapholt. Photo credit: Kenneth Stjernegaard, Trapholt

horizontal (social cohesion) and vertical (power and agency), as professor of cultural studies Birgit Eriksson has described them, are present in SBB (Eriksson, 2019). But for now we will focus on the former by asking: How did SBB actually cultivate this strong sense of belonging and community? After all, SBB was not a collaborative practice among co-creating peers (instead, the collaborative dimension lies in the collaboration between the artist, Trapholt and the citizens involved). And when participants were asked how much they had talked to people they did not know before joining the project, the most common response was 'not at all' (35%). In fact, only 8% of the respondents answered 'a lot', while 26% answered 'to some degree'. This indicates two things: 1) Trapholt did not fully harness the potential of connecting people through the shared act of making in a physical space that embroidery and crafts offer, and 2) SBB created a strong sense of community, but by drawing on the mediated affective and communicative experience of the public Facebook group, instead.

Regarding the first argument (the second argument will be unfolded in the next section): this potential has been described by textile and craft researchers Amy Twigger Holroyd and Emma Shercliff in their practice guidelines for textile-making projects (Shercliff & Holroyd, 2016). In this

instructive text, they underscore that textile workshops/projects have a vital capacity to connect people through the shared act of making. To some extent, Trapholt pursued this goal by arranging no less than ten workshops and six embroidery evenings to invite people to bring their embroidery and thus connect with each other. However, embroidery was not the main focus of these so-called embroidery evenings. Instead, the setup involved an oral presentation by an invited guest, creating a rather formal setting with rows of seats lined up in front of the presenter. This was, as one participant expressed, not an embroidery-friendly setting: "the setup could have been different; tables that would have allowed people to gather around embroidery and actually embroider during the presentation. Then, maybe, people would have hung around afterwards and maybe some sort of creative togetherness would have unfolded" (interview, Trapholt, 4 March). This indicates that the material set-up of project events is an important factor in actually facilitating a successful collaborative practice. In this respect, the workshops around the country were much better suited for the purpose of creative practice. This highlights one of the challenges of incorporating a participatory mindset in art institutions like Trapholt. When inviting visitors into the physical space of a modern museum that has often been designed to accommodate a different and more passive mode of visitor interaction, it is important to thoroughly consider the actual physical layout of an event if you want to facilitate the social dimension of participation.

STITCHING TOGETHER ON FACEBOOK

As we have described, Trapholt did not fully succeed in facilitating the shared act of making in a concrete, physical way at the museum events. But as revealed below, this seemed to be compensated for by the affective and connective dimensions of the project that unfolded in the public Facebook group created and managed by Trapholt. Trapholt used the group to share information about deadlines, schedule changes etc. and members were given the opportunity to communicate with Trapholt or Høj directly if they had any questions or uncertainties. Interestingly, though, it soon became an active forum for sharing and debating photos and texts about the creative process and final products among the participants. And in the survey's qualitative comments, the participants highlighted this opportunity for sharing and responding as an important source of support and sense of community. For instance, one participant wrote: "It has […] given me a fantastic sense of community to see and share the many embroideries on Facebook." While another commented: "The Facebook group has been a huge source of support for me, helping to keep me in the project and making me feel that I was part of a creative community. Likes and favorable comments on FB were like a pat on the back that was really valuable and gave me great pleasure."

The above comments clearly indicate that the Facebook forum was a vital aspect of the collective participatory experience in SBB because it facilitated a virtual 'shared act of making'. In this sense, the Facebook group seemed to support the connective capacity of creative making described by Gauntlett: "Making is connecting because acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with other people; And making is connecting, because through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments" (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 2). In other words, the connective and participatory affordances of social network sites like Facebook that compel their users to not only share information, but also comment and respond instantly by liking (or responding with a heart, a sad face etc.) (Klastrup, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015), seem to offer an encouraging environment for creative participation and community.

Further aspects can be added to the communal and social aspect of this 'making and connecting' online in SBB by turning to Kelty, who has described this dimension of online participation as the "collective, affective, and communicative experience of participation" (Kelty, 2015, p. 483). Starting

with the communicative experience, it can be noted that the lack of interaction and communication with other participants at museum events is counterbalanced by the rich communication unfolding online. This argument is not, at first glance, consistent with our quantitative survey data, which points to a low degree of communication between participants that did not know each other before joining SBB. Naturally, one reason for this may be that the respondents probably did not regard online communication, such as sharing a photo or liking a comment, as talking to people who they did not know in advance. The affective aspect of participation is also clearly cultivated by the online dimension of SBB. In her analysis of Twitter media and communication researcher Zizi Papacharissi argues that the publics occurring on social network sites are inherently affective in the sense that these sites create affective intensity through the sharing of information as well as "sharing of opinions, facts, sentiment, drama, and performance" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 126). According to Papacharissi, this intensity lies in the phatic mode of communication, which compels users into a more immediate and affective way of responding. This kind of emotional and affective rhythm as users feel their way into a specific topic or theme is clearly present in SBB's Facebook group, which seems to foster in particular an affective rhythm of recognition, support and thoughtful responses, something which is also highlighted in the comment quoted above. In studying the online Facebook forum, we found that the numerous postings of embroideries generally received great response in the form of likes and emojis. But they also received comments, the most common of these being 'well done', 'nice' and 'beautiful'.

The strong sense of community expressed by the participants can thus be understood as a mediated affective and communicative experience of being bound temporarily by the shared creative process and collective sense of contributing to the same artwork, rather than involving an embodied physical experience of embroidering together. By allowing the participants to share their own creative process, frustrations and accomplishments while tuning in to and responding to the shared embroidery practices of the other participants, the online dimension of SBB played an important role in generating a collective feeling of being part of something bigger among participants. In this sense SBB, as a participatory art project, can be said to harness the connective and participatory capacities of new media to realise the horizontal and communal aspect of participation. But on a more critical note, it could also be claimed that the online aspect of the project becomes an important element of the project's design, because it compensates for the lack of concrete interaction among participants at the events organised at Trapholt.

CREATIVE AGENCY

According to Trapholt, one of the main objectives of SBB was to encourage creative practices; and as we shall show in this section, this objective was achieved with great success according to our empirical data. Starting with creativity, it is significant that the participants reported that taking part in SBB had inspired them to be more creative and kindled (or rekindled) their interest in embroidering in general. For instance, one participant commented: "The project has led to more creativity in my life. New materials, new thoughts and a fun process of contributing to a collective artwork" (survey comment). While another said: "the project got me started being creative again – in my busy everyday life I had, unfortunately, chosen to do without creativity. SBB has kick started me and I have realised how much I have missed being creative" (survey comment). These comments, along with the survey results indicating that 71% of the respondents had gained new inspiration for embroidering, show that the project was a major motivational factor in encouraging the contributors to be more creative. However, it is important to note that SBB seemed to do much more than just inspire the participants to be more creative. Our observations at workshops and events at Trapholt revealed that the creative and reflexive process of embroidering a personal interpretation of the

border theme, as well as sharing ideas and the end result, offered what Gauntlett has described as creative empowerment. A key argument in Gauntlett's work on the social meaning of creativity is that even the smallest step towards creative doing can be empowering in the sense that "individually crafted items are expressive of personality, and of a presence in the world" (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 162). Creating something, and connecting with the world and people around you, leads to a strengthened creative agency and active doing that hold a potential for chance and transformation (Gauntlett et al., 2014). In Gauntlett's terms, SBB encouraged this sort of subtle creative empowerment by making the participants connect their own creative self-expression to the border topic in an artistic setting. Our data reveals that the embroiderers talked and reflected very passionately – and proudly – about their creative interpretation of borders/boundaries, thereby clearly signalling a sense of creative agency. One participant even described the leap from small steps to a more general empowerment and ability to 'do' and create: "it has been very rewarding. It has been significant [for my experience] to be able to use my hands and be immersed – this unfolding and enhancement of one's creativity can be used for EVERYTHING" (survey comment).

However, Gauntlett's idea that creative activities are small steps towards transformation and empowerment is rather vague when it comes to actually specifying the political and democratic scope of this doing and making. How does doing and making lead to strengthened agency? And in the context of this article: do all participatory projects involving citizens in creative *doing and making* automatically generate vertical participation and thus the potential for creative agency? This can be considered by turning to Emilie Sitzia's investigation of the relation between public participation and agency in art museums (Sitzia, 2020). According to Sitzia, it is crucial to distinguish agency from the two related – and often conflated – terms empowerment and ownership, given that both the feeling of ownership and empowerment can be present in a participatory practice without participatory agency being realised. Sitzia stresses that participatory agency in the context of the art museum is only ensured when a project design allows the participant to experience agency with regard to *intention*, *action* and *output*; and in fact she argues that co-creative practice often "creates a rather limited public agency" because "the agency created is limited and boundaries and control of the institution […] remain quite high" (Sitzia, 2020, p. 195).

If we take a closer look at SBB through this lens, it is interesting that the project seems to strike a successful balance between institutional and artistic control on the one hand, while creating the space for participatory agency on the other. In particular, the notion of intention, which has to do with allowing the participant to define "goals, large or small", thereby giving participants a considerable amount of power to make decisions for themselves (or collectively), is relevant in the context of SBB, because it can help us shed some light on the power relations at play between artist, museum and citizen. Although Trapholt and Høj set the overall guidelines with regard to materials, medium and thematic framework, the creative task itself, as well as the interpretation of the overall theme, is given quite freely to each participant. In this way SBB allows the participants quite a large degree of creative decision-making power regarding the creative *action* and *output*, which, according to the survey, triggers both empowerment and ownership. This creative autonomy is further underpinned by Trapholt's choice to exhibit each participant's embroidery descriptions alongside the final artwork, signalling clearly that the museum takes the work, motivation and creative reflections of the participants (and hence their intentions) seriously. We would thus argue that the creative autonomy given to the participants is crucial for their experience of creative agency. By allowing the participants to interpret the border theme individually and quite freely, both thematically and aesthetically, SBB afforded creative autonomy and public agency through a high degree of creative decision-making power.

EMBROIDERY AS A GENDERED PRACTICE

Stitches Beyond Borders did not formally set out as a *female* embroidery project as such. In fact, Trapholt encouraged citizens of all ages, genders etc. to participate. Not surprisingly, though, given the choice of artistic medium, the vast majority of participants were women (99% of the survey respondents). Historically, like needlework and textiles in general, embroidery has been considered women's work, and from the earliest of societies onwards women's labour has been closely connected to the production of textiles (Markus, 2019; Barber, 1994). As a collaborative embroidery project, SBB thus taps into a rich historical, but also highly gendered, context of textile work, and from studying the empirical data we have gathered and produced throughout the process, it became clear that the project very much seems to reactivate an inherently female collective memory and cultural history of embroidering. When asked about their previous experience of embroidery, participants would often share their personal family histories about the passing down of sewing skills from the older female generation to the next, and some had even chosen to include this female family history of embroidery into their contribution:

> When I finally started sewing, it was done with a kind thought to my female ancestors, especially my mother. […] My mother would attach great importance to embroidering the initials of her children (mostly her two daughters, though) on the towels that our aunt gave us every year. This is one of the reasons why I had to include my mother's initials in my embroidery. (survey comment)

This personal account highlights the fact that embroidery as a creative practice is deeply intertwined with female relations, family knowledge and the passing on of skills, and that it is often accompanied by a valued personal history. For instance, Hackney has described the way in which "[d]aughters always aimed at their mother's abilities, and even if youthful rebellion was signalled through refusal to participate, the homemade items became highly valued in later life as carriers of personal history." (Hackney, 2013, p. 182). In this respect SBB can be said to render visible the female values and family histories that are carried, both in embroidered items, and in embroidering as a practice and skill set that has been generously passed down from women to women. This becomes beautifully evident when the participant quoted above chooses to embroider her mother's initials as well as her own (this embroidered signature was one of the few creative dogmas stipulated by the project), thereby acknowledging the influence not only of her mother but also (in a much greater sense) the creative female practices that came before her.

However, the feminine practice of embroidery is also embedded in a problematic discourse about women's craft which is linked to the greater issues of gender inequality. As Sandra Markus puts it in her dissertation, citing Rozsika Parker (2010): "Historically, needlework was performed almost exclusively by women and was viewed as an expression of femininity and relegated to the domestic, interior sphere. Women's needlework skills were a reflection of their femininity, and hence their marriageability" (Markus, 2019, p. 4). In this respect embroidery is not only an undervalued and disregarded form of craft and self-expression, because it is closely linked with femininity. It has also served as a disciplinary practice used to produce a normative feminine subject. For centuries, the reticent, restrained and highly decorative practice of embroidery has been regarded as a suitable hobby for young (and often wealthy) women that mirrored the role of women in society as quiet and subordinate, graceful subjects. This has been portrayed by Henrik Ibsen in *A Doll's House* (1879), where Helmer lectures Mrs. Linde on the virtuous and graceful qualities of embroidery:

> Helmer: You knit, then?
> Mrs. Linde: Yes.
> Helmer: Know what? you ought to take up embroidery.
> Mrs. Linde: Really? Why?
> Helmer: Yes, it's far more becoming. Let me show you. You hold the embroidery thus in your left hand, and use the needle with the right – like this – with a long, easy sweep. Do you see?
> Mrs. Linde: well, perhaps.
> Helmer: But in the case of knitting – that can never be anything but ungraceful; look here – the arms close together, the knitting-needles going up and down – it has a sort of Chinese effect […]
> (Ibsen, 1879, p. 143, our translation)

This problematic cultural history of embroidery is currently being reflected on and renegotiated in activist embroidery practices that play with the medium's representative matrix, for instance by juxtaposing the familiar floral aesthetics with confrontational statements or imagery. However, it is important to bear in mind that such subversive and counter-cultural uses of women's craft have been practised throughout history alongside hegemonic discourses of female agency and creativity. This cultural history of counter-cultural craft practice has been described by Hackney as 'quiet activism', and according to Hackney terms such as craftivism, stitch'n'bitch and guerrilla knitting "signal a new energy; a will to re-engage with crafts, Morrisian/Ruskian political heritage, and the counter-cultural radicalism and feminism of the 1960s and 1970s." (Hackney, 2013, p. 170).

This inclination to re-engage with the political and feminine heritage of hobby craft is also present in SBB. According to Trapholt, the project was inspired by the historical use of embroidery as a political weapon in the fight for reuniting southern Schleswig with Denmark (Grøn, 2020). In the years leading up to the reunification, women from the Danish minority expressed their sense of national belonging by embroidering national symbols such as Dybbøl Mølle, the national coat of arms and the Danish flag on pillows and bell-pulls. This use of needle and thread as an important voice of resistance was the topic of one of the embroidery evenings. The question is, however, how SBB reflects and deals with the counter-cultural potential of embroidery that is visible in current embroidery practice. And even more interesting: How is this political use of embroidery in the years leading up to the reunification reactivated and reflected upon in the contemporary border context? This will be explored in the next section.

THE INTIMATE FEMALE PUBLIC OF *STITCHES BEYOND BORDERS*

As we have proposed, *Stitches Beyond Borders* certainly seemed to generate creative agency and a strong sense of community and collectivity among the participants; and in the following we will discuss the empowering dimensions of the project in a critical perspective by focusing on the gendered discursive power mechanisms in which SBB engaged by involving women in collective embroidery practice relating to such a politically loaded subject as borders.

In the article "When Borders Matter: Crafting Borders in a Participatory Artistic Project at Trapholt Museum" (Eriksson & Sørensen, forthcoming) we examine the way in which Trapholt, quite surprisingly, chose a rather depoliticised framing of the border topic. At the opening event of the project in January 2020, participants were invited to creatively explore stitching and interpret the theme of borders/boundaries in their own personal way. Contemporary political border issues were only touched upon very briefly in museum director Karen Grøn's introduction. In line with the project website, she presented multiple geographical, personal and symbolic borders/boundaries

and encouraged the participants to focus on what "borders/boundaries mean for you". In addition, the embroidery events did not cover contemporary border issues, so the project seemed to avoid politically charged or conflictual aspects of borders/boundaries by mostly referring to border conflicts as something of the past, and not the present. This was also reflected in the contributions that largely depicted historical border issues (e.g. the Berlin Wall and of course the German/Danish border), while more contemporary border issues (such as the US-Mexico wall and the EU's border in the Mediterranean) were surprisingly absent. This steering away from divisive and conflictual issues can be said to benefit the project's aim of inclusion and community. By emphasising the participants' personal interpretation, SBB created a safe space for shared embroidery practice and connecting socially with other participants. But on the other hand, it could be claimed that the project did not trust the participants to enter into a critical and constructive creative dialogue, thereby missing out on a great opportunity to activate the counter-cultural history of female embroidery in tune with not only the current wave of 'craftivism', but also the political use of embroidery in the years leading up to the reunification.

However, a more problematic issue concerns the way in which the emphasis on personal interpretations of the border topic combined with the use of embroidery – a historically unobtrusive and undervalued medium tied somewhat to female repression – risks producing what Berlant has described as an intimate public sphere. In *The Female Complaint* (2008), Berlant outlines the way in which women in American culture since the 1830s have been embedded in a speculative female discourse characterised by "the self-contained, performative modes of complaint" (Berlant, 1988, p. 253). As a consequence of the patriarchal power structures in the dominant public sphere that constantly poses the risk of embarrassment and delegitimation by only defining women as subordinate beings, women have historically sought the safety of an intimate female public sphere that allowed them to cultivate and repair their sense of belonging (Sharma, 2019; Berlant, 1988). This intimate public sphere must not be confused with a counter-public, such as described by Catherine R. Squires (2002), that positions itself in a renegotiating counter-relation to the dominant public sphere. It is rather a juxtaposed side public that allows women to be heard and to form a collective voice, but only through a governing and repressive modus of intimacy that upholds a patriarchal division between the sexes. Berlant describes how the female public operates through the affective structures of what she calls 'the female complaint'. By offering a safe space for the sharing of personal suffering and hardship, the intimate female public creates an intimate but also pleasurable community for women to indulge in the feeling of belonging to a space of emotional release, shared female experiences and ways of coping.

Berlant's notion of an intimate female public sphere offers an interesting critical perspective on Trapholt's choice to urge the female participants to relate to the border theme 'on a personal level' rather than addressing it as a politically charged and antagonistic subject. By doing this, Trapholt not only reproduces the problematic discourse about embroidery as an unobtrusive female medium which is tied to the private and hence personal sphere. The project also creates a community that can be characterised as an innocuous, intimate female public. Our observations, interviews and analysis of the Facebook group clearly indicate that social interactions at workshops, embroidering evenings and the virtual space of the Facebook group were characterised largely by the sharing of personal and intimate narratives. For instance, one participant told us that she had decided to embroider her uterus because she had gone through a hysterectomy just 14 days previously (interview, Trapholt); while another participant shared the personal narrative behind her embroidery depicting a dandelion: she had grown up just fine, much like the ever-adaptive dandelion, in spite of mental health problems in the family (interview, Trapholt). Deeply private accounts like these along with the affective structures of emotional support and sympathy in the comments signal that the community of SBB is orchestrated and fuelled by a very personal, affective and intimate modus and

thus operates as an intimate female public that on the one hand offers a sense of belonging and emotional resonance, but on the other hand reproduces the hegemonic discourse about women as subordinate, emotional and thus apolitical beings. The apolitical (and thus innocuous) nature of this public was expressed by one of the participants, who said that the community was about "techniques, chatting, the personal – not the political", and that there was a consensus "not to spoil the good mood" (interview, Trapholt 26/2). One participant even said, "In my opinion it is too much to allow people to write things [on their embroideries]… because a written statement is very intrusive. But maybe the artist can do something about that, and maybe hide it, if some [embroideries] are too political…" (interview, Billund 4/2). As the latter quote illustrates some of the embroideries did engage in politically contested topics, but overall SBB created a female public that detached the creative participatory practice from the political domain and thus, quite problematically, placed the participant's creative agency and voice of self-expression in a juxtapolitical and innocuous position.

Naturally, this does not mean that the experience of creative agency and empowerment that many participants expressed (and that we have analysed with inspiration from Gauntlett and Sitzia) is not real. SBB can in fact be said to be quite exemplary as a participatory project because the participants were given great creative freedom – which made them feel that they were being listened to and valued. So the project lived up to the criteria for agency at the museum proposed by Sitzia. However, these positive qualities only seem to lend the participants agency within the project, because Trapholt neglected to account for the gendered discursive power mechanisms in which the participants as well as the creative practices were embedded. Much like the female communities that Berlant diagnoses as innocuous and intimate female publics, embroidery is, as we have described, embedded in a problematic discourse that produces a subordinate and apolitical female subject. And when SBB creates a female community through the collective act of embroidering a personal take on such a political subject as borders without reflecting on or framing the problematic gendered discursive formations within which it is navigating, it inadvertently (re)produces these by positioning the female voices of the participants as distanced from the domain of the political.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In terms of its size and scope, *Stitches Beyond Borders* is a very impressive collaborative art project. And as reflected by the positive evaluations of the participants, Trapholt and Høj successfully designed and organised a creative and collaborative process for almost 800 people that the participants described as an exciting, entertaining and instructive experience. As we have outlined, this success may be due to the fact that SBB, as a participatory practice, facilitated both a creative agency and a strong sense of community. Starting with the former, Trapholt aimed to establish collaborative practice that entrusted a big part of the creative process to the participants by allowing them to interpret the border theme individually and quite freely, both thematically and aesthetically. Using the terminology presented by Gauntlett and Sitzia, we argue that in this way the project harnessed the creative power of *doing and making* in the context of the art museum by affording creative autonomy and public agency through a high degree of creative decision-making. In terms of the social value of the project, the participants almost unanimously emphasised a strong sense of community and belonging, even though Trapholt only succeeded to a certain extent in facilitating the shared act of making in a concrete physical way at the organised events. By analysing the Facebook group, we found that this communal feeling can be understood as a mediated affective and communicative experience of being bound temporarily by the shared creative process and collective sense of contributing to the same artwork, rather than being an embodied physical experience of embroidering together. The online aspect thus becomes an important dimension of the project's design in the sense that it compensates for the lack of physical interaction between the participants.

In spite of this participatory success, we argue that SBB not only missed an obvious opportunity for a more progressive and reflective use of the embroidery medium in tune with the current 'craftivism', but also placed the creative agency and self-expression of the participants in a juxtapolitical and innocuous position. By focusing on the creative power of stitching without considering the complex discursive power structures in which embroidery as a female practice is embedded, SBB disregarded the gendered structures of censorship and marginalisation. Inspired by Berlant, we propose that SBB created a female public that detached the creative participatory practice from the political domain and thereby unintentionally reproduced the hegemonic discourse about women as subordinate, emotional and thus apolitical beings. In spite of the community, empowerment and agency that were generated in the project it failed to appreciate that the power of stitching can be both subversive and repressive; and that in order to realise the former, it is necessary to recognise the latter.

ENDNOTES

1 The Danish word 'grænse' signifies both border and boundary, so it's important to clarify, that the embroidery task addressed both personal borders and boundaries.
2 Trapholt has continued this practise with *Among the trees* (2021-2022) *by* Tina Ratzer and 740 quilters and latest the embroidery and weaving project *Datamirror* (launched in April 2022) with weaver and designer Astrid Skibsted.

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