

Participation and affect intertwined: Linking participatory experiences and affective intensities in a collaborative craft-based art project

Tina Louise Hove Sørensen^{1*}

¹ Department of Art History, Aesthetics & Culture and Museology, School of Communication and Culture
Aarhus University, Langelandsgade 139, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

* aesttts@cc.au.dk

Abstract This article investigates the collaborative craft-based art project *Data Mirror*, launched by the Trapholt Museum of Art and Design in Denmark in March 2022 with artist and weaver Astrid Skibsted. Through the lens of affect theory (Massumi, 2002, 2009), the article explores how the textile making practice and the materials in *Data Mirror* affected the participatory experience. Building on Christopher Kelty's understanding of participation as strung between individuality and collectivity, the article argues that the experience of participation in *Data Mirror* is in fact "more than individual," but not only in the sense defined by Kelty of being "both individual and collective at the same time" (2019, p. 18). Over and above this, the participatory experience is also about connecting with and being moved affectively by materials, tools, and – in the *Data Mirror* case – artistic dogmas. The aim of the article is both analytical and theoretical. Based on a close analysis of (1) material intensities and embodied experiences of stitching and (2) felt potential and creative capacity, it calls for a more embodied, material, and affective understanding of the horizontal and vertical (Eriksson, 2019; Kelty, 2016) dimensions of participation.

Keywords participation, affect, craft, museum participation

INTRODUCTION

In November 2022 the Trapholt Museum of Art and Design in Kolding, Denmark, exhibited the grand collaborative artwork *Data Mirror* (2022–2023) by artist and weaver Astrid Skibsted, 48 weavers, and 623 embroiderers (Figure 1). The project had been launched earlier the same year, in late March, and everyone interested could join by embroidering either their own downloaded Facebook or Google data or a common 'Denmark model.' As it turned out, the interest in participating was overwhelming. In just one day, 1,200 embroidery kits were snatched up and the museum had to cancel the second of two planned start-up workshops.

The popularity of *Data Mirror* was surely related to the current resurgence in craft, but the massive interest must, however, also be attributed to the Museum's by now well-established participatory project design, which taps into and is part of this re-emergence and rearticulation of craft. Over a period of nearly ten years, Trapholt has developed this collaborative (Simon, 2010), craft-based art practice with projects like *Stitches Beyond Borders* (2020–2021), *Lighthope* (2020) and *Among the Trees* (2021–2022). In the process the museum has gained a devoted community of participants waiting eagerly for the next project. These returning participants also figured in *Data Mirror*, where nearly half of the survey responders (42 percent)¹ had participated in one or more of

¹ This percentage is based on the 494 participants who participated via Trapholt. 136 participated via drop-in centers. Only two out of 100 survey responders at the drop-in centers had participated before. Unfortunately, the drop-in centers changed Trapholt's survey questions and graduations slightly. This makes it impossible to compare the different data sets. Accordingly, I refer to Trapholt's survey only in the text, but add the



Fig. 1. The final artwork at Trapholt. Photo: Kenneth Stjernegaard, Trapholt.

Trapholt's previous projects, and a striking 97 percent² stated that they would like to participate in a similar future project.

Overall, the qualitative data on *Data Mirror* tells a matching story of positive experiences, but interestingly, the first-hand accounts also enable me to nuance the nature of that experience. Participants often mentioned how the project has inspired them. In fact, many participants underscored how the embroidery process has affected them and their everyday lives in a very fulfilling, but also rather intense way. One said that it felt "very, very, very giving" (interview); another wrote that "From the day I picked up my kit at Trapholt the first day until now, the project has filled my life, my thoughts, my conversations with others, and my creative processes in general" (survey comment). These accounts, like many others, can be said to reflect the "profound experience of meaningful, powerful participation" that according to Christopher Kelty is linked to participatory processes that facilitate an experience of becoming a collective (2019, p. 2). The profound and meaningful experiences in *Data Mirror* were, however, also notably shaped by the embodied, material, and affective practice of embroidering, and thus not exclusively linked to social cohesion and becoming "more than individual" (Ibid. 18).

Through the lens of affect theory (Massumi, 2002, 2009), this article explores how the textile making practice and the materials in *Data Mirror* affected the participatory experience. Building on Kelty's understanding of participation as strung between individuality and collectivity, the article argues that the experience of participation in *Data Mirror* is in fact "more than individual," but not (only) in the sense that it is "both individual and collective at the same time," as Kelty defines it (2019,

percentages form the other survey in a note. The qualitative data is not affected by this, and when I refer to interviews, survey comments, and accompanying texts, this refers to both drop-in center participants and 'regular' participants.

² At the physical drop-in centers, 72% responded that they would like to participate again. At the digital drop-in, this number was 83%.

p. 18). The participatory experience is also about connecting with and being moved affectively by materials, tools, and artistic dogmas. The aim of the article is therefore both analytical and theoretical. Based on a close analysis of (1) material intensities and embodied experiences of stitching and (2) felt potential and creative capacity, it calls for a more embodied, material, and affective understanding of the horizontal and the vertical (Eriksson, 2019; Kelty, 2016) dimensions of participation.

ABOUT DATA MIRROR

In *Data Mirror*, Trapholt and Skibsted invited everyone interested to embroider a digital visualization, a so-called data mirror, of their own downloaded data from Facebook or Google. The data mirror, that was translated into circular word clusters by an algorithm, 'mirrored' the words, that the participant had either posted on Facebook or typed into Google's search engine. If the participants did not want to or were unable to use their own data, they could also base their embroidery on data from a common 'Denmark model' based on the accumulated data in the project. However, the majority of participants chose to download and embroider their own data.

The analysis of the personal data and the process of conveying it into stitches were guided by artistic 'dogmas' set up by the artist. The dogmas worked on two levels, with instructions on (1) how to download, reflect on, and translate the individual data traces, which were then made into a digital data mirror by an algorithm, and (2) the materials and the type of stitches, with the participants obliged to use the fabric and yarn that Astrid Skibsted had selected (three different colored skeins and one white skein per embroidery kit) and, for the stitching, horizontal and vertical stitches only (Figure 2 & 3). The digital data mirror that visualized the words that the participant had posted or searched for functioned as a template for the embroidery (Figure 4). But it also functioned as a visual model which, by organizing the data thematically and quantitatively, made it easier for the participants to explore the data traces.

The project was launched in late March 2022. Just over two months later, 623 embroiderers handed in 630 embroideries at Trapholt (some participants had chosen to embroider both their Facebook and their Google data mirror). During the embroidery process, participants had had the opportunity to join a range of different workshops and salon formats hosted by Trapholt, by the embroiderers themselves, or partner institutions like libraries, cultural houses and the national association of drop-in centers (Landsforeningen af Væresteder).



Fig. 2 & 3. The participants translated their digital data mirrors into embroidery with vertical and horizontal stitches using the material handed out by Trapholt. Photo: Kenneth Stjernegaard, Trapholt.



Fig. 4. A print of a digital data mirror. Photo: Kenneth Stjernegaard, Trapholt.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical data analyzed in this article was collected and produced as part of the action-based research project CraftWorks (2021–24), a collaboration between the Trapholt Museum (director Karen Grøn, project manager Nina Schrøder) and Aarhus University (Professor Birgit Eriksson and Sørensen (the present author)). As researchers, Eriksson and Sørensen followed and actively contributed to the development of the project – from concept to exhibition – while at the same time gathering knowledge using a mixed-methods approach. This incorporated a quantitative/qualitative survey conducted in collaboration with Trapholt (the survey was sent to the 494 participants, of whom 203 responded),³ 43 interviews with participants, 26 observations, 630 embroideries and accompanying texts, eight creative diaries, and two Facebook groups – a public *Data Mirror* group with 1,300 members and a private group with 87 members from the national association of drop-in centers.

A guiding strategy for choosing and combining qualitative research methods was Luc Pauwels' useful distinctions between researcher-initiated data, participatory data, and found data (2011). Pauwels' typology, further developed by Dawn Mannay, distinguishes between: (1) already existing data, that is, data produced without involvement of the researcher (found data), (2) data production controlled and initiated by the researcher (researcher-initiated data) and (3) participatory productions facilitated by the researcher but produced by the respondent (participatory data). This typology inspired us to use a mix of all three data types. Perhaps most importantly, it ensured a focus on including 'participatory productions' that to some degree decentralized data control and enabled unexpected perspectives and "questions we would not think to ask" (Mannay, 2015, P. 27). These participatory productions did, however, also obviate the need for more embodied and process-near accounts of making. As Amy Holroyd and Emma Shercliff have noted, it can be "challenging to capture the making experience" in participatory textile projects (2016, p. 14). As they suggest, "reflexive note-making" after making-activities is one way to deal with this, and accordingly we invited participants in *Data Mirror* to volunteer as creative diary-writers.

³ An altered version of this survey (see note 1) was also sent to the 136 participants participating via the drop-in centers.

A key methodological challenge was how to capture and be analytically attentive to affective intensities and processes in the collection and coding (done with NVivo) of data. Affect, as a bodily state, is ephemeral by nature and is, according to the branch of affect theory that this article draws on, beyond representation. This, naturally, presents a challenge for conventional fieldwork techniques and content analysis. Inspired by Britta T. Knudsen and Carsten Stage's strategies for affective methodologies (2015), we opted for a more embodying observation strategy, with a focus on the bodily reactions and orientations when participants interacted not only with each other but also with materials and tools. Furthermore, the facilitation of creative diary writing was also informed by this affective methodological approach. As Stage and Knudsen point out, "Texts linked closely to social practices seem to be privileged material because of their ability to (through either content or form) track bodily rhythms and automatisms as well as cognitive responses to affective forces" (2015, p. 12). On a more analytical level, the article also draws on Knudsen and Stage's strategies for tracing affect. This entails a textual analysis and coding of expressed affect (of emotional statements, or accounts of bodily experiences and intensity), but also of stylistic markers of affect, such as outbursts, exclamation marks, capital letters, broken language, and hyperbole.

THE PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE AND AFFECT

Since 2014, Trapholt Museum has developed a large-scale participatory practice involving up to a thousand participants in craft-based collaborative art projects. This unique practice, which invites ordinary people to contribute to a collaborative artwork to be exhibited and later saved at Trapholt, fits right into current norms of participatory art and of the democratization of cultural institutions that have been on the agenda in art and cultural institutions for well over a decade (Simon, 2010; Black, 2005, 2011).

This orientation toward participatory strategies in art museums and cultural institutions is of course part of a much wider participatory turn that has gained ground across various academic fields, cultural practices, institutions, and policies in the twenty-first century. Participation has become a cultural norm, a buzzword, and accordingly it is sometimes difficult to decipher how participation and its potentials are to be understood. Kelty, and more recently Birgit Eriksson, have shed some light on this vagueness, which also sometimes seeps into the participatory theory. The vagueness, they both argue, arises because participation has two fundamental meanings. As Eriksson explains it, participation is subject to a vertical and a horizontal understanding. In the vertical understanding, participation has to do with decision-making and power: how the participant gains voice and agency. This understanding is developed and explored in much of the political theory about participation (Carpentier, 2012, Pateman, 1979, Arnstein, 1969). In the horizontal understanding, participation has to do with belonging, community, and becoming a collective: a central argument is that "We cannot understand participation's many forms without paying attention to both community and ownership, belonging and empowerment – and the complex relation between the two" (Eriksson 2019, p. 223–224).

Participatory theories do, however, often fall short when it comes to exploring and describing the affective, material, and bodily dimensions of the participatory experience. This has also been noted by Kelty et al., who argue that theories on participation often reference the affective aspects of participation without making them central to theory (2015, p. 484). Affect does not exactly take a leading role in Kelty's work on participation either, but he describes the horizontal, collective dimension of participation as inherently affective, and in *The participant* (2019) he develops this further through the notion of "the experience of participation":

Participation is also an experience of a peculiar kind: it is the experience of becoming a collective. It is neither a strictly private, personal experience nor a fully collective, anonymous one. Neither the memoir nor the statistic can communicate it. Experiences fade. The immediate, emotional, affective experience of participation is intense and meaningful in the moment, tattered and incomplete in retrospect. The experience of participation, I maintain, is not accidental but essential to the power of participation – but it is also the aspect least likely to be preserved, strengthened, or taken seriously. (Kelty 2019, p. 3)

Powerful and meaningful experiences of participation, in Kelty's account, thus stem from the intersubjective, social experience of becoming a collective, and are inherently affective and fleeting (although he does not specify these affective qualities further).

Nevertheless, it is evident that “the immediate, emotional, affective experience” (ibid.) in *Data Mirror* is not exclusively linked to the social encounters and effervescence of being part of a community. Time and time again, the participants expressed how working with the artistic dogmas, the digital data mirror, and the materiality of the embroidery affected them, sometimes quite intensely. To explore and analyze these material and affective experiences of participation in *Data Mirror*, this article takes a cue from Kelty's focus on “the participatory experience,” because it very sympathetically directs focus onto the lived experiences of the participant. In so doing, it also to some degree places the focus on the sensuous encounters and the in situ experiences that are part of all participatory processes, but very often evaporate or are left out completely once participation is theorized.

This article does, however, argue that not only do we need to direct focus onto the participatory experience, we must also (re)consider the nature of that experience as having to do with more than social interactions and becoming a collective. Inspired by affect theory (Massumi, 2002, 2009), this article argues for a more embodied material and affective approach to participation. Affect theory directs our attention to affective conditions, intensities, and capabilities of the body as well as to immaterial transmission between humans and nonhuman entities, and this brings something new to participatory theory, which often ignores these dimensions in favor of a focus on the participating subject(s). This theoretical perspective also helps us to understand and define the participatory experience as inherently affective. As Brian Massumi has pointed out, “intensity and experience accompany one another like two mutually presupposing dimensions or like two sides of a coin” (2002, p. 33). The theoretical framework for such an analysis will be elaborated further in what follows.

AFFECT THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the turn of the century, affect has been a central concept in art, culture, and media studies, as well as various other disciplines. Publications like Massumi's *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation* (2002), Teresa Brennan's *The transmission of affect* (2004) and Nigel Thrift's *Non-representational theory: Space, politics, affect* (2008) have led the way toward a renewed focus on the non-representational – on atmospheres, on affective conditions, on intensities, and on capabilities of the body and immaterial transmission between humans and nonhuman entities.

Since then, as the field of affect studies has gained ground, various approaches to studying and understanding affect have emerged. This article draws on Massumi's understanding of affect as precognitive intensity. It is thus inspired by the line of affect studies heavily influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's elaboration of Baruch de Spinoza's original distinction between affect and emotion. In their account, affect refers to “the ability to affect and be affected. It is a

pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xvi, cited by Papacharissi, 2015, p. 13). Affect is not, however, restricted to the realm of the body: it is incoming and outgoing, always on the move. The body, as Deleuze and Guattari remind us, is deeply contextual in the sense that it enfolds and is unfolded in social and material contexts (2005). Following this line of thought in the context of *Data Mirror*, it is important to remember that affective intensity does not magically appear in the participants: it unfolds in the conjunction *between* the participant and the things, materials, and bodies that she/he encounters in the participatory process.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Massumi understands affect as precognitive intensity: a bodily capacitation and activation that unfold *before* cognition can translate and fix it semantically. Affect, Massumi asserts, is "a perception of a qualitatively different kind"; "emotion and affect – if affect is intensity – follow different logics and pertain to different orders" (Massumi, 2002, p. 27). The logic of intensity does not follow a conventional positive–negative index in the sense of positive or negative emotions, but is about intensities as felt transitions "where a body passes from one state of capacitation to a diminished or augmented state of capacitation" (Massumi, 2009). These transitions tend to invigorate us and often take on positive connotations when put into words, "for it is nothing less than the *perception of one's own vitality*, one's sense of aliveness, of changeability [...]" (Massumi 2002, p. 36). This non-indexical logic of intensity is a useful approach to analyzing participatory experiences, because it helps us understand that meaningful participation is not necessarily expressed with positive emotions. Often, invigorating and powerful participation is complex, ambiguous, and intense.

Another useful concept for analyzing affect is Massumi's notion of *attunement*, which signifies the immediate bodily response that unfolds when the body is hit by affective force. This term, along with the adjoining term *cue*, is useful for distinguishing between affective signs (cues) and affective reactions – between bodily attunement and the *cue* that induces it. Importantly, affect does not transmit uniformly from body to body, and bodies are not *attuned* evenly by the same cue:

Say there are a number of bodies indexed to the same cut, primed to the same cue, shocked in concert. What happens is a collective event. It's distributed across those bodies. Since each body will carry a different set of tendencies and capacities, there is no guarantee that they will act in unison even if they are cued in concert. However different their eventual actions, all will have unfolded from the same suspense. They will have been attuned – differentially – to the same interruptive commotion (Massumi, 2009, p. 6).

I argue that affect, as it is conceptualized by Massumi, is a productive lens for analyzing participatory experiences because it directs focus onto the myriad of intensities that occur in and move through the complex relations and contacts between bodies and materialities in a participatory process. Furthermore, it helps us to recognize participation as an embodied experience that does not necessarily attune the participating bodies uniformly.

EMBODIED EMBROIDERY AND MATERIAL INTENSITY

One of the crucial aspects of Trapholt's artistic collaborative practice is that it is craft-based. Participation in *Data Mirror* unfolded through the material creation of a personal embroidered contribution, one that required effort and, to some extent, the "application of skill and material-based knowledge" (Adamson, 2010, p. 2). When analyzing and coding the empirical data, it became apparent that the chosen craft and the materials handed out also influenced the participatory

experience significantly. As argued in various new materialist perspectives, it is not only the user who does something with the material; it is also the material that shapes the user (Latour, 1996; Bennett, 2010; Dudley, 2013). As I will show in what follows, this material agency – ‘thing power,’ as Jane Bennet calls it – is evident in *Data Mirror*.

As participation unfolded in a physical and social setting at embroidery workshops and talks at Trapholt or at local meetings in libraries, cultural institutions, or private homes, I observed how the yarn and the embroideries, as well as the participants’ knitted sweaters and other crafted gear, quite consistently cued the bodies efficiently with reactions of excitement and attraction: reactions that shifted the focus and bodily orientation noticeably toward the material (Figure 5). Textiles, as Alice Dolan & Sally Holloway have noted, are “emotionally charged for a myriad of reasons including their association with women’s history, admiration of skill, and the sensation of physical comfort created by the touch of soft” (2016, p. 155). Some of these emotional histories and tactile affordances were clearly activated when the participants encountered the materials in *Data Mirror* in a collective setting. On several occasions I observed how the passing around or showing off of the embroideries, as well as the materials laid out by Skibsted herself, made the participants crowd around, lean in toward and touch the textiles, and how this often evoked intimate and personal stories about learning or practicing textile craft. This material attraction was, however, also cued by Skibsted herself. During both physical and online meetings, she directed the participants’ attention to the quality and sensuousness of the materials and encouraged them to approach the colors and materials anew – by, for instance, embracing a color they might dislike. The textiles, and Skibsted’s approach, quite uniformly set off positive bodily histories and capacities, and instantly prompted physical touching and handling of the embroideries. Interestingly, this tactile orientation also seemed to rub off on the social interactions, which often had an intimate, personal, and supportive modus, much like the intimate female publics Lauren Berlant has described (1988; Sørensen & Eriksson, 2022).

These physical meetings were, however, only attended by some of the participants. Most of the embroidering was done individually at home. Much like my observations from physical meetings, the accounts of the individual and more solitary processes tell a story of material intensity and engagement, but they also reflect more differential attunement to the embroidery and materials. The pre-chosen colors in particular gave rise to ambivalent reactions. Some were very positive: “[...] the three red nuances of flax yarn governed my associations [...] and made it easy,” while other participants experienced a diminished capacitation: “I have had some difficulties accepting the combination of the colored linen and the yarn. I would never have thought that it would affect me, but it made it harder to get my contribution done because I didn’t feel comfortable with it” (accompanying text).

Interestingly, some participants portrayed how they formed a very close bond with the embroidery. One participant, for example, disclosed how the embroidery became a confidential co-producer: “It’s sad to finish off the project that we (the embroidery and I) have spent many hours working on with thought and reflections” (accompanying text). This confidential and intimate relation between the embroiderer and the material mirrors the social modus of the physical embroidery meeting, but of course differently – it is an emergence of a nonhuman/human ‘we.’ A similar thing–human relation was articulated in this survey comment:

Data Mirror has been surprisingly important for me. It has been a new experience to express myself artistically. It struck me deeply. Just imagine: When I cut the last tiny flax yarn there was an unexpected sob.

The symbolically loaded wording in this survey comment bears interesting traces of affect and relational intertwinement between maker and embroidery. The participant articulates the



Fig. 5. Participants engaging with materials, and each other, at a workshop at Vejen library. Photo: Kenneth Stjernegaard, Trapholt.

importance of expressing herself artistically through the embroidery, but the embroidery also made an impression on her. In fact, it struck her “deeply,” connoting that the embroidery or the stitching needle pierced her. Not only did this have a profound affective impact, it also tied or stitched her intimately to the embroidery – as if it was a part of her body or a baby from which she now had to separate herself by cutting ‘the cord.’ This is underscored by the unexpected bodily outburst as she cuts the last thread.

The sadness that both embroiderers experienced when the project came to an end reflects that the embroidery process had been a deeply affective and relational experience, one that differed from the collective experience Kely writes about. This was rather a becoming of a human–nonhuman collective, of being intimately attached to and moved by the embroidery. Belinda MacGill has described how “Craft brings us into being through enactments of co-construction, making, being and belonging: it is a practice of ‘injointness’” (2019, p. 415), and it is exactly this experience of co-construction and being *in between* material and self, or being more than self, that moves the participants and brings them into being.

Along similar lines, Tim Ingold has described the relation between maker and material as a *correspondence*. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas of matter as “always in movement, in flux, in variation,” he further elaborates on this relation: “The builder or artisan, destined thus to follow the material, is necessarily an itinerant or wayfarer. He or she must go where the material goes finding the grain of the world’s becoming and bending it to his or her evolving purpose. Deleuze and Guattari call such following ‘intuition in action’” (Ingold 2011, p. 4).

This intuitive creational modus was, for some of the participants, experienced as Ingold describes it, as a matter of following and thus allowing themselves to give up control of the material. One participant often embroidered upside down to “let the yarn live a life on its own” (accompanying text). Another was excited about the materials and was inclined to follow them and the emotions they brought on: “Embroidering with flax yarn is incredibly sensitive and vulnerable and I liked it enormously. FOLLOWING the materials was a great experience” (survey comment).

Others described a similar, yet slightly different intuitional experience of letting “the hand guide the needle – not the brain” (accompanying text) or letting “the thread do the talking. And the hand”

(accompanying text). In these accounts, we often see how the participants strove after, and enjoyed, a more intuitive, bodily autonomous embroidery process in which the hand – or the needle, as the middle ground between maker and material – took the lead rather than the conscious mind. In other descriptions, the agency of the embroidery process is placed even further away from the subject: “the embroidery created itself in the process” and “the needle stitched on its own and the flower just appeared” (both accompanying texts). Analyzing these making narratives, it becomes apparent that it is hard to pin down the source of making agency precisely because it is moving *in between* maker and material. Or as Belinda MacGill describes it, “Craft does not reside in the body, but it moves between the maker and the object being made” (2019, p. 411). This moving or continuous dislocation of doing is also reflected in individual stories like this one, where the participant quite poetically describes the agential ambivalence of making: “It’s the needle that embroiders, no, the needle paints with the yarn. It is not me who paints with the yarn, it is the needle that paints. Well, it is of course also me and my needle” (Interview).

As the analysis shows, the participatory experience in *Data Mirror* was greatly influenced by the affective affordances of the textiles and the embodied nature of embroidering as a correspondence between maker and materials. The embroidery process brought forth feelings of belonging and material partnership. More than this, it was also, as I have argued, an experience of becoming a collective in a broader sense than Kelty has described it. This way of connecting to things and materials through making can of course be understood and categorized as horizontal participation. The connection with the material spills over into, and cannot be fully separated from, the social experience of being a part of something bigger that many of the participants articulated (Eriksson & Sørensen, 2023). The embroidery is, after all, individual pieces in a collective artwork, and the embroidery process and the bodily tensions were surely informed by this collective future. In that sense, the participants were embroidering in concert even though they didn’t physically do it together, much as this participant described it: “There is something about this feeling, that women in all of Denmark are embroidering. Doing something together. But not together – we don’t need to” (interview).

We must, however, also look at this from another angle. The collective social experience in *Data Mirror* is very much influenced by and cannot be separated from the textile materials and the craft practice. As the initial analysis of the physical embroidery meetings indicated, the textiles quite concretely shape the social encounters. Accordingly, I will argue that we must consider the material, embodied, and affective dimensions when we analyze and conceptualize horizontal participation. The engagement and the deep powerful participation that Kelty describes does not happen magically when people are brought together as part of a participatory process. Participation is, as with *Data Mirror*, often – if not always – shaped by the sensuous, material, and affective nature of the participatory activity. We need to think of the relational, collective, and cohesive dimension of participation as more than something that happens in between subjects.

AFFECTIVE AGENCY IN DATA MIRROR

The participatory practice in *Data Mirror* gained some of its participatory intensity from the relational, embodied, and affective nature of craft. It is, however, also an aesthetic and artistic participatory practice that uses embroidery to discuss and reflect on an important societal issue by setting up ‘creative dogmas’ for the participants to follow. The participants responded to the dogmas in different ways. Some found them “too strict” (survey comment), while others referred particularly to the stitching rules as “a revelation” (accompanying text) and “a challenge that makes you grow” (accompanying text). Looking across the qualitative data it is, however, evident that the participants generally appreciated the creative dogmas. This was also reflected in the survey, in

which 86 percent⁴ responded that it was important or very important that the project works with artistic rules and dogmas.

From an affective perspective, the dogmas are interesting because they brought intensity into the embroidery process, an intensity that elevated it from everyday textile practice. Some of the participants highlighted how the creative and analytical task evoked a myriad of reflections: “the two circles have indeed given rise to a lot of thoughts. Could I use the time I spend on my mobile and iPad better? Should I perhaps stop using Facebook and Instagram entirely? And a lot of thoughts regarding the embroidery, colors, patterns... I have never pondered so much, and it is really just two circles!” (accompanying text). While others articulated how the stitching rules interrupted old patterns of textile making: “My previous experience has been cross-stitch embroidery, and therefore it has been challenging to restrict myself to vertical and horizontal stitching, but quite a revelation. It’s definitely something I will explore further in the future” (accompanying text).

These accounts reflect how the challenges of the creative process not only affected the participants in intense ways, but also seemed to push some of them into new creative and reflective territories. This potential of affect to actualize what we do not yet know or are capable of is a cornerstone in Deleuze’s affect studies (2005) and is further developed by Massumi (2002; 2009). According to him, affect is a part of every perception as a microperception that installs a pre-discursive openness in every situation. As a force that hits the body and unfolds somewhat separated from, or before, cognition, affect can be said to wedge a degree of openness into every perception that might allow for previously unfelt potential to be recognized (Massumi, 2009).

This does not, however, mean that every affective encounter sets off recognitions of previously unfelt potential. It is only particularly “interruptive signs” that trigger “the cues that attune bodies while activating their capacities differentially” (Massumi, 2009, p. 6). Interestingly, Massumi highlights how art often emits such potent cueing, because the aesthetic composition, reframing, and materiality of artistic practices create affective tension that extends the momentary interruption (or ‘cut,’ as he also calls it) of a microperception and makes it perceptible:

The aesthetic act extends the creative tension of contrast that characterizes the emergence of every action. It prolongs the suspension of the cut, the commotion of interference and resonance, gives it duration, so that it passes the threshold of perceptibility and is consciously felt as potential (Massumi, 2009, p. 12).

Following Massumi, the artistic dogmas in *Data Mirror* can be said to create such a “tension of contrast” by coupling the unfamiliar domains of data and embroidery, and furthermore by restricting the stitching practice to vertical and horizontal stitches. In this perspective, the dogmas can be perceived as triggering cues that activate and reveal the participants’ capacities differentially. This was evident in the recurring articulations of new realizations and experiences in relation to craft practice and creativity/making in the empirical data. This participant, for instance, clearly expressed the revelatory capacities of the participatory practice: “Especially the realization that I work intuitively has been a really nice experience. I knew that already, somehow, but suddenly it was made visible to me, it smacked me right in my face” (interview). Notably, she expresses how this intuitive capacity was there all along, but it was only truly experienced and felt – in fact quite forcefully, almost brutally, like a slap – when she participated in *Data Mirror*.

The creative dogmas were also, in some instances, described as a creative liberation that capacitated the participants with a freedom to act creatively: “it is extremely interesting to have such strict rules drawn up, and it induces a great freedom” (accompanying text). And “It was almost

⁴ At the physical drop-in centers 38% agreed that rules are important and 36% were neutral. At the online drop-in centers, 29% agreed that rules are important and 50% were neutral.

like a liberation for me that I couldn't use cross-stitches, because I could use the stitches differently lengthwise and depthwise" (interview). The latter participant elaborates even further how this has impacted her: "It has simply meant that I dare to realize some of the ideas in my head [...]. Just throw myself into the deep end and see where it takes me."

These testimonies of felt potential and enforced creative capacity point to an understanding of the dogmas as interruptive signs that shaped the sensory meetings and interchanges between the bodies, materials, stitching practice, and data artistically and inventively. The participatory practice in *Data Mirror* was not merely craft-based: it is also an aesthetic practice that fused the material and embodied embroidery process with affective forces that revealed previously unforeseen potentials or unrecognized capacities by extending and amplifying the creative tension of everyday craft practice.

As Camilla Jalving has described in her exploration of the link between art works affective capacities and participation, the subtle changes of bodily capabilities that affect induces "seem far removed from the ideas of participation, democracy and empowerment that pervade participation discourses. And it is. It is vague and indefinable" (2017, p. 123). Consequently, she argues, art generates a different form of 'affective participation,' one that cannot be properly conceived within the frames of participatory theory. I agree with Jalving that participation discourses both in theory and in practice lack sensibility and attention to affect and aesthetics (this has also been pointed out by Claire Bishop in her work on participatory art in *Artificial Hells* (2012)), but I don't think the solution is to theorize affective participation as a different form of participation. On the contrary, as this article has analyzed and argued, we need to approach participation as inherently affective. This does not mean we have to discard the existing frameworks of participatory theory. The articulated felt potentials in *Data Mirror* can, in fact, to some extent be translated into agency, a term much used (along with autonomy and voice) in the vertical approach to participation, which understands and values participation with respect to shared decision-making and distribution of power. In *Data Mirror*, as with many of the previous projects at Trapholt, the participants did have quite a high degree of creative decision-making power, as analyzed by Sørensen and Eriksson (2022) in relation to another embroidery project at Trapholt, *Stitches Beyond Borders* (2021–2022). It was, however, not (only) the participatory decision-making power that induced creative agency in the project. As the analysis shows, the experience of agency as felt potential or capacity to "Just throw myself into the deep end and see where it takes me" (interview) and "use the stitches differently" (interview) also stemmed from a participatory format that, through an embodied and material craft practice, generated a great deal of participatory intensity. Paradoxically, the artistic rules and confinements that reduced the participants' scope of agency in terms of what to embroider, how to do it, and what materials to use also seem to have given rise to what we could call 'affective agency.' This more subtle and vague yet powerful experience of affective agency, expressed by many participants, was not a direct outcome of decision-making power. Instead, it was set off by the way that the dogmas functioned as interruptive signs that infused the participatory practice with affective tensions, sensibilities, and contrasts.

TOWARD A MORE EMBODIED, MATERIAL, AND AFFECTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF PARTICIPATION

This article has explored the participatory experiences in *Data Mirror* through the lens of affect theory, with a particular focus on the way these experiences were shaped by the tactile materials, the embodied practice of embroidery, and the aesthetic and contrasting qualities of the artistic dogmas. The aim of the article has been both analytical and theoretical. Based on a close analysis of the empirical data, the article has argued for a more embodied, material, and affective understanding of both vertical and horizontal dimensions of participation.

Inspired by affect theory and affective methodology, I first analyze how affective outbursts, ambivalence, bodily reactions, and expressed emotions in the empirical data are often set off by material encounters. Based on these findings, I argued that we must understand the collective, horizontal dimension of participation in *Data Mirror* more extensively, and include in this horizontal dimension the collective formations and relations between bodies, tools, and materials. The article then went on to analyze how the artistic dogmas infused the embodied craft practice with aesthetic and affective tension, which opened up possibilities of experiencing felt potentials and unrecognized capacities. The dogmas can be said to have worked as an aesthetic matrix, composing affective interchanges and movements between bodies, craft practice, and material in ways that potentially actualized new experiences of affective agency.

Based on these findings, the article calls for an affective approach to participation that is attentive to its intensive, relational, and material dimensions. I am of course aware that the participatory craft-based practice in *Data Mirror* – a practice that seems to draw part of its participatory intensity from the relational, embodied, and affective nature of craft – is not representative of all types of participatory projects. Materiality and affect play different roles in different projects, and not all participatory practices are equally intense. I do, however, suggest that my analysis of particularly intense participatory experiences in *Data Mirror* shows that we need to link participation and affect in order to recognize and analyze the intense dimensions of participation, dimensions that can be – and probably most often are – essential in evoking powerful participatory experiences. Informed by the analysis of the participatory experiences in *Data Mirror*, I thus propose three possible paths forward:

1. Being attentive to *participatory intensity*

Affect theory, and perhaps in particular the notion of intensity, offer an alternative lens to understand, analyze, and value participatory experiences. Meaningful participation is not always meaningful because it makes sense, but because it moves the body and makes us feel changeability and aliveness. One way to be attentive to these participatory qualities could be to think through the notion of *participatory intensity*. Inspired by Massumi, I propose to understand participatory intensity as the intensity that is related to or cued by different aspects of the participatory setting or design. Importantly, participatory intensity is relational. It emerges 'in between' in the encounters both between humans and between nonhuman and human entities in the participatory process.

2. Approaching horizontal participation as both human and nonhuman relations

Based on my analysis of the feelings of material belonging and attachment that emerged through the craft-based participation in *Data Mirror*, I propose a less subject-centered understanding of horizontal participation. A broader and more relational understanding of Kelty's notion of becoming collective or 'more than individual' not only helps us to recognize the human/nonhuman relations that unfold with more or less intensity in participatory processes; it also directs attention to the ways in which nonhuman actors, like the materials in *Data Mirror*, shape participatory relations.

3. Recognizing affective agency as a dimension of vertical participation

Finally, I propose a more nuanced understanding of participatory agency. As my analysis of the articulated felt potentials shows, the experience of agency in participatory processes like that of *Data Mirror* is not exclusively linked to the distribution of power and access to decision-making. Here, participants also express a gained creative agency, one that stemmed from the way the project, through aesthetic tensions between craft practice and dogmas, affectively reframed their analytical skills and maker-practice. Consequently, I argue, we need to account for what could be called 'affective agency' when we analyze and theorize vertical dimensions of participation. This form of agency is set off by affective encounters that make the body's

changeability and capacities perceptible anew, and thus paves the way for accessing what we are capable of doing. This affective agency is probably more prevalent in a creative craft project like *Things Matter* than in many other projects, but it would be interesting to trace it in participatory designs that are less centered around making and creating.

It is important to underscore that these three suggestions are merely the first step toward a more affectively attentive approach to participation. There is, of course, still a long way to go and much work to be done. This endeavor to link participation and affect is, as this article has demonstrated, crucial for understanding how participatory practices can foster strong emotional attachments, belonging, felt potential, and intensity. Materialities and affect play different roles in different participatory projects, but participation is, I would argue, always to some degree shaped by sensuous, material, and affective encounters. In order to study and understand the powerful and meaningful experiences that participation can give rise to, we have to account for its affective dimension.

AUTHOR BIO

Tina Louise Hove Sørensen is postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University. She works in the area of media, culture, and aesthetics, focusing on the democratic and empowering potentials of creative and artistic practices. Her current research is affiliated with CraftVærk, a research collaboration between Aarhus University and Trapholt Museum, and investigates participatory craft practices as a way of making the museum a more inclusive and democratic space.

References

- Adamson, G. (2010). *The craft reader*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Arnstein, S. (1969). A ladder of participation. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35 (4), 216–224.
- Sørensen, T. L. H. & Eriksson, B. (2022). Threads of participation: Crafting female agency in a collaborative art project in Denmark. *Conjunctions: transdisciplinary journal of cultural participation*, 9 (1) 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.2478/tjcp-2022-0003>
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (1988). The Female Complaint. *Social Text*. 19(20), 237–259. https://www.jstor.org/stable/466188?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference--references_tab_contents
- Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. Verso.
- Black, G. (2011). *Transforming museums in the twenty-first century*. Routledge.
- Black, G. (2005). *The engaging museum: Developing museums for visitor Involvement*. Routledge.
- Brennan, T. (2004). *The transmission of affect*. Cornell University, Ithaca.
- Carpentier, Nico. The Concept of Participation. If They Have Access and Interact, Do They Really Participate? *Fronteiras – estudos midiáticos* 14, no. 2 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.4013/fem.2012.142.10>.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (2005). *Tusind Plateauer: Kapitalisme og Skizofreni*. København: Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademis Billedkunstskoler.
- Dolan, A. & Holloway S. (2016). Emotional Textiles: An Introduction. *TEXTILE*, 14:2, 152–159, doi: 10.1080/14759756.2016.1139369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2016.1139369>
- Dudley, S. (2013). *Museum materialities: Objects, engagements, interpretations*. New York: Routledge.
- Eriksson, B. (2019). Kulturel deltagelse. In B. Eriksson & B. Schiermer (Eds.), *Ny kulturteori* (pp.197–227). Hans Reitzels Forlag.

- Eriksson, B & Sørensen, T. L. H. (2023). Data og craft på det kollaborative kunstmuseum. *Dataspejlet: data og craft i fællesskab kunst*. Schrøder, N. R. & Grøn, K. (eds.). Kolding: Kunstmuseet Trapholt, 8–31.
- Gregg, M., & Seigworth, G. J. (2011). *The affect theory reader*. Duke University Press.
- Ingold, T. (2011). *Redrawing anthropology: Materials, movements, lines*. New York: Routledge.
- Jalving, C. (2017). Affect and the Participatory Event. *ARKEN Bulletin*, 7, 115–131.
- Latour, B. (1996). "On actor-network theory: A few clarifications." *Soziale Welt*, 369–381.
- Kelty, C. (2019). *The participant. A century of participation in four stories*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Kelty, C., A. Panofsky, M. Currie, R. Crooks, S. Erickson, P. Garcia, M. Wartenbe & S. Wood (2015). Seven dimensions of contemporary participation disentangled. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 66(3), pp. 474–488. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.23202>
- Knudsen, B. T., & Stage, C. (2016). In *Kulturteori og kultursociologi*. København: Hans Reitzel, 53–75.
- Knudsen, T. B., & Stage, C. (2015). *Affective methodologies: Developing cultural research strategies for the study of affect*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. Sage Publications
- MacGill, B. (2019). Craft, relational aesthetics and ethics of care. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 4(1), 406–419. doi:10.18432/ari29413
- Manney, D. (2015). *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Massumi, B. (2009). Of microperception and micropolitics. *Inflexions*, 3, 1–20.
- Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the virtual*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Pateman, C. (1979). *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology and politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pauwels, L. (2011). An Integrated Conceptual Framework for Visual Social. Essay. In *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*. SAGE.
- Sharma, D. & Tygstrup, F. (2015) *Structures of feeling affectivity and the study of culture*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Simon, N. (2010). *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0.
- Thrift, N. (2008). *Non-representational Theory. Space, Politics, Affect*. Routledge, London.