

MAP 5
DISCUSSION

TOWARDS TOGETHERNESS

PROBING AS A DECOLONIZING APPROACH FOR ARTISTIC INQUIRY

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LUCA
SCHOOL
OF
ARTS

***“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”***

T.S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout this doctoral research, I probed for the knowledge and guidance of the people who participated in either the *Food Related* project, or the *Niva to Nenets* project. My approach to probing was rather artistic, with an aesthetic attention to detail and a focus on the ambiguity of the objects. I believe it is beneficial to artistic research to handle the probing method with fluidity, as I did throughout this thesis. Theoretical findings elucidate the experiments and elaborate on certain aspects of the practice. Actor network theory (ANT) and other material-semiotic concepts inspired the practice, while analyses of gift-giving and food cultures situated the actions. Theory clarified contexts and is mainly handled to deepen understanding of the practice. The practice, however, is not controlled by theory. Theoretical findings have influenced the practice in multiple ways, consciously and unconsciously, but never overruled it. Above all, this doctoral project handles practice as research, and is research in practice.

From this probing practice I review some important points of concern, realizing that it is impossible to fully grasp them all. Thus, I never aspire for completeness. Neither do I aim for closure. Instead, I prefer to create and sustain as much openness as possible. Because openness, to my way of thinking, is a key ingredient of a decolonizing approach handled from a non-indigenous, not-colonized position.

In this fifth and final map, I will summarize and discuss my empirical experiences with the practice of probing for the two projects. The presented findings give possible answers to the question how artistic participatory practices can establish connections between people(s) and stimulate knowledge sharing through probing. Special attention is given to the role of the artist acting out the probing, being myself. This role is multiple in essence, as it includes the initiation, organization, creation, approach, moderation, artistry, presentation, and more. In all its various aspects lies a possibility to decolonize. This leads me to the key question of both this research and this discussion chapter: How can probing art contribute to a decolonizing discourse?



PROBING FOR ART

The cultural probes method, which was introduced by Gaver et al. (1999, 2004), inspired me to design creative questionnaires and probe kits for the *Food Related* project and the *Niva to Nenets* project. Probing stands out in communicating through imagination as it generates a playful mood. For instance, the appealing promise of joy motivated the teacher in Ittoqqortoormiit to accept the creative questionnaires despite her restraint. Probes, thus, attend the 'playful' character of human life, for which they draw on the conceptual arts "to provoke or call forth the ludic" (Crabtree et al. 2003, p. 2). Besides the promise of joy, which appealed to me when I chose this method, the creativity of cultural probes invites the artistic. In conformity with Gaver's approach to probing, I depart from the artistic and put the probes in practice to enrich art projects.

For *Food Related* I inquired about experiences of Arctic food culture to inspire the design of an online platform, while for *Niva to Nenets* I was building relationships in preparation of a shared activity in the nearby future. It is not uncommon for artists to craft from the personal, or to include private matters in the objects they make. For example, I integrated private feelings in several of the probes, such as my longing for the Arctic regions and my feeling of shame for my country's colonial past. Communication of personal issues, or other ways of expressing the personality of the maker, is less common among designers. Designers usually bear their design

mission in mind and probe for the benefit of that mission, without too much attention for their personal being. The probes for *Food Related* were made less personal than those for *Niva to Nenets*. With the design of the online platform in mind, for which I did not anticipate playing out my individual presence and behaviour as a point of attention, the sharing of private feelings felt less appropriated. In result, the implementation of cultural probes within the *Food Related* project is more similar to the design approach to probing. The *Niva to Nenets* road-movie, which by contrast strongly focused on my own presence and behaviour, asked for a different approach. Artistic aspects of the probes stimulated the imagination and enabled the co-drivers to get to know my intentions and me before travelling together. These probes, which I nicknamed 'Getting-to-know-you probes', functioned as an artistic preparation for our shared trip. They communicated my motives behind and within the project, inquired about the participants' needs and wishes, and about possible subjects that we could discuss on the road.

Working with these probes affirmed that the method is well able to support inquiry during participatory practices, especially without physical presence of the artist. While reflecting upon my experiences, I realized that a similar practice was already part of my art making for many years. Without knowledge of the probing method, I have often structured my thoughts and ideas about certain topics or themes through making things, even before I went to art school. Many times, these objects became part of my projects' outcomes as



Illustration 61 and 62. Working on the blanket in Ittoqqortoormiit.

storytelling props. Although they weren't made as tasks, the projects in essence always probed for opinions, viewpoints or other kinds of contributions. Boldly speaking, one could say that I am a probing artist by nature.

From this 'natural' way of working, I crafted objects for the two projects. For example, I embroidered the land and the mayor islands within the Arctic Circle on a blanket that travelled with me during propositional visits and organizational meetings. Searching for ways to include food and commensality in the *Niva to Nenets* project, I assembled a Lada emblem on a big blue cooking pot. Placed on a wooden bearer that held sixteen Russian cups, I served reindeer soup from this pan during the opening of an exhibition of my work in progress. While this soup was eaten on the blanket, the cosines of the moment influenced conversations about the project positively. This inspired me to design the Picnic-Quiz, a strategy for probing during public meetings.

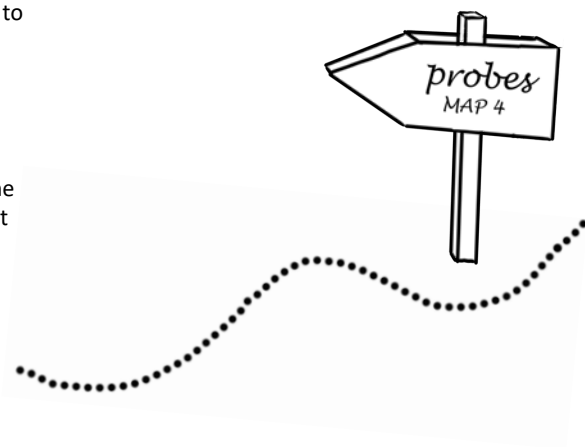


Illustration 63. *The blanket in action in Naryan Mar.*



PROBING FOR TOGETHERNESS

The aim to build up a feeling of togetherness through probing differs for the two projects. Within the *Food Related* project, feelings of togetherness were aimed at in the sharing between the Arctic peoples, within a virtual environment. The different Arctic peoples share similarities in their diets, and their habits and challenges related to food, although their food cultures also reflect their uniqueness. The focus on relatedness is not strong in the cultural probes. But for the online platform, which functions as a probing tool, it is the main focus. It was my intention to bring people from the different Arctic peoples together on the platform, virtually, as high travel costs and long travel distances make this almost impossible 'in real life'. Within the *Niva to Nenets* project, feelings of togetherness were aimed at in the sharing between the participants and me. This aim is clearly visible within the cultural probes, the use of the car, and in the design of the Picnic-Quiz.

The cultural probes packages for the *Niva to Nenets* project were made for the participating co-drivers who drove particular parts of the long road-trip with me and

turned out to be a way of getting to know each other beforehand. My emotions and intentions behind and within the project were communicated with an artistic approach and stimulated the imagination of the co-drivers. For example, the DIY-cardboard for building a small 3D Lada Niva encouraged observing the car from all sides and wondering how it would be to like to drive in it. The probing was a good preparation for conversations and discussions on the road. Iben Mondrup, who drove with me from Copenhagen to Stockholm, brought up the topic of labelling people twice during our joint trip. This topic was introduced and inquired about by one of the probes. Although she didn't have the time to fill in the accompanying booklet, she confirmed that this particular probe had stimulated her thoughts about the topic. The probes helped in getting familiar with the idea of travelling together, and to start building a relationship. Svetlana Usenyuk, who participated from Helsinki to St. Petersburg, expressed her enthusiasm about the probes during an interview in Kronstadt: *"That was really nice. It created this feeling of personal contact even when we were not talking yet"*. Her experience supports the thesis that probes can build or strengthen personal connection.



Illustration 64. Svetlana's DIY Niva.

With the design of the Picnic-Quiz I aimed at the creation of a temporary feeling of togetherness. This strategy for public probing events stimulates engagement through a dynamic format, commensality, and a creative use of colours. Participants are inquired with specific questions and asked to position themselves to discuss their answers among each other. I look back on the Picnic-Quizzes as joyful gatherings that led to useful exchange of thoughts and experiences. It would be far-fetched to say that the established feeling of togetherness lasted long after these probing events, but there were moments where I gathered strength from the sharing that occurred. For example, remembering all the words of advice giving to me during the several Picnic-Quizzes I felt supported when importing a car in Russia turned even more difficult than expected, as if I was no longer alone in the decision-making process. And when I finally arrived at the two reindeer herding families on the tundra, my joy had increased tenfold as if the imagined presence of the Picnic-Quiz participants, including the co-drivers, enlarged it.

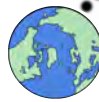
Creativity, artistry and playfulness can be beneficial in finding equal grounds. In our creative expressions, I believe, lies a borderland in between us-and-them. I found some backup for this belief in David Gauntlett's 'Making is Connecting' (2011), in which he explains how acts of creativity usually involve a social dimension that connects us with other people. New plans and ideas can arise if we think imaginatively together, during the act of making things, which gives us resilience and the creative capacity to deal with significant challenges (p.20). Within the process of finding equal grounds, boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1989, Bowker and Star 1999) can enrich our understanding of the borderlands in between us-and-them. Boundary objects are representational forms, things or theories that mediate between worldviews and facilitate our minds to understand. Probes can function as boundary objects, and thus bridge the borderlands between worldviews, between us-and-them. As boundary objects, probes can create a temporary feeling of togetherness through the bridging of distance. In my experience, the artistry of the probes is able to break the proverbial ice. Thus, I agree with Gaver et al. (2004) that probes enable artists or designers to feel connected to the people they design them for.



Illustration 65, 66 and 67. *After the Picnic-Quiz.*

PROBING FOR DECOLONIZATION

Motivated by a strong passion for the Arctic regions and a deep respect for the indigenous peoples living there, I designed my artistic doctoral research in the favour of decolonization processes. A colonial aspect is almost always present when practicing research, as current research attitudes have the tendency to depart from a western scientific worldview that excludes discordant points of view. Media use, or even art making, can lead to a colonial approach if its conditions or implementations are exclusive. Other ways of seeing or experiencing things are then pushed to the periphery, just as indigenous peoples have been pushed away by dominant cultures. Being aware of the hidden colonial attitudes of my point of departure, I practiced probing to create favourable opportunities for combining and communicating knowledge and to allow discordant or conflicting (world) views to exist next to each other. Both the making and the use of the probes turned inspirational and functioned as a creative bridge between the participants and me. Instead of global culture, the probe method illuminates the local culture in which people 'play out their lives' (Crabtree et al. 2003). Probing differs from regular scientific tradition, as it has a strong focus on the personal and allows the intimate, the ambiguous, the spiritual, the discordant, and the artistic. Thus, in working with probes lies a possibility to share and collect knowledge beyond intellectuality. When unexpected and less comfortable contributions are welcomed, probing can invite participants to include and highlight what they find important. The playfulness, creativity and artistry of the probing method enable openness towards ambiguity and contradictory contributions. Thus, probing encourages subjective and imaginative engagement. Everything is possible and anything can be important. Altogether, probing can be beneficial when opening up the research setting towards different cultures.



I believe that the probing method can contribute to a decolonizing approach. This does not mean that the act of probing is a decolonizing act, or that probing necessarily leads to a decolonizing approach. One can even wonder if decolonization 'from the outside' is possible at all. To what degree can the probing within the two art projects be considered decolonizing in its approach? Making statements about possible decolonizing aspects of my art practice feels like skating on thin ice. Because, who am I to state something about the influence my approach has on others? And how can I possibly understand decolonization in full if I am only part of one side of the us-and-them; the one with the colonial tendencies? Without evading the search for answers, posing questions can be a strategy for finding them. To continue asking questions about your approach is a good strategy to decolonize this approach. Do I give participants enough space to be themselves, to respond in a way that suits them best? Do I take their responses seriously, even if they go against my opinion, worldview, or initial aim? Is the probing practice empowering them, or are their responses mainly contributions for the sake of the project? Probing, as a creative, artistic and playful way of asking questions, definitely supported critical examination of my approach. Although I suppose that it is, unfortunately, almost impossible to overcome all power imbalances in knowledge sharing projects like *Food Related* and *Niva to Nenets*, I believe that probing helped me to decolonize my approach as far as I could.

To recapitulate my findings for a decolonizing approach, from the position of the non-indigenous, I introduce a four step-plan.

1

The first step on the road of decoloniality is to create openness. As described before, probing is a suitable method for opening up towards ambiguity and discordancy. An open mind is an essential tool for working with probes, and a necessary condition for taking this first step.

2

For the second step we need to take the experiences and concerns of the colonized people seriously. The probed responses were sometimes unexpected, mainly within the *Food Related* project for which they unveiled underlying needs. The fact that the project lacks firm roots within the Arctic was considered a serious weakness of the project and even reason not to participate. I realized that in the refusal to participate laid a strong message that I could not ignore. As 'yet another initiative from the dominant west that aims to harvest our people', no matter how well intended, the project was decolonizing in its approach. Pinpointing of indigenous identities was enlarging the us-and-them dichotomy instead of reducing it. The implementation of automatic translation software implicated power imbalance through the use of 'colonial' languages where software for the indigenous languages is non-existing. Eventually, after deep consideration and some difficult moments, I decided to put the *Food Related* project on hold until ownership can be transferred to (a partnership within) the Arctic regions. Acting upon the expressed experiences and concerns of the colonized, is the strongest way of taking them seriously.

3

A third step on the decolonial road can be a thorough investigation of personal ambitions and possible hidden motivations. For an artist who wishes to support indigenous peoples, it is important to know what lies behind this wish. The investigation of possible motives was a major part of the *Niva to Nenets* project. Before, during, and after the long road-trip I probed for experiences and concerns related to gift-giving. And as Western-European scholars are often blind for the suppressing and dominating aspects of their culture, I discussed colonial relationships with people who experience the us-and-them dichotomy on a daily basis. The outcomes revealed that colonial structures are more complicated than I expected. Good intentions, if acted out from the idea of knowing what is good for others, can suppress people. Deep self-reflection and being aware of possible pitfalls can prevent us from acting out an unintended colonial approach.

4

As a fourth step we need to realize that decolonization is an on-going process, which does not stop after the first three steps. Thus, the fourth step is not a final step. We need to continue walking the road, probably for the rest of our lives, if we wish to contribute to the long and difficult, but above all necessary, decolonization process. From openness, taking experiences and concerns of the colonized seriously, and awareness of personal motives and possible pitfalls, 'we' can encounter people from 'them'. During a temporary feeling of togetherness, which can be supported by probes as boundary objects, the sharing of food as an act of commensality, and the artistic to stimulate engagement, imagination, and joy, we can think *with* them instead of *for* them.

PROBING TO ENCOUNTER: THE END OF ANT



The painting 'La Rencontre' (1854) from Gustave Courbet inspired me to handle approaches as a point of departure for this doctoral research. It depicts the artist himself, meeting his patron and his dog. Despite the meaning of this painting within its own time frame, to me it represents the possible arrogance artists can express during fieldwork or participatory practices. From the beginning of this research I was therefore determined to watch out for having an arrogant attitude, and searched for possible methodologies and frameworks that could open up towards discordant mindsets.

In *Lean Logic* (2016), David Fleming writes about the meaning of a true encounter. He elucidates encounter as "the act of recognising something – a person, a practice, a system – on its own terms; the particular character and wholeness of the other is acknowledged; judgment and opinion about him/her/it are set in a relevant context, rather than in the context of universal general principle or immovable mindset". Openness towards different terms, a different context than your own, even a different mindset, is conditional if you truly

want to encounter something or someone. Fleming continues: "To acknowledge the wholeness of a system – a woodland, a person, a planet, nature – means being aware that you are in the presence of something which has business and an agenda of its own, and which cannot be tamed by your understanding". Thus, on the one hand, opening up to others is an act of giving space for context and mindset different than your own. On the other hand, it is important to ignore your mindset if this forces the being or thing you meet in a different light than its own.

Fleming inspires me to think of encounter as an essential aim for working with participants. The painting of Courbet meeting his patron is, according to Fleming's description, not depicting a true encounter. Instead, Courbet depicted inequality. Paradoxically, he probably did this to establish more equality between his patron (the gift-giver) and himself, as an act of self-empowerment. While I wished to support the self-empowerment of the Arctic peoples, I experimented with ANT as a framework to acknowledge the wholeness of a system.



Illustration 68. *La Rencontre* or *Good Morning Mr. Courbet*. (G. Courbet 1854. Musée Fabre, Montpellier)

ANT can be useful to reveal relationships between actors. For example, a study of ANT improved my understanding of the different roles the Lada Niva had within the *Niva to Nenets* project. As a semiotic ontological tool, however, I also experienced ANT as a burden. Contradictive to its aim to make meaning making inclusive, for example through the agency of objects, it is a very intellectual tool. It can easily exclude intuitive, spiritual, irrational, emotional, or instinctual aspects of meaning making. As such, I often found ANT rather limiting instead of broadening my experience of the world. I found some understanding of these limitations in 'How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human', in which Eduard Kohn (2013) criticizes actor-networks as they are understood in terms of their language-like properties. He wrote:

"My argument is that we are colonized by certain ways of thinking about relationality. We can only imagine the ways in which selves and thoughts might form associations through our assumptions about the forms of associations that structure human language. And then, in ways that often go unnoticed, we project these assumptions onto nonhumans. Without realizing it we attribute to nonhumans properties that are our own, and then, to compound this, we narcissistically ask them to provide us with corrective reflections of ourselves."(p. 21).

Kohn calls actor-network thinking colonial as it forces non-human beings, including objects, to fit in our perception of the world. This worldview is limited as it is structured by language. That which is too hard to describe, is easily ignored or altered when verbalized. Probing, on the contrary, is known for its possibilities to include knowledge that is otherwise difficult to grasp in words (Gaver et al. 1998, 2004).

Despite Latour's good intentions for a better world (2005), his vision stays limited to a Western scientific worldview, which is colonial in essence. Coloured by white supremacy, academic imperialism controls a Western monopoly on the flow of information in the world of academia (Alatas 2003). Appropriation is even worse than ignorance or other forms of exclusion.

When Zoe Todd was disappointed that Latour did not refer to indigenous knowledge in his lecture about the climate as sentient, she stated that ontology is just another word for colonialism. The ontological turn, she says, uses indigenous cosmologies and knowledge systems, "all the while ignoring the contemporary realities of indigenous peoples vis-à-vis colonial nation-states, or the many Indigenous thinkers who are themselves writing about these issues" (Todd 2016). If we wish to decolonize research projects that work with indigenous people, we should prevent knowledge extraction. Instead, we better facilitate collaborative shaping and building of knowledge.

As an artist within academia, I found the ever-present focus on the rational one of the biggest challenges within this doctoral research. How can we truly encounter with a scientific mindset? The ecologist Stephan Harding describes this challenge in a taster video for *The Seed beneath the Snow*, a posthumous documentary about Fleming's legacy of ideas. He says:

*"Encountering means really meeting something, in a way that goes beyond one's intellectual process. Normally in the West, particularly as a scientist, as I am, one is taught to encounter, say a tree, through one's ideas. How did the shape of that tree come about through the process of natural selection? What might the forces have been that made the sycamore leaf, the shape it is? It becomes a sort of instinct when you're a scientist and an ecologist, to look at nature in that sort of way. That's not encounter. Encounter is when that conceptual structure vanishes. And you actually meet the being, as the being, coming forth from itself, as itself, revealing itself to you in a way that is beyond your intellect. In a way that's much more deeply intuitive, and much harder to express. In fact, scientific language is inappropriate for this kind of encounter."*¹

What Harding and Fleming explain about encounter has similarities to what I have learned in art school as the difference between looking and seeing. As a liberal art student, I was taught to witness reality and see it through experiencing its essence. We were motivated not only to look at how the light that is reflected on a certain object changes its colours, but to see how the environment influences its being as well. In order to engage myself with the object, I trained to become one with it, while grasping the moment as a whole in itself, as a grasp of temporary reality from knowing it from the inside. Although I was never a good painter, I then tried to paint my experience of that particular moment, that particular state of being, which derived from my intuition, imagination, and emotions. Step one was to look, step two was to see, and step three was to become. Step four, to transfer it on canvas with paint, was the hardest for me as painting has never been my medium.

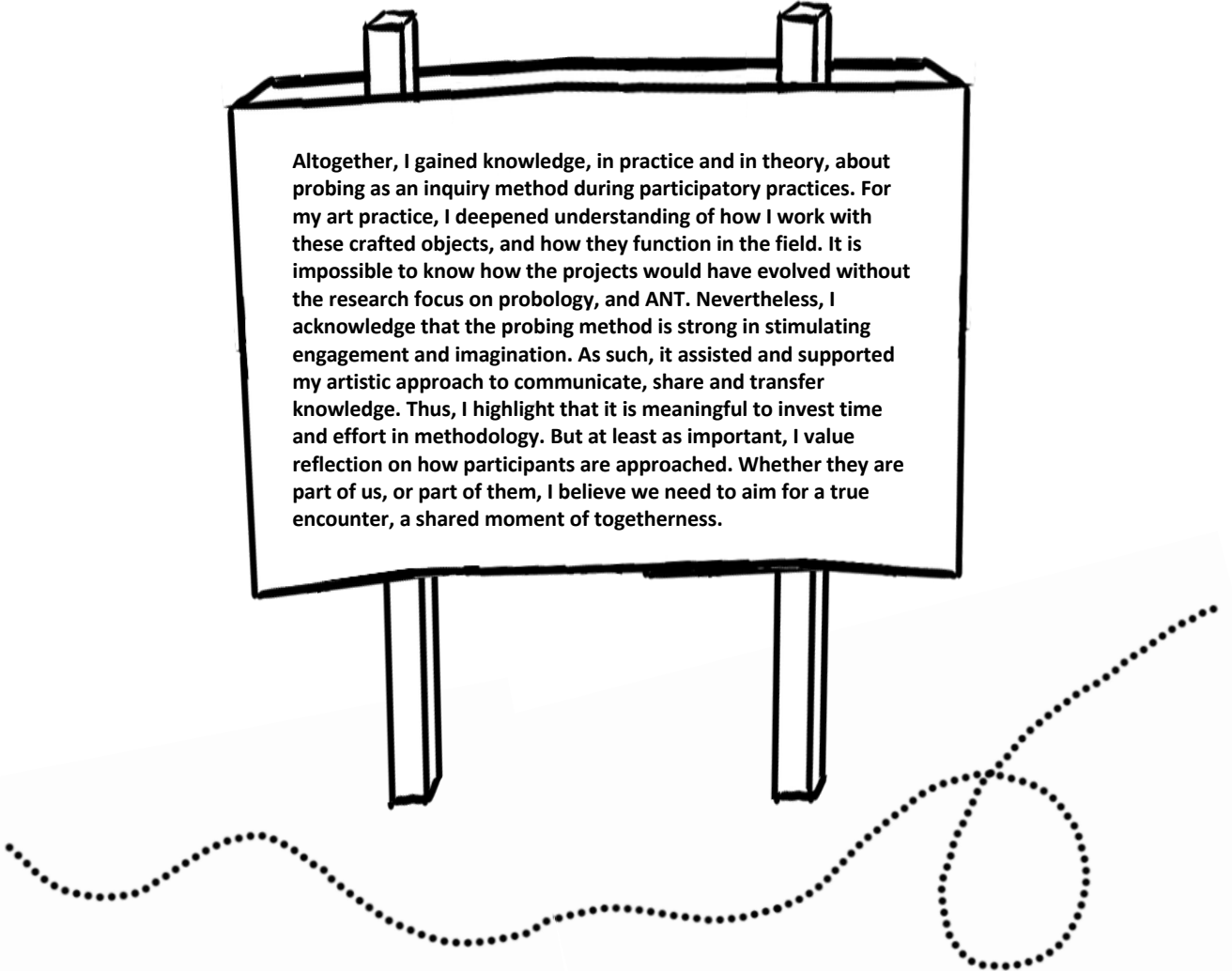
If I would look at the same object through ANT, the outcome would become bad photography. I find ANT too limited as it only witnesses the world from an intellectual approach, as a conceptual structure. Nevertheless, ANT can be useful to experiment with

during artistic practices. Throughout this thesis, many examples illustrate how understanding was supported and deepened through ANT. But when it comes to the influence of emotions, intuition, or wild, raw energy, there comes a moment where you should ANT no further. I believe it is important to stop there. Because if one continues there, one risks killing the magical sparkle that makes the difference between art and bad photography.

To see someone or something as its own self, Fleming says, you need to approach it with the manners of the stranger (2016, p. 128). And then, he continues, “when the system you have been studying looks back at you, it is not understanding that hangs in the air, but a ‘hallo’. There is a conversation. You are not alone”.² I believe Fleming’s notion of an encounter, when put in practice as he described, prevents arrogant appearances or gestures as I see characterized in Courbet’s painting. When we come to meet someone or something with the intention to encounter instead of to control, we better put logic aside. This might be the key essence of a decolonizing approach: a true encounter from which conversation can derive.



While reflecting upon my artistic practices, including multiple encounters through probing, I tried to grasp my experience of what was happening as closely as I could. But as Harding explained, true encounter goes beyond intellectuality and conceptual structures. I indeed repeatedly felt limited, even burdened, by a conceptual focus deriving from scientific tradition in general, or from ANT specifically. At times, I could no longer encounter my art practice without such a mindset as I was too much aware of the fact that I needed to write about this practice. Scientific ideas, as illustrated by Harding, clogged my natural being there. When I probed too far or too academically into my own practice, it even started to stir things up. It became too disturbing, unbalancing, and even painful, to probe further. Some aspects of art and art making, I therefore believe, should better stay untouched.



Altogether, I gained knowledge, in practice and in theory, about probing as an inquiry method during participatory practices. For my art practice, I deepened understanding of how I work with these crafted objects, and how they function in the field. It is impossible to know how the projects would have evolved without the research focus on probology, and ANT. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that the probing method is strong in stimulating engagement and imagination. As such, it assisted and supported my artistic approach to communicate, share and transfer knowledge. Thus, I highlight that it is meaningful to invest time and effort in methodology. But at least as important, I value reflection on how participants are approached. Whether they are part of us, or part of them, I believe we need to aim for a true encounter, a shared moment of togetherness.

*Thoughts and comments about
probing for artistic inquiry:*



*Thoughts and comments about
probing as a decolonizing
approach:*



*Thoughts and comments about
the limitations of ANT:*



*Thoughts and comments about
togetherness as an encounter:*



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DISCUSSION

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