

MAP 4  
**PROBОLOGY**

TOWARDS TOGETHERNESS  
PROBING AS A DECOLONIZING APPROACH FOR ARTISTIC INQUIRY

PhD in the Arts – LUCA School of Arts  
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**LUCA**  
SCHOOL  
OF  
ARTS

*"To conceive of it with a total apprehension I must for the thousandth time approach it as something totally strange."*

Henry D. Thoreau  
Journal entry 4 Oct. 1859, XII, 37Z.



## INTRODUCTION

Input of others is highly appreciated and searched for within my art and art making, as explorations of relations, circumstances and behaviour are recurring aims. Not just for *Food Related* and *Niva to Nenets* but for almost all projects that I worked on this far, I spent much time in creating, organizing and orchestrating conditions through which contributions of others are collected and shared. This includes, but is not limited to, opinions, viewpoints, words of advice and words of critique, questions, associations, anecdotes, memories and other kinds of experiences. In order to gather and include such input, my working approach has been developed into a twofold method. On the one hand this is a matter of reaching out towards groups and individuals to trigger their attention and to allure them into participating. On the other hand, this is a matter of opening up and giving space for the input to merge with and within the artwork. In practice, the two usually occur in one movement or action.

During this doctoral research, I discovered how this working approach is similar to probing. Probing is an act of exploration and examination that not necessarily needs physical components. For example, during interviews specific questions can act as verbal probes to follow up on what people tell.<sup>1</sup> In my art practice, however, the making of material things is omnipresent during all stages. Creatively and artistically I craft to support my inquiries. Many of the material objects I make reach out for contact and content, like probing devices, when I invite people to participate.<sup>2</sup> As probes, they enable me to creatively and artistically explore certain topics, aims or situations. This occurs during the making process as well as during their deployment within the participatory processes. For example, assembling a Lada emblem on a blue enamel cooking pot made me explore the aesthetics of my Lada Niva and the possibilities of using food during public events. When this same pot was used to serve reindeer soup at an exhibition set up, it played a role in the entourage and helped focusing the conversations towards the *Niva to Nenets* project.

In order to deepen my understanding of my own practice, and to gain and share more insights from a methodological point of view, I studied probology. Probology uses probes to encourage subjective engagement, empathetic interpretation and a pervasive sense of uncertainty (Gaver et al. 2004). I experimented with the cultural probes method as it was initiated by Gaver et al. (1999, 2004). In this map, I share my experiences in working with probe kits for both the *Food Related* and the *Niva to Nenets* project. The most significant probes that I simultaneously made are discussed: a blanket that travelled with me during exploratory journeys and meetings, a series of artefacts that I made for presenting my ongoing research at DeFKA (including the Lada cooking pot), and a life-size mock-up Lada Niva. Also, the Picnic-Quiz is discussed as a strategy for probing. Altogether, they uncover and clarify how essential probology is within my art and art practice. And, it shows how this approach supports exploring the relations between participants (as *them*) and me (as *us*).

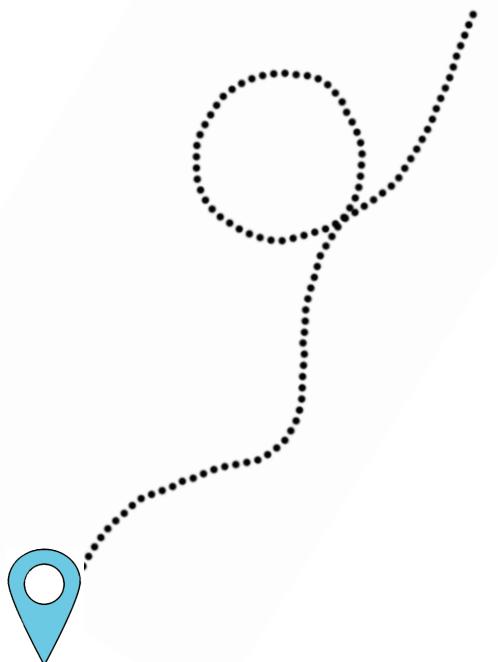
### WHAT ARE CULTURAL PROBES?

Cultural probes are small creative tasks, mostly used in a set (probe kit or probe package). They invite participants to think imaginatively about certain topics or matters of concern. As a methodological variant of ethnographic studies, it follows the artistic approach, which is characterized by being irrational and uncontrolled (Gaver et al. 1999).

Cultural probes invite participants to think imaginatively about certain topics or matters of concern. They can capture individual perspectives and experiences upon a research topic in a non-intellectual way. Probe kits usually contain ludic tasks and assignments, often combined with a diary or notebook to gather and explain outcomes. For example, illustrated cards, maps, stickers and other materials are used to form open-ended, provocative and sometimes weird exercises providing empathy, impetus and enrichment for mental processes (Mattelmäki 2006). Like devices that are sent into deep oceans or outer space, probe kits can be sent to territories where it would be (too) difficult or interfering for researchers to go themselves. These can, for example, be households and residential homes. Cultural probes outshine for their openness to various kinds of expressive responses. Through the creativity of both the initiator(s) and the participants, they give space to dreams, subjective thoughts and uncertainties. They can open up the design space, instead of narrowing it down (Gaver et al. 2004), and therefore are a match for the inclusion of different kinds of knowledge.

The probe method is mainly used within user-centred design and other design-based research. When implementation of the method is explained, credits are usually given to Gaver et al. (1999), who pioneered with cultural probes in *The Presence Project*.<sup>3</sup> Motivation to work with probes can be varied and in practice the method is used for various aims. Crabtree et al. (2003), for example, mainly worked with the probe method to gather information, while artistic inspiration was the main focus for Gaver et al. (1999). In adopting and appropriating probology, probes are often named according to their purpose, such as *residential probes* (Hemmings et al. 2002), *informational probes* (Crabtree et al. 2003), *technology probes* (Hutchinson et al. 2003), *mobile probes* (Hulkko et al. 2004), *domestic probes* (Gaver et al. 2004), *urban probes* (Paulos & Jenkins 2005) and *creative probes* (Bowen 2007).<sup>4</sup> Although difference in approach exists, four main motivations characterize probe use: inspiration, information, participation and dialogue (Mattelmäki 2005). Mattelmäki (2006) underlines the meaning of probes to find new horizons. From their exploratory character, probes inspire participants to share experiences, thoughts and ideas from their daily lives, including the social, aesthetic and cultural environment, needs, feelings, values and attitudes (p. 40).

William Gaver (2004) is sceptical about a formal definition of the method, to prevent it from losing its profundity, heart and authenticity. He criticizes the analysing of probe results and worries about the way researchers appropriate the probes into a 'scientific' approach. Gaver et al. deliberately refuse to analyse the results of their probing because "*the Probes embodied an approach to design that recognizes and embraces the notion that knowledge has limits. It's an approach that values uncertainty, play, exploration, and subjective interpretation as ways of dealing with those limits.*" (p. 53). In line with these 'limitations', Crabtree et al. state that probes provide no silver bullet: "*they do not tell designers what to build or provide a convenient recipe for translating fieldwork insights into technical applications*" (Crabtree et al. 2003, p. 9).



## CULTURAL PROBES

Before I started to work as an art teacher at the LUCA School of Arts in Genk, formerly Media, Art and Design Academy (MAD), I had never heard of cultural probes. Colleagues and guest speakers, who mostly had their focus on design practices, shared their experiences and ideas about this method with contagious enthusiasm. I learned that the method aims to stimulate imagination and ambiguity, and often evoke emphatic responses. And, I found out that cultural probes are known for their possibility to include knowledge that is otherwise difficult to grasp in words (Gaver et al. 1999, 2004). Thus, from my wish to include different kinds of knowledge, I was curious and motivated to experiment with this method myself.

Working with the cultural probes method turned out an important strategy within *Towards Togetherness*. For both the *Food Related* project and the *Niva to Nenets* project, I first made small interview booklets with one or more creatively asked questions, followed by so-called probe kits. Creative questionnaires were made for schoolchildren of Ittoqqortoormiit in Greenland to inquire about their food habits. After that, I designed packages containing a collection of individual tasks that all tune into matters of concern for the *Food Related* project. Ten boxes containing ten explorative tasks, including a notebook for diary purposes and writing down responses, inquired about general and specific aspects of Arctic food culture and possible features of the online platform. Even though I encountered opposition when working with cultural probes for the *Food Related* project, the method convinced because of its abilities to stimulate engagement and imagination. Thus, I decided to make cultural probes for the *Niva to Nenets* project as well, during its preparation stage. Again, booklets with questions were put in practice first, followed by kits of eight probes that were sent to the invited co-drivers.

The outcomes were sometimes unexpected, especially within the *Food Related* project for which they unveiled underlying needs. Both the making and the use of the probes turned inspirational and functioned as a creative bridge between the participants and me (as the artist). Experimenting with cultural probes made the probing aspect of my art practice explicit and stimulated me to examine probology thoroughly. In this part of *Map 4*, I will share my experiences with cultural probes in relation to the two projects, (first *Food Related*, then *Niva to Nenets*), followed by reflections on the method.

## CULTURAL PROBES WITHIN THE FOOD RELATED PROJECT

### Creative questionnaires in Ittoqqortoormiit

In spring 2010 I visited Ittoqqortoormiit (Scoresbysund), in the northeast of Greenland, for a short holiday.<sup>5</sup> This gave me the opportunity to try-out the probe method, as I had never worked with it before. Cultural probe kits almost always include a notebook or diary, in which participants can write, draw or paste their responses. Thus, I choose to make small booklets filled with creatively formulated questions to start my experiment. I was particularly interested in food experiences of the local youth, as I could not find those in literature. Imagining that it would be difficult to contact the children of Ittoqqortoormiit one by one in the limited timeframe of my visit, I designed the booklets to be used in classrooms. These questionnaires contained as little text as possible.<sup>6</sup> In it, drawing was often mentioned as a possible way to answer the questions. For example (see *Illustration 26*), children were asked to draw their favourite food on an image of an empty plate. A set of 14 handmade stickers of yellow smiley faces with a licking tongue and 14 green faces that expressed disgust was to be found in the back of the booklet, which could be used to show appreciation or dislike for local animals in an Arctic environment. The children were asked about their food likes and dislikes, the frequency of eating certain food items, and their knowledge of Arctic food traditions. These inquiries were alternated with more open questions towards food related interests, anecdotes, opinions and comments. Altogether the booklets contain twenty pages, excluding the cover. Nine school children aged 10 and 11 worked with these booklets under the guidance of their teacher. Putting the method into practice resulted in three insights that I consider valuable.



Illustration 25. Questionnaires.



Illustration 26. Creative questionnaire p. 3, drawing of a narwhal by Jensinannnguaq, and pp. 6-7, filled in by Signe.

First of all, I experienced that it was not easy to find good conditions for the questionnaires to be used in class. Due to the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which disturbed most air traffic in and around Iceland, I arrived in Greenland with a delay of four days. The teacher whom I was advised to approach was no longer in town. Instead I encountered a hostile response, because too many outsiders want the schoolchildren to participate in their projects. Putting the interest of the children first, I could only appreciate the teacher's response to protect them. Showing her the booklets anyway made her a little milder. She then offered the golden mean: she allowed her class to work with the booklets but without my presence.<sup>7</sup> Hence, I learned that finding good conditions surrounding the participation is perhaps more difficult within Arctic communities than in most Western-European societies. This is common knowledge for the anthropologists that I met who work in these regions, but it was a new experience for me as an artist.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, I noticed that the creative approach of the booklets motivated participation. When I picked up the booklets after a short weeks' time, the previously reluctant teacher enthusiastically explained the joy she and her pupils experienced from it. If I would be able to come back another time, the teacher told me, we could prepare a collaborative working moment around the Arctic food theme as a guest-lesson. Unfortunately, I had not enough financial resources to do so. Remembering her attitude earlier, I realized that the creativity of the booklets had broken the proverbial ice – maybe in a similar way as food and commensality can (see Map 2). Realizing the ice-breaking features of this creative approach, I considered the considerable amount of time it had cost to design and make the booklets was worth all the effort.

And thirdly, I experienced the bi-directional connection of working with the booklets; they were like an exchange of gifts. At home I had made something for the children, and now they made something for me in return. The bi-directional character of this connection is clearly visible in some messages written to me, which often expressed words of thank or informed about my well-being. After viewing the nice drawings, funny remarks and sometimes even rebellious responses in the returned booklets, I felt sympathy for these children despite the fact that we did not meet in person.<sup>9</sup> Thus, I agree with Gaver et al. (2004) that probes enable artists or designers to feel connected to the people they design them for. In our creative expressions, I therefore believe, lies a borderland in between us-and-them. Within this borderland, the booklets function as border objects. They bridge between us and them, before and after they have been worked on. As such, these objects deepen relationships.

Even though I visited Ittoqqortoormiit for only one week, clearly as an outsider to the community, I managed to establish the participation I was aiming at. The creative questionnaires indeed evoked emphatic responses and stimulated imagination, like it was promoted by Gaver et al. (1999).<sup>10</sup> They fulfilled my high expectations and even succeeded without my presence. Combined with casual interviews with three elderly people, a day-trip over the frozen ocean on dogsled, and observations of everyday-life in the village, the booklets enhanced and enriched my understanding of the food culture in this part of Greenland.<sup>11</sup> And now that my understanding of the probes method was enhanced and enriched through practice-based experience, I felt ready to start working on a full cultural probes kit for the *Food Related* project.



Illustration 27 and 28. *Cultural probes for the Food Related project.*

#### **Cultural probes in the Tromsø region**

Because of the successful try-out in Ittoqqortoormiit, I was encouraged to continue working with the cultural probes method. Instead of just one single probe (the creative questionnaire that I used with the school children), I now wanted to experiment with a full implementation of the method, as it is more common to use them as a kit. Besides the intention to probe for experiences from local food cultures, I aimed at responses and inspiration that could help making design decisions for the *Food Related* platform. As it is hard to predict on beforehand what might be inspirational, I appreciated the openness and ambiguity of the probes method towards its outcomes. For many weeks I fiddled, tinkered and searched intensively for suitable materials. I was able to continue that kind of work while being based at the residency of the Finnish Society of Bioart in Kilpisjärvi for almost two months.<sup>12</sup> During a beautiful autumn in and around this biological research centre in the north of Finland, close to the Norwegian border, ten boxes each containing ten probes were finalized. These probing tasks were all food related and inquired about people's experiences, worries, habits, knowledge and ideas concerning (Arctic) food. A notebook gave structure to the purpose, use and responses of the probes and gave space for writing a food diary and for additional questions.<sup>13</sup> The *Food Related* probe kit was designed to be used for seven days in a row within this Arctic region.

Among the ten *Food Related* probes, one task reflected on futuristic food, asking for wishes or predictions concerning the future of Arctic food. The design of this so-called 'Predict-your-future' probe clearly elaborated on the experiences with the creative questionnaires

used in Ittoqqortoormiit.<sup>14</sup> It consists of a similar sized booklet, presented in a transparent envelope together with a small plastic petri dish filled with an unfamiliar substance. In the booklet it is written how Winston Churchill, during the interwar period, predicted that in fifty years we should be able to escape the absurdity of growing a whole chicken in order to eat only the breast or wing, by growing these parts separately under a suitable medium. The illustrated booklet continues explaining that it is today possible to produce meat tissue in laboratories for about one million dollar per 250 gram. After some images of food designed for the future,<sup>15</sup> I inquire how the participant thinks reindeer meat will be like, in fifty years. What will be the colour, taste, smell, production and consequences? The suggestion is given to draw, write, photograph or print how life will be like with this food of the future. Obviously, both the petri dish and the link to biological future scenarios derived directly from working in the vicinity of biological laboratories. The substance in the small dish, basically candle-grease mixed with small pieces of dried paint, was added to the booklet to motivate tactility and to stimulate the imagination.

Another probe informed about the connection between food and identity through an allegory with flag placements, including three little white flags that could be coloured and used to claim certain food.<sup>16</sup> There was a probe that consisted of a little box with freshly picked berries with the question to write or draw what comes to mind when eating this.<sup>17</sup> And the box contained a set of handmade playing cards with recipes, requesting to add more cards to the deck.<sup>18</sup> To shortly introduce them all; there was also a probe to label oneself,<sup>19</sup> a probe to design view modes for the online platform,<sup>20</sup> a probe to

write a message in a bottle,<sup>21</sup> a probe to frame one's most important outcome,<sup>22</sup> a probe to leave comments,<sup>23</sup> and a probe containing Arctic candies and *Food Related* buttons as a thank-you gift.<sup>24</sup> The purpose of the probes and the overall *Food Related* project was explained in a booklet that came with the probes. This booklet gave space for a daily description of food intake and experiences, and for sharing additional thoughts and insights. Altogether, it became a varied and colourful combination of things and thoughts to explore, with many possibilities for sharing opinions, experiences and concerns.

Some local people helped me to organize a *Food Related* workshop at Small Projects in Tromsø.<sup>25</sup> We discussed the project and the current design of the platform. At the end of this workshop I introduced the probe kits. People appreciated the creative approach and were impressed by the time and effort I put into it. Looking at the probes was naturally followed by using them. Some people felt restricted to 'use' a whole kit for working with just one or two tasks. Some responses, therefore, were written on a piece of paper separated from the kits. Other reactions were expressed to me in spoken words. The Arctic berries that came with the 'Experience-your-food' probe were very much

appreciated.<sup>26</sup> I witnessed how one participant ate them with closed eyes, while he paused drawing a tundra landscape.

When the event at Small Projects ended, three probe kits were taken home to work with. Two other kits were used later in the same region. As I made ten kits in total, half of them were not used at all. This illustrates that it was again difficult to find favourable conditions for using them, like it was in Ittoqqortoormiit. Although the 'look and feel' of the probe kits was again breaking some ice, like the creative booklets for the schoolchildren did, people were not so eager to take the kits home for friends or relatives. The time-consuming aspect was mentioned first, which was considered a burden during this busy time of the year. Working with the probes is, indeed, quite a lot to ask from participants, even when I tried to make the experience joyful. However, I could sense that the time aspect was not the only reason that caused restriction. This is why I asked if other aspects played a role as well. The fact that the English language was used instead of North Sami was not a real burden. When I underlined my need to understand clearly why the probes kits would probably be refused, the true obstacle was expressed: the workshop participants found it problematic that I



Illustration 29 Cultural probes in use at Small Projects. R. van Klaveren 2012.

approached people because they are Sami. Although it was never my intention to exclude other people, I indeed addressed Sami in particular. For example, on the invitation posters that I made for the workshop, I prominently wrote: *"Are you Sami? Are you part of another Arctic people? Or are you feeling closely related? Please join us!"* This is, because I intended to build the *Food Related* prototype as a virtual meeting place for the different Arctic peoples. I thought that these peoples would benefit from the sharing of thoughts, concerns, facts and experiences deriving from their food cultures (see *Map 2*). And through the probes, I hoped, it would be possible to open up my working process towards a local people that the project aimed at: the Sami. But maybe I was enlarging the us-and-them by pinpointing the indigenous identities. Maybe that motivated people *not* to participate.<sup>27</sup>



Illustration 30 Cultural probes in use at Small Projects. R. van Klaveren 2012.

After encountering this unwillingness of people to participate, like I initially encountered in Greenland before, I was very happy when I received two of the probe kits completed. They were both handled with care by Sami women, who both affirmed the time-consuming aspect of working with the kits. Because

one of the women wanted to fill in almost all questions and tasks but had no time straight away, she postponed her participation. I received her package by mail when I was back in Belgium. To give an idea of the outcomes, I like to share this response to the earlier described 'Predict-your-future' probe:

*"I think it will be like now. The Sami reindeer-meat traditions have not changed that much, compared with the time my parents was young. The biggest difference is the vegetables that they did not have very often (only potatoes). Today, reindeer meat is served with different kind of vegetables, sauces and maybe the dishes will be influenced by people from other parts of the world – mixed food traditions. My brother in law is from Phillipines, and he make the most wonderful reindeer meat dishes in a 'Philliphine-way'. Really exciting!"*

This response covers both of the aims I had for the probes: to gather insights into local food cultures and to become inspired for the design of the *Food Related* platform. The practice of mixing food traditions that is described in this response inspired me to consider an

additional view-mode that focuses on the mixing of food traditions and other relational aspects. This illustrates how the cultural probes method can lead to unexpected, inspirational results, since I had not thought about that option before.

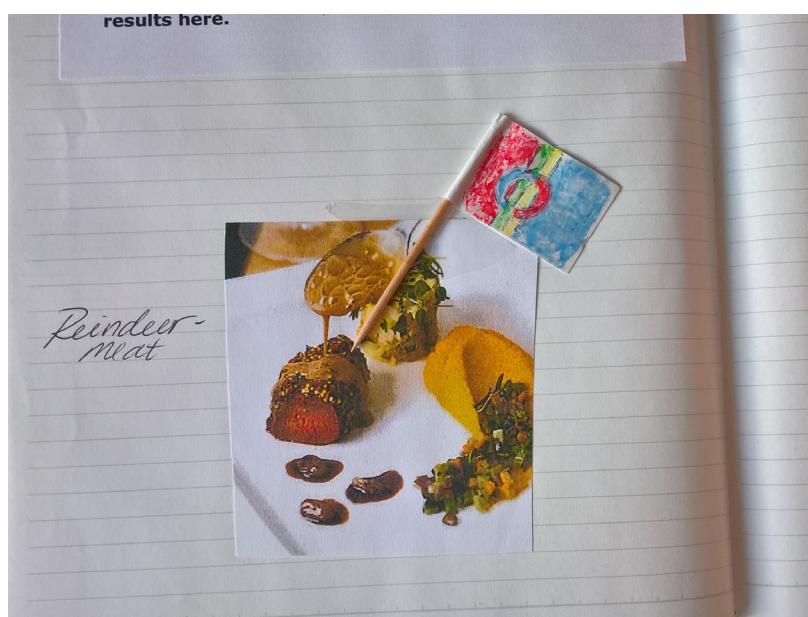


Illustration 31. Reindeer meat is claimed as a Sami food in the probe-booklet.

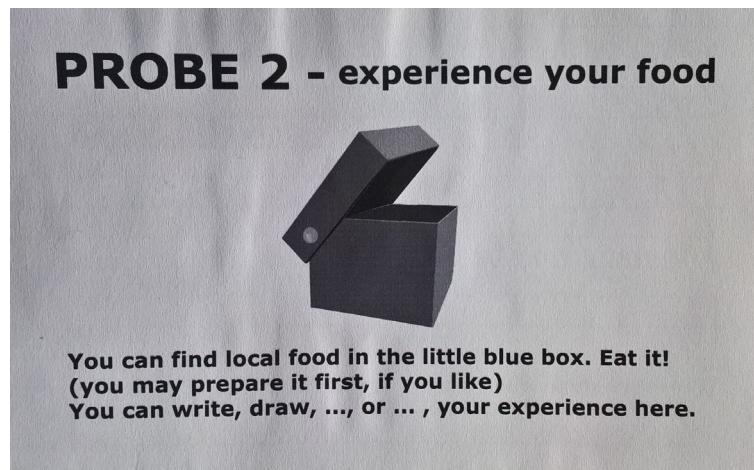


Illustration 32. Description of the 'Experience-your-food' probe in the booklet.

Besides this practical outcome, I particularly find the responses that transferred experiences pleasing and useful. The 'Experience-your-food' probe, the little box filled with blueberries that came with the request to

express ones feelings, thoughts, or taste during consumption, triggered such responses. Lisk, one of the two Sami women who worked on the probes at home, wrote in her notebook:

*"I love blueberries. Those in the box were very inviting, fresh and shiny. I felt adding antioxidants to my body, and the taste stayed in my mouth for a long time. It also made me think about our three small sons who were so eager to pick blueberries this fall."*

Her description invited me to follow her experience of eating the berries, which lead to a memory of the excitement her children had about picking similar berries. In between the lines I read how this type of food excites Lisk. She described her experience with a personal touch, as if I was her pen pal. The possibility of this particular probe to trigger and transfer personal

experiences instead of general information is, I believe, an advantage. There is, however, not a clear line between information and experience, which both contain (local) knowledge. It depends on the approach and writing style of the participants as well, and on my interpretation. This is another response to the same probe:

*"I prepared this berries with white cream. Very good, and typical for the autumn. In the autumn we eat a lot of berries as blueberry, raspberry, strawberry and cloudberry."*

Reading this response I feel less close to the participant and her experience. Nonetheless, her information triggered my imagination. As this response connects the berries to the autumn too, but this time more specific, I started to imagine possible view-modes for the online platform that focus on seasons and other particular time periods.<sup>28</sup>

Seven months later, during the summer, a Koryak woman named Alona worked with the 'Experience-your-food' probe as well. I met her in Copenhagen during a

working period at Danish Art Workshops for the *Niva to Nenets* project,<sup>29</sup> and asked her to work with one of the remaining probe kits. She responded enthusiastically about the creativity that was involved in the approach, but her workload turned too heavy to complete the kit. From all the tasks, she had chosen the 'Experience-your-food' probe to focus on. This time, I had filled the blue box with unfrozen store-bought berries, as it was not the time of the year, or the location, to pick fresh berries myself. Alona wrote:

*"This blueberry is not exactly kind of my traditional food, because it does not grow in my home area (Kamchatka, Koryak Okrug, Ayanka). It is much bigger than the blue berry in my home forest (*Vaccinium uliginosum L.*). And it does not taste the same. It is tasty and it has a body but still not the same. Maybe because our summer is shorter and the sun is shining much longer and therefore it has a sweetness and aroma from the other plants. Blue berry from my land is very important for my mother: I remember from my childhood that she would rather pick up this berry than another and we always had a big containers filled with the blue berries in the storage. When I saw them in Norway growing together with the blueberries I felt that I saw a piece of my 'homeland' and it made me feel homesick. I believe that food represents the identity of your culture, people, land, animals and trees. At the same time if you consume your traditional food in a different conditions (not in the native location, but f. eks. abroad or in Moscow) it does not taste the same. I tried to bring my food from home but I would never eat it with the same appetite. My favourite food is navaga (Russian word – *Eleginus gracilis*) a fish similar to cod fish. I didn't find it here and I am sure it will not taste the same way. I miss the fish and every time I come to Kamchatka, I eat it every day. I had an allergy to it when I was small, but I would still want to eat it."*

I consider Alona's response to be one of the most valuable outcomes of working with the cultural probes method for *Food Related*, as her rich description unveils a meaning of food that goes beyond words. A food item – the berries from Alona's native location – can contain essential aspects of locality. The short summer, particular sunlight and surrounding plants might influence its taste, while this taste can be different when consumed elsewhere. Its visuals can trigger sense of belonging, as seeing the particular berry in Norway triggered feelings of homesickness. I appreciate how she pinpoints the differences, as the berries I bought are not part of her 'us' but are from a supermarket freezer, illustrating the 'them' I belong to. When reading Alona's response, I feel she touches an essence or core meaning

of food that exceeds nutritive values. This touches me personally, as to me, this connection between one of her traditional foods and her cultural identity feels 'healthy'. Sensing the 'healthiness' of this native connection, I feel in parallel how some of my own traditional foods, for example chocolate sprinkles or 'plofkip' (broiler from factory farming), are connected to a completely different culture.<sup>30</sup> Without a reference to nutritive values I sense our western-European food less healthy, even unhealthy. Just as the surrounding conditions influenced the essence of Alona's native berries, essential aspects of western-European food production and other local conditions influence our food. Feeling this connection, understanding how that influences our European food negatively, sadness takes

over my mood as if I am mourning for a loss. This mood is similar to feeling homesick. But in my case, I cannot connect this feeling to an actual situation or to circumstances I previously experienced, although my desire for the Arctic somehow seem to fit. However, I can easily commiserate with Alona's disconnection to her native location – expressed through her food

experiences. Although our identities differ greatly, I find her experiences very understandable. And it inspires me to aim at richness of taste in my artistic expressions, instead of showing up with 'supermarket quality'. From the many responses written in the notebooks, I found this anecdote shared by Lisk notable because it was bounding:

*"During a stay in Botswana, I met with several San tribes. In one village, an old man was roasting beetles in the ashes of the fire. Since I had a fear for beetles at that time, I prayed to God that this man would not offer me a roasted beetle to eat. He didn't, and I was happy."*

This anecdote was meaningful for me personally, because I have been in similar situations. For example, during my visit to Kugluktuk (Nunavut, Canada) I was served tongue, brain, and other parts of the caribou head. As I have been a vegetarian for approximately twenty years, and am still not used to eating meat, this was a big challenge to me. Therefore, I sympathize greatly with Lisk's anecdote in Botswana. The assumption that Lisk most probably eats reindeer organs every now and then, but is still horrified by the idea of eating beetles, interests me. We all have certain food habits that repel or even disgust others, while on the other hand we find some foreign food habits repulsive.<sup>31</sup>

These and other responses turned useful for deepening my understanding of food and food culture, and inspired me to imagine future options for the *Food Related* platform. But among all the outcomes, it was the earlier mentioned disapproval of approaching people because they are Sami that turned the most influential for the project. Against better judgment, one of the probe kits was taken home by a workshop participant to be handled over to his Sami partner. As he already assumed, she did not want to participate and the probe kit was returned to me unused. Her refusal was intensified by a verbal message saying that she became sick of initiatives of southerners who wanted her collaboration just because she is Sami.<sup>32</sup> If I would have been Sami myself, the situation would have been different and collaboration would without doubt be considered. Thus, 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 this rejection gave a strong

message that I could not ignore. The ownership conditions of the *Food Related* project were brought up and discussed during the workshop. These clearly address the us-and-them dichotomy and the outsider-position of artists who work temporarily with communities. In doing so, they form the burden that I was aiming to overcome in my artistic research, through creativity and artistry. However, I did not expect this (non)participant to take down the foundation of the project in pointing out a deep need to exclude me for not being one of them. But she did, as she indirectly placed her finger on the weakest spot of the project at a crucial moment in its development. And I let her do so, as I refused to become an ego-driven artist that values her art above other truths, forcing responses to fit aimed outcomes. I remembered the painting of Courbet, specifically the interpretation I gave to it, and recognized the need to bow as a good guest (see Map 1). Thus, in taking her feedback and the workshop discussion seriously, I eventually decided to put the *Food Related* project on hold until firm roots within the Arctic are found.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that working with the cultural probes stimulated a complete reconsideration of the project illustrates how the method enables risks and opens up the working process for unexpected turn of events. Just as the openness towards possible responses can lead to unexpected critique, one needs to include the possibility to follow the view or the experiences of the participants. Working with cultural probes would otherwise become too conditional, constraining the participants into a 'working for' instead of a 'working with'.

## CULTURAL PROBES WITHIN THE NIVA TO NENETS PROJECT

In the autumn of 2012 I visited Naryan Mar, the capital city of the Nenets Autonomous Region in the northwest of Russia. During earlier meetings in St. Petersburg and Archangelsk, this location was chosen as the final destination of the Lada Niva – the location to where I would drive my car. It was not only important for the project to get to know this location beforehand and to continue the preparations locally, but to learn about the local perception of the Lada as well. Western people often find the old-fashioned and squarely aesthetics of the Lada Niva cute or ‘camp’.<sup>34</sup> Many people, both inside and outside Russia, link the car to the Soviet period. As it was not clear to me how young people in Naryan Mar perceive the Lada, probing was an essential step while preparing my act of gift-giving (see *Map 3*, p. 23). Twenty-eight students from the Socio-Humanitarian College of Naryan Mar expressed their opinion on the Lada Niva in small booklets, as a second experiment with singular probe use.

In spring 2013 I finalized four cultural probes packages that each contained eight creative tasks. These probe kits were designed for the participating co-drivers within the *Niva to Nenets* project, who drove particular parts of the long road-trip with me. As an artistic strategy to prepare for this trip, they communicated imaginatively about my intentions behind and within the project, about the participants’ needs and wishes, and about possible subjects that we could discuss on the road.



Illustration 33. *Lada Niva* booklets.

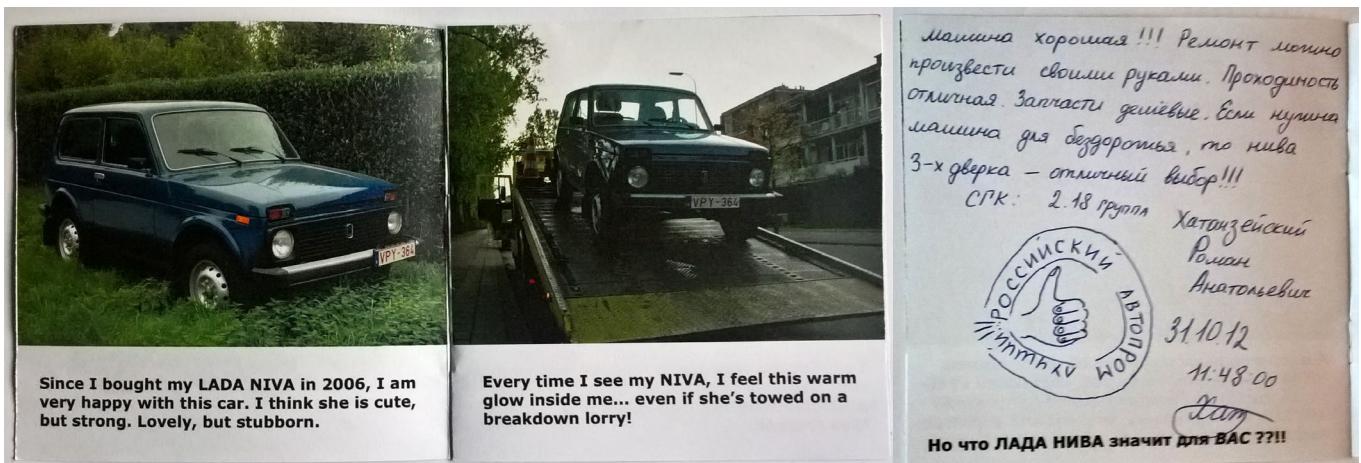


Illustration 34. *Lada Niva* booklets, pp. 2-3 + p.6 filled in by Anatolivia.

### Probing in Naryan Mar

The booklets that were made for the students of the Socio-Humanitarian College of Naryan Mar contained only one question, instead of the multiple questions that were asked in the creative questionnaires for the schoolchildren of Itoqqortoormiit. Their design is similar to the 'Predict-your-Future' probe and the 'Claim-your-Food' probe for the *Food Related* project. I present my attachment to the Lada Niva as a photo-novella and inquire about the students' feelings for the car. Instead of a petri dish or white flags, each booklet for the students of Naryan Mar came with a small handmade chocolate in the shape of a Lada Niva. Inside the booklets, underneath four illustrating images, the following text is written (either in English or in Russian):

*"Since I bought my LADA NIVA in 2006, I am very happy with this car. I think she is cute, but strong. Lovely, but stubborn. Every time I see my NIVA, I feel this warm glow inside me... even if she's towed on a breakdown lorry! I am not the only one in West-Europe who is in love with LADA NIVA. In Belgium, for example, there is a club called the 'Belgium Niva Friends'. And in a Dutch magazine for cars, the NIVA is promoted as a 'cool cult car' that beats the boasting SUV's and sport cars in the city center of Amsterdam. But what does a LADA NIVA mean to YOU??!! Please share your thoughts, experiences, opinion or anecdotes with me..."*

This time it was not difficult to arrange the participation. While I was arranging the trip, I was invited to reside in the dormitory of the Socio-Humanitarian College by the principal, in exchange for guest lessons. Knowing beforehand that the booklets would most probably be used, was encouraging. Being able to introduce them to the students first, after a short lecture about the *Niva to Nenets* project, was experienced as a privilege. It was interesting to see how the students, as a listening audience that did not ask any questions, changed into a talkative community when the booklets were handed out. Of course, this change in behaviour can be considered normal class manners. However, some individual chats with students and the teacher afterwards convinced me that the booklets - and not forgetting the chocolates - had broken the ice. Most students found the project and my approach humorous. I noticed that the accompanying chocolate Niva's were an important part of these singular probes. They upgraded the photo-novella from 'just a booklet' to an explorative experience. Observing the probe use in the classroom, I witnessed how the chocolates were received as small gifts. This brought about an exchange: the students were given a treat and I received their responses to my question in return. From the notes in the booklets I understand that many students have a positive attitude towards the Lada Niva.

Teiko Eugene wrote (translated from Russian):  
"Niva, I believe, is a good, reliable car."

Maria Rubuova wrote (translated from Russian):  
"Lada Niva is not as much appreciated in Russia as it is in the Netherlands. But in Naryan Mar there are a lot of cars of this brand. In my opinion, this car is not worse than other good cars © Lada Niva – Super!!! ;)"

Larise wrote (translated from German):  
"I think that the Niva is a safe car. The car is already a long time very popular in Russia. It is important that the vehicle can be repaired by oneself, with own hands."



Illustration 35 and 36. *Lada Niva* booklets in use in Naryan Mar, 2012.

Not a single student linked the car to the Soviet period, or expressed negative feelings about it. This was an important outcome for the project. The risk of being offensive, even if it is unintended, is troublesome to the intention of the project to support the Nenets people of this region. And, offensiveness is disastrous to the feeling of togetherness that this whole artistic research is aiming at. When I discussed the responses with the principle and some of the teachers, they assured me not to worry about the link to Soviet times at all. There are so many Lada's and other cars with a Soviet design in the Naryan Mar region that nobody bothers. In case older people would have negative feelings about the

car, it would most probably be because they just prefer more modern cars instead. My attention to the Lada Niva, as a gift, was not considered insulting or otherwise burdened. As both the participation and the outcomes resulted in positive stimulation, I consider this probing practice successful.<sup>35</sup>



Illustration 37. Posing with the students in Naryan Mar, 2012.



*Illustration 38. Getting-to-know-you-probes for the Niva to Nenets project.*

## Cultural probes for the co-drivers

After my positive experience with the probe booklets in Naryan Mar, I made probe kits for the participating co-drivers for the *Niva to Nenets* project. These probe kits were an artistic strategy to prepare for the long road-trip and were sent to the co-drivers a couple of weeks before departure. Gaver et al. (1999, 2004) valued the possibilities of their probes to create relationships with their participants. As I hardly knew the participating co-drivers beforehand, except Cunera Buijs, who is part of the supervising team of this PhD research, I found this an interesting use of the method. Through neatly assembled probes I tried to portray myself as a caring and reliable person. Because, in getting to know the person who takes you driving in an old car, for approximately two days on a row, I considered this to be reassuring. Besides that, I was curious to get to know the people who I invited to drive with me. Within my attempt to take good care of them, I for example wanted to get to know their needs while traveling. With this aim in mind, the kits were soon nicknamed 'Getting-to-know-you' probes.

One probe consisted of a DIY-cardboard for building a small Lada Niva, suggesting how it would be like to drive in it to Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki or St. Petersburg, respectively. For another probe, I attached to an invitation card a whale (modelled in gelatine) with its head full of bath oil, with the instructions to take this whale for a swim in the bathtub letting go of all worries related to the trip. The invitation was to consider how much luxury one needed on the road. The probe kit contained a handmade handkerchief with prints of typical Dutch icons: a windmill, tulips and wooden shoes. It came with a wrapper with the words 'I am sorry' written on it. The booklet linked this probe to our

shared colonial past, inquiring if there is anything I can do to compensate for my ancestors' mistakes. Because listening to music is usually a pleasant activity during long road-trips, and a possibility to bond, I added a memory-stick with a selection of songs about travelling. All songs that participants copied to this stick could be played in the car and could prelude certain topics, if they wished. A set of earplugs was included to simulate the experience of the Arctic stillness and the contrast upon removing the earplugs. The cultural probes packages also contained very salty Dutch liquorice candies, informing about food habits, diets, or what one dislikes eating, and last but not least, a set of labels to choose from in order to label oneself.<sup>36</sup>

The eight creative tasks came again with a booklet to structure its use and to give space for writing responses. While making these booklets, I naturally added practical information and questions. For example, useful travel information was added and participants could select their return flight from a list of possible departure times and aviation companies. I was aware that this practical approach goes against the essence of the method, which focuses on ambiguity (Gaver et al. 1999, 2004). However, ambassadors of the method promote adaptations particularly for the applied project (Gaver et al. 2004, Mattelmäki 2006). Therefore, a combination of imaginative and informative purposes seemed appropriate.

Unfortunately, not all co-drivers were able to work with the probe-booklets. One package got lost in the mail. Anders and Anna Sunna, a Sami couple who drove with me from Stockholm to Mariehamn, therefore never received their probe kit. As departure time for the upcoming trip was already near, I decided not to send them a duplicate. Kullunguaq (Kulu) Petersen, a



Illustration 39. The DIY Niva on Svetlana's desk. S. Usenyuk 2013.

Greenlandic student who joined me from Copenhagen to Stockholm, did not receive a probe kit because she participated very last-minute. Although I tried to make the probe-use as little time-consuming as possible, after learning from my earlier experiences with the *Food Related* probes, Iben Mondrup (who participated in the project together with Kulu from Copenhagen to Stockholm) still had no time to work with them.

Nevertheless, several probe subjects were brought up by her during the road-trip. For example, Iben employed the label-yourself topic twice during our joint trip. It was important for her to underline that of all the labels she is wearing, being Greenlandic is often disputed as she is born from Danish parents. While driving in the Lada Niva, she encouraged me to see the actual human being beyond the labels:

*"I don't actually see myself as either one or another thing. Because there are so many issues when being a human, like: being a woman, you're a gender. Being a mother. Being a Greenlandic. Being a Dane. So, it doesn't make sense trying to pin people down to being something specific. Because when you change context, you tend to adapt to the way, to the surroundings. I think what is very important to realize about humanity is that you are able to adapt to almost everything. And that is a skill that you should actually use more or be more aware of. I think what is going on in Greenland both back then and now is that people are so focused on a right way: a right way to be, a right way to see things and a right way to do things. And it doesn't make sense. I mean, we have so many labels. If it comes to labels, I am so many things. I am an artist, no-no, I am a writer, no-no-no, I'm a singer. Well, I am just a mix of what happened in my history. And it just turns out that 18 years of my life I have been living in Greenland. So that's a part of my history."*

Svetlana Usenyuk, a Russian designer who participated between Helsinki and St. Petersburg, worked thoroughly with the probes. She mentioned a different opinion about labels in her probe-booklet. Explaining why labels are important for her, she wrote: "They can give a concise image of you to others, which is important now,

*in the 'era of rush'"*. Svetlana was more critical to the Lada Niva in general, and to my intention to give mine away to the Nenets, than the people in Naryan Mar. Within the booklet Svetlana described the Lada Niva to be a Soviet icon:

*"For me, it's yet another symbol of Soviet automotive industry – a 'top-down' generalized approach to design the entire 'lifestyle' for the whole country..."*

From her perspective as a designer, this Soviet approach has been a mistake that we better not glorify. Further on, responding to the question whether it is a good idea

to give my Lada away, she critically warned me not to leave the car in Russia as garbage:

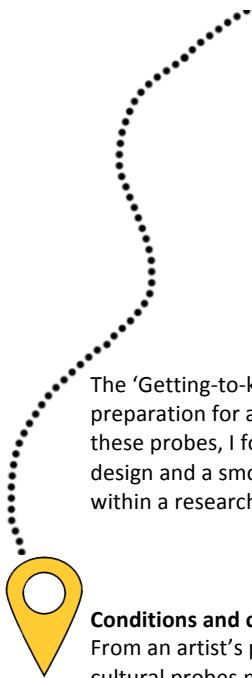
*"I personally have some concerns about your idea. 'To give away' sounds like a 'trash'. You also mentioned you'd like to have something less polluting, but WHY you want to put this one into such a fragile environment, and also fragile culture?"*

I asked Svetlana to share her critique again during the Picnic-Quiz in Helsinki, which she did. This time her concerns led to an interesting discussion that became valuable content for the road-movie. Later on, in Naryan Mar, remembering Svetlana's critical view helped me when I eventually had to decide whether I should drive my car back to Belgium or not. The impact of Svetlana's criticism was perhaps not as fundamental as the criticism concerning ownership issues within the *Food Related* project, but it just as much pinpoints the possible influence participants can have in a project. Again, I was glad that I opened up the project and its process for participation, to create space for opinions and views that are not necessarily in line with my initial intentions. This is what is sometimes referred to as the uncertainty or the risk that is searched for in participation (Huybrechts 2014), and is the reason why one decides to open up the project for participants in

the first place. Taking additional or even contradictive views seriously is therefore a precondition for a successful implementation of participatory practices – which includes the cultural probes method. Throughout all different responses to the probes, I became more than ever aware of the importance to allow different opinions to exist next to each other. Instead of searching for one truth or one right way to do things, the constant sharing and discussing of viewpoints and possibilities became the core strategy within this project.

Svetlana was less critical about the probe kits, which she enjoyed working with. During an interview in Kronstadt, near St. Petersburg, she expressed her enthusiasm. From her experience, I conclude that the 'Getting-to-know-you' probes indeed enabled a feeling of personal communication:

*"I really like this paper model, that was nice. I can't say that I was really thinking about the trip. What I got, was your romantic attitude about how things maybe should be arranged. It was that feeling that you also don't know how the trip will go. It was this cloud feeling that something should happen but it was not like a real line. I liked that it was not too much structured. I really liked this freedom. (...) It was really persuading how sincere you were in this booklet, like describing yourself and especially your passion for the Arctic. That was really nice. It created this feeling of personal contact even when we were not talking yet."*



The 'Getting-to-know-you' probes were an artistic preparation for a long road-trip. During the making of these probes, I focused more on the storytelling, the design and a smooth finishing off, than on the usability within a research setting. Feeling more related to the

#### **Conditions and contributions of cultural probes**

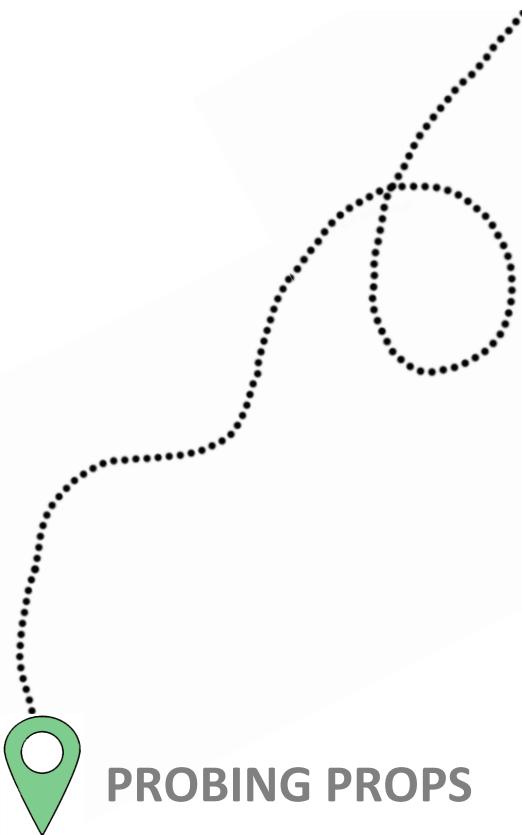
From an artist's perspective on working with the cultural probes method, for both *Food Related* and *Niva to Nenets*, it is the openness of the approach that I value most. Ambiguity during the making process is needed for the flow of inspiration. If one too rigorously follows contemplated meaning or an intended purpose, one dejects artistic intuition. This counts for art making, but for the creation of probes too. I therefore believe that it is not a good idea to distinguish, for example, the different forms that the probes can or should have (for example probes in the form of an invitation, or an award). Probology should avoid formulas by all means. Although there is no clear-cut formula for probing, Boechner et al. (2007) found that many practitioners take a *probes-as-recipe* approach: they hardly adapt the outside form of the method towards their particular research (p. 1083). While the probes method was developed as an alternative to more traditional means, human-centred designers have shown a tendency to use a traditional, scientific rationalization when applying them (Lee 2012). The probes appear to them as a set of reproducible techniques and structures (p. 62), and are often produced hasty. Tasks are generalised and uncertainty in outcomes is frequently limited in seeking scientific validity (Lee 2013). Trying too hard to make creativity fit into the restricted knowledge structures of western-scientific reasoning, limits or even excludes the non-verbal, the intuitive, the uncertain, and the spontaneous responses. Trying too hard to carry out a methodology is obstructing as well.

During the reflection on probing results, one should be aware of the pitfall of assigning meaning. Gaver et al. (2004) expressed worries about the way researchers appropriate the probes into a 'scientific' approach. They deliberately refused to analyse the results of their probing because "the Probes embodied an approach to design that recognizes and embraces the notion that knowledge has limits" (p. 53). In working with the probe method, I recognized the uselessness of a strong focus on its results. That what the probes brought into movement could easily stagnate if I would put my finger on it too early or too strongly, I noticed. Probing results that are allowed to stay ambiguous are much more

Initial artistic use of cultural probes as presented by Gaver et al. (1999), which had a stronger aim at the sharing of imagination than the gathering of data, I feel satisfied with the ambiguity in which the probe kits helped preparing for the road-trip.

valuable and 'true' than those that are forced to justify certain intentions or design choices. Like in all art making, it often stays unclear why certain expressions are made and received in certain ways, even to the artists themselves. That's the magic of it. When it comes to probology, one should be able to read in between the lines.

Scientific reasoning, however, expects us to be as rigorous and stringent as possible. Artists conducting artistic research are not excluded from scientific traditions and are asked to defend and define their practices, often through methodological introspection. In an attempt not to kill the magic, I only loosely incorporated repeatability. Cultural probes were deployed twice, for *Food Related* and for *Niva to Nenets*. Similarity can be found in the conditions. For both cases, I departed from Gaver's notion of probing, and thus approached the method as an artist. For two times, I first experimented with booklets or creative questionnaires, followed by the deployment of cultural probes packages or probe kits. Inequality can be found in the conditions too, as the probes were designed and put in practice for different projects, including different participants. The insights, or knowledge, that my experiments contribute highlights the value of ambiguity – an insight that Gaver et al. already presented. The probing also led to insights in how I, as an independent artist, work with cultural probes, as if probing were a technique or medium like watercolour or film. Much time is spent on each individual task, searching for ways to artistically communicate my questions or wonderings. The 'look and feel' of the probes signifies the characteristics of my artistic expression. From practice, both intellectually and affectively, I gained insight in how probology can fulfil border functions. This, I believe, is valuable beyond the scope of my individual art practice and contributes to what is already known in both art and science. Both the artist and the participants were invited to abide in the zone in between reasoning and intuition, in between the practical and the dreaming, in between them and us. From these contributions, I find probology a valuable method to inquire participants for their experiences and to seek their collaboration.



## PROBING PROPS

While I experimented with the cultural probes method, I became aware of a similar approach that was already existing within my art making. For all projects I worked on this far, I craft objects that have meaning within the art making but are not necessarily seen as art objects. These objects usually come into existence from artistic intuition; less biased by theory or predefined methodologies. In case the making of these objects followed any rule, it would be an artistic working habit that I unconsciously developed over the years. After my experiences with the cultural probes method, it makes sense to focus more on this part of my art practice. How do these objects relate to probes, and how can we compare their use to probing?

Sometimes I just craft without knowing what I'm making. In that case, meaning or purpose can originate during the making process. There is usually a strong connection to the project I am working on, because thoughts about that project linger in my mind during the making process. These thoughts can get structured while crafting, as doodling on a piece of paper during telephone calls can. Restrained thoughts can disappear, as they do during meditation sessions or long walks in nature as well. Other times, I first structure my thoughts and create things for a particular purpose, but still use my artistic senses to guide both the making and the outcome. The first is often followed by the second, similar to the way sketches precede prototypes. In this way, I created several material objects sideways to the creation process of the online prototype for *Food Related* and the scenario or road-map for *Niva to Nenets*, as well as during the propositional stages of both projects. This includes a blanket with the Arctic region embroidered on it, a series of painted plates and tea towels, a Lada pan with standard and cups, and a life-size two-dimensional copy of a Lada Niva made in

felt and fleece. In general, making these objects is not a synonym for making art, as they usually have not much artistic value when separated from the projects they are made for. In case they are used during participatory practices, I consider these objects to be artistic components of the art practice. For example, in the continuation of my research I designed a public event for participation, called Picnic-Quiz, which leans heavily on the emplacement of these objects. Similar to props in film industry, the objects set stage and support the creation of an imaginary world where people can temporarily linger. While gathering insights in and experiences with probology, I realised that most of these objects function as probing devices too. From this similarity, and to distinguish them from the cultural probes, I refer to these objects as probing props. From reflections on both the creation and the functionality of these objects, or probing props, I now deepen understanding of more intuitive aspects within my method of working. Thus, I probe further into my art practice.



Illustration 40 and 41. *The blanket in use In Tana Bru and in St. Petersburg.*

#### A blanket to stimulate engagement

The first probing prop that I made during the *Toward Togetherness* research is without doubt the blanket. In April 2009, the basic design of this blanket was realised. Using an embroidery technique called assemblage, a big blue dot was embroidered on thick red fleece. On top of the blue fabric, I embroidered representations of the land and all major islands that lay within the Arctic Circle. The blanket accompanied me towards Kugluktuk (Nunavut, Canada), and kept me warm at night. In the local supermarket I was able to buy beautiful black ribbon by the meter, with white representations of polar bears on it. This I used to decorate the edges of the blanket.<sup>37</sup> In town I obtained the skin of an Arctic ground squirrel (*hikhik* in Inuktitut, *siksik* in Inuinnaqtun). This animal was often present during my time in and around Kugluktuk, dead and alive. Because this animal does not occur in all Arctic regions, I sewed its skin on the blanket as a mascot of my time and inspiration in Kugluktuk. Later during my travels, a seal in sealskin was added on the blanket near Ittoqqortoormiit and several reindeer in felt were embroidered around Scandinavia and the Russian Arctic, together with a roof-racked Lada Niva. A reindeer's shank skin, including the hoof, was sewn on the blanket, resulting in a variation of textures to touch. Inspired by the many logo's and emblems that are often sewn on clothes, tents and other objects that are carried around by scientists and explorers inside the Arctic, in order to communicate their sponsors, I decided to do the same. Thus, the space between the black ribbon and the representation of the Arctic Circle was partly reserved for this purpose. Some of the first emblems to copy in felt include the Hamlet of Kuglukuk, the Nunavut flag, the logo of KU Leuven (my home university as PhD student), one of LUCA School of Arts and MAD-faculty, and the logo of our research group Social Spaces. Later on, the logo of the Dutch human rights organisation Arctic Peoples Alert, for which I work as a volunteer,

was added, as well as the logo of the University of the Arctic where I followed courses in Circumpolar Cultures. Over time, many other logo's, flags and emblems followed, adding more colours and information to the blanket. I marked specific spots that I visited for this PhD research with coloured dots. Thus, every now and then I added updates. Altogether, the blanket became a mapping. As such, it was supporting and initiating conversations.

As it travelled with me most of the time, I started to show it during meetings at universities and at people's homes. Because of its illustrations and representations, it probed for responses. While looking at the blanket people spontaneously showed me where they come from, where they have travelled, and where certain family members live. They responded to the presented animals and, for example, told me which other animals live where. I was often asked the meaning of specific flags and emblems. Amongst all responses to the blanket I found the ones that were triggered by its craftsmanship the most enjoyable. Although admiration is always encouraging, I specifically cherish the moments that I was suddenly approved as an artist because of the blanket. Explaining what kind of art I make or intend to make is difficult among, for instance, my own family members, and often even harder to grasp for people abroad. Thus, several times, (for example in Kugluktuk, Northern Scandinavia and in Russia), showing the blanket resulted in expressions along the lines of 'Ah, now I see that you are truly an artist!'

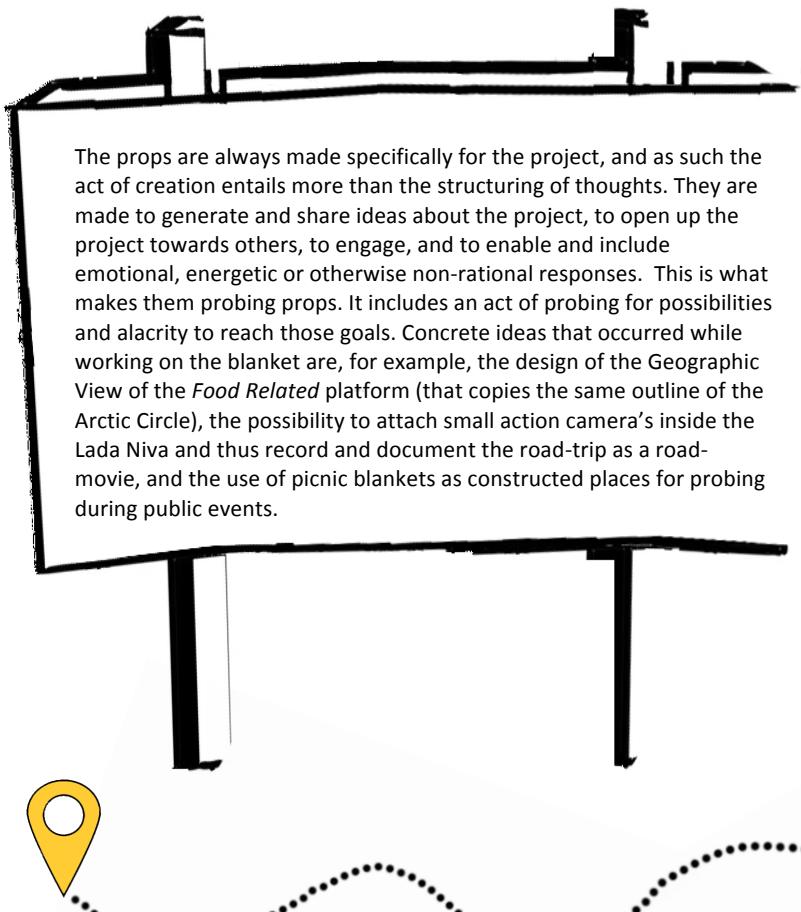
It would be an overstatement to say that the blanket functioned as proof for my artistic approach, but I clearly noticed its impact during three conversations that took place during the proposition stage of the *Niva to Nenets* project. The first of these three meetings took place in the city centre of Stockholm, where I had the



chance to have a short chat with Lilian Mikaelsson, a Sami who worked for the Swedish Sami Parliament. Lilian was already late for her next meeting, as the previous one disrupted her time schedule. So we had a negative amount of time and I hastily explained my ideas for the project while unpacking the blanket from its bag. While holding the blanket up with my arms stretched, her swift look changed into a smile while her attention and interest tripled. The blanket stimulated her engagement, although she still had to run for her next meeting. But before she left, she gave me her contact information and later on we discussed whom to invite to travel with me from Stockholm to Helsinki. The second meeting took place in Tana Bru, in the very north of Norway not far from the Russian border. Here I met Zoia Vylka, a Nenets filmmaker married to the Sami lawyer Oyvind Ravna, in her stepmother's house.<sup>38</sup> We had an interesting conversation and afterwards my companion and I were invited to stay for dinner. Only after we finished a delicious cloudberry dessert, I showed the blanket. Especially Zoia's stepmother, who before had chosen to stay a bit at distance, responded enthusiastically. She immediately searched for her location on the embroidered map, and for the location I wanted to travel to for meeting the Nenets. Arts and crafts are important for both the Sami and the Nenets, she assured me, and my stitches were nice and clean. The third and final meeting that I consider worth sharing in relation to the blanket took place at the Herzen State University in St. Petersburg. I had made an appointment with Pr. Tatiana Bulgakova, who is specialized in Nanai shamanism. Showing the blanket to her was naturally followed by laying it on the ground as people wished to photograph it. Soon it became a picnic blanket we both sat on. Although no snacks were present we continued our conversation as casual as during a regular picnic. Sitting on the ground within the outlined space of the blanket enabled us to share thoughts on an equal level, despite the strong presence of hierarchical structures at this university.

### **Mock-up Niva**

Similar to how I experienced the making of cultural probes, crafting the blanket was a valuable action on its own. While I was materializing elements to add, for example the logo of one of the artist' residencies that invited me, related thoughts found firm ground within the overall scenario. This is what happened during the making process of the Mock-up Niva, a prop that was crafted specifically for the *Niva to Nenets* project. This object for probing has the shape of a life-size mock-up of the Lada Niva, made in felt and fleece. Again, while I peacefully performed the repetitive act of sewing and embroidering, all by hand as I dislike sewing machines, I meditated about the project and its components. I consider these quiet times, during which time itself felt obsolete, of major importance for my art practice.



The props are always made specifically for the project, and as such the act of creation entails more than the structuring of thoughts. They are made to generate and share ideas about the project, to open up the project towards others, to engage, and to enable and include emotional, energetic or otherwise non-rational responses. This is what makes them probing props. It includes an act of probing for possibilities and alacrity to reach those goals. Concrete ideas that occurred while working on the blanket are, for example, the design of the Geographic View of the *Food Related* platform (that copies the same outline of the Arctic Circle), the possibility to attach small action camera's inside the Lada Niva and thus record and document the road-trip as a road-movie, and the use of picnic blankets as constructed places for probing during public events.

The Mock-up Niva is an artistic impression of the front size of the car, where people can sit behind and turn a steering wheel. Two of my earlier projects inspired me to build this mock-up: for *De Grote Treinreis* (The Great Train Journey), participants made self-portraits in front of a life-size picture of the Trans-Siberian Express. For *Vogelvlucht* (Birdview), I recorded opinions and local knowledge of participants in front of a photo-collage of the scheduled nature reserve.<sup>39</sup>

The prop was designed to attract possible co-drivers. For this purpose, it was put in practice at Statens Værksteder For Kunst (Danish Art Workshops) in Copenhagen, where I worked as an artist in residence in 2012. I invited Erik Gant to drive with me from Copenhagen to Stockholm. Erik is Greenlandic and wrote his dissertation on the representation of natives in movies, in particular Inuit. As he headed the Arctic Council (IPS), I considered he could be a valuable participant for the project. We discussed this option inside the Mock-up Niva, but travelling was unfortunately too time consuming for him.

When I tried-out the Picnic-Quiz (which is described a bit further) during the same afternoon, the emplaced Mock-up Niva proved to be strong for another purpose: it automatically became a prop that staged the imaginary world of the project. Later that summer, during a third try-out of the Picnic-Quiz at the Participatory Design Conference in Roskilde (PDC2012), the Mock-up Niva was emplaced again. There, it was enthusiastically used for photo-shootings. As such, this prop became the eye-catcher for introducing the project, and a stimulator for temporary feelings of togetherness that occurred during photo shoots. At PDC2018 in Hasselt (Belgium), the Mock-up Niva became the main location for the recording of additional opinions that are added to the road-movie in a sixth storyline. As this purpose was only implemented recently, it illustrates again how probes often find their meaning and use during the process, and not beforehand. New, additional purposes that came to mind for the Mock-up Niva include recordings during exhibitions of the *Niva to Nenets* road-movie.





Illustration 42. Serving reindeer soup at Defka.

#### Probing with food and the act of emplacement

In 2011, from 26<sup>th</sup> May till 18<sup>th</sup> June, I presented my work in progress during the Investigations exhibition at DeFKA (Departement voor Filosofie en Kunst Assen), in the Netherlands.<sup>40</sup> This group exhibition focused on art and knowledge in relation to artistic research, with a special interest in the PhD programs in the art. A symposium was held on the opening day, including short presentations by the exhibiting artists. During that time, I was following courses in Circumpolar Studies, a bachelor program at the University of the Arctic. Thus, contemporary issues concerning the region I wished to focus on, where on my mind. In the meantime, I had just finished the first fully functional prototype for the *Food Related* project and was working on the scenario for *Niva to Nenets*. Taking part in this exhibition was therefore a good opportunity to express my thoughts and to invite people to think with me.

I painted seven small plates with the same image of the inner Arctic Circle as I embroidered on the blanket. On each plate I added specific graphical information, for example the declining sea ice boundaries, the disputed ownership claims to the North Pole, or the present and future possibilities for mining. All the plates were accompanied by a tea towel, on which I wrote corresponding statements, questions and a legend. A corner of the exhibition space was furnished with a wall-mounted rack that put the plates, tea towels and the prototype of the *Food Related* platform on show. Next to the rack I placed one of my probing props to support discussions about the *Niva to Nenets* project: a big blue cooking pot with a Lada emblem, surrounded with matching cups. During the symposium day that opened this exhibition, I served reindeer soup from this Lada pot. Two cakes that I baked in the shape of igloos were served as well, enabling the painted plates and towels to be put to use. The blanket was emplaced on the ground as a picnic blanket and equipped the surrounding area for foods and thoughts.

In my experience, the serving of food stimulated engagement and conversations very well. People naturally took more time or found more ease in the moment. The act of eating together, also called commensality, is a bonding act (see *Map 2*). Thus, I was determined to work with serving food again. The dynamics of the group of people that gathered during this event at DeFKA motivated me. Looking at the blanket for one more time, the next step in my research presented itself to me: I would design a picnic event for the *Niva to Nenets* project to structure public participatory practices.



Illustration 43 and 44. Serving igloo cake at Defka.



Illustration 45. *The Lada Pot.*



## PICNIC-QUIZ

### The Picnic-Quiz: an event for probing

It was important for the *Niva to Nenets* project to map out possible courses of action and to include different voices on the premise of the road-movie: the fact that I wanted to give an old car to an indigenous people. Such a gift is questionable and comes with difficult conditions, which I wanted to discuss as one of the main topics within the road-movie. To include more people than only the participating co-drivers, I wanted to organize public events to take place during the road-trip from Belgium to Russia. With my experiences at DeFKA in mind, I searched for a format to structure my probing activities during these events. From my earlier art practices, I believe that the success of (artistic) participation depends deeply on the setting and the atmosphere the initiators are able to provide. Thus, I usually spent much time and effort in staging a so-called story-space: a physical environment in which the story of a project can be fully appreciated. Storytelling elements that are essential for the project can be staged to build this atmosphere as props.<sup>41</sup> As participation is often motivated by curiosity, the possibility to be heard, and the prospect of a good time, this setting or story-space should include cosiness, playfulness, a feeling of togetherness and an openness to contribute.

I found inspiration in the entertainment value of television quizzes. Combined with debate, dynamic showbiz elements can form a strong structure for the participation of groups of people. This is often the approach of the British art collective The People Speak.<sup>42</sup> For example in their project *Talkaoke*, people take place at a round table with integrated lights and speakers to discuss any topic they like. A talk-show host democratically facilitates conversations and builds an entertaining but comfortable atmosphere during these performative events. In *Who Wants to Be?*, another of their projects, the audience generates ideas for spending a certain amount of money and decides

through a custom made voting system which idea should be executed after the show. In this format, the entertaining showbiz elements work persuasively. It is specifically that aspect that inspired me strongly. But instead of the participants' freedom to introduce 'whatever kind of topic or idea', probing with specific questions was preferred for the *Niva to Nenets* project. This becomes possible within the setting of a quiz. As I experienced before, food can bring people together and spice up conversations. Combined with the showbiz feature, commensality became a second strong element of the event structure, which I soon started to call 'the Picnic-Quiz'.



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

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

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



Illustration 46 t/m 59. *The Picnic-Quiz in action.*



The Picnic-Quiz was tested between April and August 2012, starting with an artist-in-residence working period at Extrapool in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. The method was refined during an artist-in-residence working period at Danish Art Workshops in Copenhagen, where the Picnic-Quiz was held as a public event during International Indigenous Day. Later that summer the method was put in practice again with minor improvements at the Participatory Design Conference at Roskilde University. Responses to the colourful picnic snacks were sometimes striking, as it so clearly added cheerfulness and joy to the atmosphere. For example, often laughter was expressed when people pretend to quickly change their position when desired snacks were served on a different blanket. The moving around from blanket to blanket, followed by the (re)grouping with other participants, made the event dynamic and joyful. With this strategy I aimed to stimulate the possibility to allow different, even contrasting, viewpoints to exist

next to each other.<sup>43</sup> After these three occasions of testing possibilities and restrictions in practice, it was implemented in the recording phase of the *Niva to Nenets* road-movie in 2013. The combination of scheduled probing events, the Picnic-Quizzes, and regular conversations inside the car turned out to be fruitful. Regular conversations during the road-trip took place inside the car, mostly deriving from open questions, while time was abundant. In contrast to these conditions, conversations during the Picnic-Quizzes took place outside the car, mostly deriving from specific questions, while only a limited amount of time was available. While these conditions of the Picnic-Quizzes resemble co-design sessions, the regular conversations were similar to everyday life conditions while travelling.





Five Picnic-Quizzes took place during the road-trip from Belgium towards Russia. Although not all Picnic-Quizzes were well attended, the outcomes were always meaningful. Each blanket was equipped with its own GoPro camera, mounted on a detachable stand in similar colours. Thus, participants were asked to record their and each other's opinions. Some of these recorded responses became part of the *Niva to Nenets* road-movie. But as the participants recorded themselves with the small action cameras, many recordings are too shaken, too fragmented, or with too low sound quality to be used in the road-movie. Still, they turned valuable in influencing my course of action. For example, I received interesting and useful responses to a quiz-question that concerned the bureaucratic difficulty of importing a car in Russia. Before I posed my question, I explained how involved the import procedure is. During an earlier trip to St. Petersburg and Naryan Mar by plane, necessary for the organization of the whole

project, I was told that the import procedure of the car would cost around 3.500 euro. Although my Lada Niva was of less value, I added this amount to the desired budget and considered the high import costs as an extension of the paradoxes within my questionable wish to bring the old car back to its native country, as a gift. Much to my dismay I later found that actual import costs were at least 6.000 euro, which should be paid in Moscow or St. Petersburg in advance of the border crossing. With only a single-entry visa and less than a week before departure, there seemed to be no other option than to cross the border under tourist conditions. Therefore, my question to the participants of the Picnic-Quizzes was the following: Should I or should I not leave my car in Naryan Mar at any cost, taking into account that I risk to be considered a car smuggler if the import date on my tourist document expires?<sup>44</sup> The answers to this question were as diverse as the participants:



- *"I think you should do it. Just because that's how things are going in Russia. It is all about a kind of, I don't know, not even enthusiasm but just to do and not to play all the rules of the game. Because it's really a game. Some rules are really contradictory to each other, if you are talking with people from different organizations; they not really know how they correspond. So just go, go for it. That's why I think it is also a question of principle, just to make it. I'm also pretty sure if you have such a good intention and a strong wish to do it, it will end well. Eventually."*
- *"It is a game."*
- *"Do what you can, but don't take unnecessary risks."*
- *"When you are followed by five men in plain-clothes who take you into custody in a local office, you should think: it is enough."*
- *"I think you should impose a limit to yourself. If you know that you have only 100 euro, that's the limit. If you then should give money, then that's the limit. And you sometimes have to."*
- *"They car just happens to break down... coincidentally in Naryan Mar."*
- *"It is all becoming more difficult in Russia. For artist, and for the people themselves. We as tourists, because this is how they see us, are always able to leave the country. But those people, they stay behind. I know that they can have a very though time. For example RAIPON, the organization for indigenous peoples, has sincere problems. And many of the foreign-faced organizations are reputed as foreign agents. This can also happen for an art project with good intentions, because that is not in your hands. It is what they will make from it, in Russia, if they want to. And that is a risk you should not take. But if you find a way to import the car, one way or the other, I would definitely do it. But, I will be very careful, not only for yourself but for the local people who might get in trouble."*
- *"You have promised it. A promise you should keep."*
- *"I would say: go for it. Follow your dream. But if you can't do it, it's not that you didn't do your best. You are super motivated, so just go for it and see what happens. If it's impossible, it's impossible. And you should not have any regrets."*
- *"If I was you, I would just drive the car, get insurance at the border. And there, leave it as scrap. Somebody will find new plates for it."*
- *"There is no such a transparent procedure of doing this thing. That's what I am sure about. (...) If we are talking about corruption in Russia, it is quite obvious, because everybody knows about that. Nobody cares, in generally. It is just how it is. Because here, for example in Finland, you actually must obey the rules. It is just another situation. It won't work if you just go to certain people and talk. In Russia, it works."*
- *"I think it is also this huge political statement. If you are giving in accordance with the way the indigenous people live in the North, and how they don't have any borders, and how they move freely. And how we come here to define borders, to define different territories, to make everything so theoretical. From an artistic perspective it would be an amazing statement: first try to really follow the rules. If, through the rules, it is not possible, then even go through corruption. To show this was needed just to bring a car there!"*
- *"You need to realize that it is an adventure. It is a game and you should follow the rules."*

If I would pinpoint the most important outcome of the Picnic-Quiz, seen from my perspective, it would be the mental support that some of the responses gave me. I felt supported during the earlier expressed difficulties while trying to import the car in Russia, as if I was no longer alone in the decision-making process.

Remembering all the words of advice given to me during the several Picnic-Quizzes motivated me to keep on searching for creative solutions when Russian bureaucracy turned out to be less flexible than expected, but also to stop pushing when I would otherwise create unworthy risks.<sup>45</sup> And I felt specifically supported by the concern of one of the Picnic-Quiz participants who asked me anxiously to prevent unnecessary risks for Yasavey, the local Nenets organisation I collaborated with. With his concern in mind, it felt wise to agree with the proposed solution offered by my local contact person: to drive the car back to Belgium. Fortunately, Yasavey had not promised the Lada to a specific family yet.

If I would pinpoint the strongest weakness of the Picnic-Quiz in practice, it would without doubt be the time that is needed for preparation. While the whole travelling already took much of my energy, and created some stress because of a tight schedule, the challenge was huge to prepare all the different snacks, in matching

colours, on time. This sometimes exhausted me even before the start of the event. For future purposes it is therefore advisable to either schedule more time, or to delegate some tasks to others.

The time aspect, conversely, plays a founding role for the Picnic-Quiz to become an event or happening. Time restrictions, like in co-sessions, stage the moment. Within the time frame, colourful picnic blankets, with or without GoPro cameras on sticks, bite-size snacks in similar colours, and a Mock-up Niva made of felt during the three try-outs, functioned as probing props. They supported the probed questions and motivated engagement. A probing event, like performance art, has to be experienced in order to see how connections and sense can be made. Meaning and usability are not known or sure beforehand; it can only be found during the process. As the Picnic-Quiz structured dialogue in a joyful way and originated many interesting and useful discussions, I consider it to be a successful probing strategy. Some of the dialogues were valuable three times: during the moment itself, as an influence on my course of action, and as a scene within the road-movie. Documentation, again similar to performance art, is important if one wants to share the outcomes or wishes to say that something important has happened. These reflections, combined with the recorded scenes within the road-movie, fulfil that purpose.

Similar to the probe kits for the *Food Related* project, some outcomes of the Picnic-Quizzes influenced the course of action for *Niva to Nenets*. This is what is sometimes referred to as the uncertainty or the risk that is searched for in participation (Huybrechts 2014), and is the reason why one decides to open up the project for participants in the first place. Again, I was glad that I opened up the project and its process for participation, to create space for opinions and views that were not necessarily in line with my initial way of seeing things. Taking additional or even contradictory views seriously is a precondition for a successful implementation of participatory practices – which includes probing. Throughout all different responses to both the probes and the probing, I became more than ever aware of the importance to allow different opinions to exist next to each other. Instead of searching for one truth or one right way to do things, the constant sharing and discussing of viewpoints and possibilities therefore became the core strategy for this doctoral research.





## PROBING AGENCY

Besides the focus on the practice of probing, it is prudent to reflect upon these practices from a theoretical point of view. Thus, I will now analyse the making and the use of these creative objects while reflecting on some theoretical insights of others. First, I focus on the making process, on how the probes were assembled. These understandings lean heavily on Louridas (1999), who reflects upon design as bricolage from Lévi-Strauss. I put on my Actor-network glasses again to build a conceptual framework for their use, partly from a focus on boundary objects. Eventually, when I inquired the materiality and relationalism of my probes as deeply as possible, I encounter limitations that let me probe no further.

### Bricolaging probes

In *Design as bricolage: anthropology meets design thinking* Panagiotis Louridas (1999) views design as bricolage, where bricolage is understood as analysed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage* (1962). Although Louridas approaches bricolage metaphorically, I strongly recognize the assembling act within my crafting as a literal practice. Like bricolage, I constructed my probes from a diverse range of available things. But, as the crafted objects are assembled materialisations of my thought, they can contain metaphorical meaning. While assembling them, I interrogate with the material and with the signs they carry, creating new signs through new combinations or alternations. In Louridas words: "The bricoleur will interrogate, use, take stock, and interrogate again, and the result is unique and unpredictable" (1999, p. 519).

In bricolaging probes, I did not create objects from virgin substances to materialize images from concepts. Instead, I browsed through an already existing collection of materials and objects, partly within my atelier and partly at second hand shops and flea markets. Then, I rearranged different combinations over and over again, trying out which added element resulted in which effects, functionalities or possible roles of the objects. The blue enamel cooking pot for the *Niva to Nenets* project, for instance, was bricolaged this way. After I coincidentally found a cooking pot in more or less the same colour and shine as my Lada Niva, I searched for possibilities to further enlarge the aesthetic connection to this specific car. While searching, I found a plastic Lada emblem that I once bought at a flea market in St. Petersburg. Assembling this emblem on the pot, not too high and not too low, it became a Lada pot. As I wished to emplace this object during public gatherings, but wanted to use it for serving soup too, I tried out different configurations before I finally refurbished a piano stool to exhibit both the pot and a collection of

sixteen matching cups. This process of bricolaging is recognisably described by Lévi-Strauss (1962): "(the bricoleur) interrogates all the heterogeneous objects that constitute his treasury, he asks them to understand what each one of them could 'signify', thus contributing to the definition of a set to be realised, which in the end will, however, differ from the instrumental set only in the internal arrangement of its parts" (p. 32).

Within the process of interrogating, the bricoleur adds a personal touch. Louridas quotes Lévi-Strauss again: “he ‘speaks’, not only *with* the things, (...) but also, *through* the things: relating, through the choices he makes among the limited possibilities, the character and the life of the creator. Without ever accomplishing his project, the bricoleur always puts into it something of himself” (p. 35). Although most artists probably put in things of themselves, consciously or subconsciously, I emphatically expressed personal aspects in some of the cultural probes. For example, I metaphorically shared my personal feelings of deliberation through a set of assembled earplugs (see *Map 4*, p. 19). And, I expressed my personal feelings for my Lada Niva in the probing booklets that were used by the students in Naryan Mar. This was clearly not a one-way track, but a two-way process. I had never thought so deeply on why I feel so good within the Arctic. Motivated by the idea that people would like to understand, I searched for a simulation of this feeling. This not only brought me closer to the feeling itself, but showed me its essence as well: deliberation. Thus, the making of these objects made me probe for the true essence of my feelings. To embrace this ‘speaking with and through things’, one has to open up as much as one can and allow the things to speak to you.

According to Ingold (2015), “To know things you have to grow into them, and let them grow in you, so that they become a part of who you are”. Allowing this two-way process to function in full potential, one needs to allow uncertainty as the interplay of contingent and structure is unpredictable. Creativity is the handling of the unpredictable, says Louridas (1999): “Good designs surprise us by their ingenuity and their handling of contingencies” (p. 534). Without the contingent, it becomes manufacturing. He states that (good) designers accommodate the contingent through integration into a structure. As such, my probes are the form of the created structure by means of contingent events. Hence, bricolaging is opposite to the scientific approach that brackets out events and secondary qualities to arrive at the essentials and primary qualities (p. 520).<sup>46</sup> Thus, the practice of bricolage can be beneficial to understanding and remaking of existing structures, including the us-and-them dichotomy.

In the making process of the Lada pot, we can recognize how a certain structure is constructed.<sup>47</sup> This structure was arranged by means of contingencies, such as my association of the blue enamel with the varnish of the blue car, the resemblance in straightforward design from both the pot and the car, and the common understanding of the Lada logo.<sup>48</sup> Such contingencies can be internal and external, and are considered to be events in the words of Louridas, but elements when he refers to Lévi-Strauss: “He (the bricoleur) uses an inventory of semi-defined elements: they are at the same time abstract and concrete. They carry a meaning, given to them by their past uses and the bricoleur’s experience, knowledge and skill, a meaning which can be modified, up to a point, by the requirements of the project and the bricoleur’s intentions” (p. 518)<sup>49</sup>. Lévi-Strauss (1962) adds to this: “Each element represents a set of relations, at the same time concrete and virtual; they are operators, but they can be used for any operations of a certain type” (p. 31). As such, we can understand these elements to have agency and as such they are able to influence other agents within an actor-network.<sup>50</sup>

### Bricolaged agency

Drawing on material-semiotics, we can make meaning from objects. According to Barthes (1985, 1993), we can consider both the object, as a whole, as well as its components, to be signs (as defined by De Saussure). Thus, bricolaged objects can refer to a whole universe of significations (Louridas 1999, p. 529). These significations can be personal, as objects can have personal meaning for its owners. But, significations can refer to personal experiences as well, or to personal emotions that are meaningful to others. If these significations tell something about the owner or the maker of the object, they are biographical significations (Hoskins 1998). For example, the ‘I-am-sorry’ handkerchief, one of the cultural probes that I made for the co-drivers of the *Niva to Nenets* project, has a clear biographical signification. It visualizes my Dutch identity through the print of the fabric, showing stereotypical Dutch identity markers such as windmills, tulips and wooden shoes. It communicates that I am concerned with the colonial history of my heritage, perhaps not so visible in the object itself but understandable through its context. With this probe I aimed to evoke emotions and relationships. It probed the co-drivers for responses to my heritage, to my feeling of grief about it, and to the fact that they are handed out a handkerchief.

Specific components of a bricolaged probe can be established deliberately, when in search for a specific form of influence. For example, the Mock-up Niva is designed with the aim to attract people's attention and to engage them into participation. Its size and characteristic texture made this prop very present during the try-outs of the Picnic-Quiz and thus strongly influenced the local atmosphere. It represented the Lada Niva that I would drive to Russia and invited people to pretend driving it. The photogenic aspect of the design resulted directly from my previous experiences during former projects, and invited people to make photographs of the 'driving'. But in most of my probes, not all signs, nor their responses or relations, are consciously designed. Some components only become noticeable when the probe is put into practice. The playing cards probe that I made for *Food Related*, for instance, was unintentionally designed too neat and too beautiful in the experience of some people to be written upon. Probes, like all actors, are able to lead to unforeseen responses as we all carry our own individual backpack full of prior experiences and habitus (Bourdieu 1990) that colour and influence us continuously.<sup>51</sup> Other actors within a relational network can greatly influence the moments when probes are put to use. Thus, we can never have full grip on its agency.

Latour, one of ANT's major representatives, shows that objects have 'scripts' from which they mediate action. These scripts are inscribed by the designers of objects, as 'prescriptions' or instructions on how to act. They concern four concepts of mediation: translation, composition, reversible black-boxing, and delegation (Latour 1994). The first concept, the *translation*, mediates the programs of action. If a GoPro-camera is present on a certain picnic blanket during the Picnic-Quiz, one might use it at the moment when someone has a statement to make. Thus, the Picnic-Quiz, as a constructed event, is mediated by a program of action: the possibility to make recordings. The handling stick that is constructed underneath the camera is an example of a prescription too. It mediates the camera's program of action to use it as a recording device and point it towards other participants like a microphone. Although this program of action motivates participants to do so, other (f)actors might program them to do otherwise. In the second concept, the *composition*, mediation enables newly developing relations between the actants to form new programs of action. If a participant during the Picnic-Quiz suddenly realizes that someone is pointing a camera towards his or her face, he or she might act differently. The participant who is filming might alter his or her actions from knowing that the situation will be recorded. In other words, things (including people) relate to other things and thus continuously trigger possible actions and reactions by and through each other. The third concept of mediation, the *reversible black-boxing*, refers to the idea that the joint production of actors usually remains hidden (black-boxed) but nevertheless acts out in the present time. As the designer of the Picnic-Quiz, I emplaced three cameras on three picnic blankets and turned them on just before the start of the event. At the beginning of the event I explained to the participants that the recordings of these cameras could possibly become part of the road-movie. During the event, I was not needed to handle the cameras. Still, my relation to them, expressed during the exposition of their purpose, influenced the action in the present time. The fourth and final concept of Latour's mediation, the *delegation*, basically indicates that programs of action can be 'inscribed' into objects. This possibility, in the eyes of Latour, is the most important meaning of mediation (1994, p. 38). The four together, presented separately to distinguish them, function so closely connected that they cannot exist singularly.

The size of the impact that inscribed components of the probes have is hard to predict beforehand. All scripts depend on the whole set of actors within a network in which each and every actor can mediate action, and reaction, or not. Again, from my experiences with the Mock-up Niva I noticed how this particular probe turned much stronger than expected in the creation of a temporary feeling of togetherness. I am referring to the Picnic-Quiz at the Participatory Design Conference (PDC) in Roskilde, during which participants spontaneously started to make joyful group pictures. At a certain moment, twelve people posed in and around the fake car, hands in the air, forming a group of enthusiasts. Although I deliberately designed this mock-up to stimulate photo shootings, it did not cross my mind that this could include group pictures to this extent, nor had I foreseen how this would bind us as a group. This is an example of a stronger impact than expected, while on the other hand rather disappointing situations also happened. During the Picnic-Quiz at the Greenlanders' house in Copenhagen, the absence of participants was disheartening. The fact that possible participants did not respond to the invitations, calls and announcements, illustrate that the impact of their particular program of action can be as low as zero. How big the risk of uncertainty can be when

(aiming at) working with participants!

Goffman (1969) suggested that objects define a framework for action together with the actors and the space in which they are supposed to act out their agency. From a focus on space, the Picnic-Quiz held indoors came with a different set of signs than when it was held outdoors. Besides the influence of space as the locality, for example inside a certain building or within a certain landscape, objects had their influence on the experience of the space. For example on the Suomenlinna island in Helsinki, before I parked the Lada Niva on the meadow next to the chosen picnic spot, before I arranged several tables, covered them with cosy table clothes and carefully installed all food, drinks and tableware, before I laid out the three colourful picnic blankets and installed the cameras in their colourful holders, I experienced this location differently. Now, the space became a particular place, perfect for the Picnic-Quiz as it was possible to sit in the shade. Thus, objects assemble and transform the materiality of space into the ordered arrangement of a place. In the words of Hetherington (1997): "the subjective world or memory, image, dream and fantasy, so often associated with place, operates by assembling materials into representations and using those representations to establish the difference between one place and the next" (p. 189). Thus, through their arrangement, ordering, inclusions and exclusion, objects enable us to compare the spot to other spaces. Blankets on the grass, in the presence of bite-size snacks, are strong representations for the Picnic-Quiz to associate to the idea of a picnic.

### **Boundary objects**

The agency of probing has similarities with the notion of boundary objects. Boundary objects, first introduced by Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer (1989), are representational forms, things or theories, that can be shared between different worldviews, with each holding its own understanding of the representation. They have a different identity in each social world that it inhabits while they facilitate communication between the different worlds (p. 409). Boundary objects are never completely embedded within the context of one single community of practice, but reside in the borderlands between two or more social worlds (Bowker and Star 1999, pp. 303-305). In order to do so, they need to be abstract and concrete, simultaneously fluid and well defined. They 'track back and forth' between being specific and being abstract (Star 2010), and need to be able to adapt to the specifics of the several parties while maintaining a common identity across sites. Thus, "they are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. (...) The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds" (Star and Griesemer 1989, p. 393).

The concept on boundary objects can lead to deeper understanding of the agency of probology. Within the complex networks of interacting people, the probes mediate between worldviews and facilitate our minds to understand, and to act. The Lada Niva, for example, has different meanings in different social worlds but is still recognizable by means of translation. Although the car was not engineered as a probe, it was put in practice as a probe. Each actor approached the Lada with different concerns, motivated by the social world they inhabit. This led to different interpretations of the car. For example, it could be interpreted as an outdated transport vehicle, a Soviet icon, as polluting, as cute, as stubborn, as a gift, as a useful device, and so on (see *Map 3*, Relational agency of the Lada Niva). Gaining insight in different interpretations, however, is not a prevailing purpose of working with boundary objects. Instead, it is more interesting to gather insights in the complex networks of people whose worlds intersect through their interaction with the object (Star 2010, p. 613). The Lada Niva, as a boundary object, invited participants to share meaning from their social worlds. The car was an incentive for communicating and negotiating the differences in meaning, and challenged us to see the object through different eyes. As a result, we learned to know how and why our worlds intersect. Boundary objects can bridge the gaps between different social worlds or worldviews. From their position in the borderlands, they exist at the intersection of disparate social worlds without fully belonging to any of them (Star and Griesemer 1989, p. 411).

Bowker and Star (1999) raise the question whether it is possible to design artefacts as boundary objects. If boundary objects do not arise organically, which they usually do when the need arises, it is important to

prevent imposing or ignoring membership categories on individuals (p. 305). As we have seen in relation to the *Food Related* platform (see *Map 2*), unwieldy ownership issues can act dysfunctional if one tries to design an artifact to connectworldviews. Bowker and Star illustrate how multicultural educational models and broadly accessible information systems can be understood as attempts to engineer boundary objects, but often fail because they lack ambiguity (pp. 305-306). Ambiguity, the quality for which I valued the cultural probes method most, is necessary to maintain the delicate balance between being simultaneously abstract and concrete.

Whether a boundary object arises organically, is designed, or deliberately put into practice like the Lada Niva; there is no guarantee that it will function well, or will continue to function over time. As they allow actors to collaborate without necessarily coming to a consensus, it is important to handle a process-oriented approach (Stoytcheva 2013). Functionality, therefore, depends on the specific contexts in which the objects are situated, and the situations that are happening at that precise moment in time. Space, as was discussed in relation to the Picnic-Quiz held indoors or outdoors, is an essential agent within the complicated networks of social relations, and thus influences the functionality of boundary objects. While the objects are shaped by the network's power dynamics, their function is very much a product of their location within the networks (Stoytcheva 2013).

The probology within this doctoral research functions in line with the notion of boundary objects. Both the cultural probes and the probing props, including the Lada Niva, communicate through representations between intersecting worldviews. In addition to the ways that they are interpreted, they inquire about the context in which the objects are embedded. Ambiguously strong, they balance in between fluidity and concreteness. Within a process-oriented approach that acknowledges the specificity of the contexts, probing with boundary objects can enrich our understanding of the borderlands in between us-and-them, and bridge them.

#### **'ANT no further'**

When using ANT to focus and reflect on the use of probes within my art practice, I irrevocably come unstuck by the limitations of this material-semiotic approach.<sup>52</sup> In my experience and opinion, probes, and the use of them, relate to aspects that reach too far beyond materiality and their relations. For example, when it comes to emotions and aesthetics mediations reach within the fields of poetics, imagination, fulfilment and belief systems. To a certain extent it is still possible to trace into these realms, but after a while my ANT glasses become too autistic, too blurred by rational and structural thinking. Who I am, and how I act and react within the networks that surround me, is only traceable to a certain amount. So is the making of my art. When Radford and Weston (1975) inquired how we can be moved, they found that works of art "involve us in inconsistency and so in incoherence" (p. 78). Emotions are by definition irrational and thus lead to irrational behaviour, such as the experience of fiction. Feagin (1994) even goes one step further when she writes that artworks develop our capacities for emotion and feeling. They give us what she calls 'affective flexibility', in order to "alter our sensitivities, not simply respond by using the ones we already have" (p. 64). Thus, I believe that practitioner knowledge can only be retrospectively developed from ANT to a certain degree. Beyond that, it becomes too fluid, too ambiguous. I find confirmation in the writing of Candy and Edmonds (2011), in which they explain that the study of material culture "can be contrasted with other cultural forms such as ideas, images, practices, beliefs, and language that can be treated as independent from any specific material substance" (p. 128).

Besides these limitations, the understanding of the contrast between material culture and other cultural forms that I so specifically aim for during my probing practices is perhaps the most valuable insight that I gained during this ANT study. This turned valuable in the design of the *Niva to Nenets* road-movie, in which I share the ideas, images, discussions, practices, beliefs, and other outcomes recorded during my trip to Russia (see *Map 3*, pp. 36-43).

### *Thoughts and comments about cultural probes:*

## *Thoughts and comments about probing with props:*

### Thoughts and comments about the Picnic-Quiz:



### Thoughts and comments about bricolaged boundary objects:

Handwriting practice lines for the letter 'Y'.



**MAP 4**  
**PROBОLOGY**

**CULTURAL PROBES**

- CULTURAL PROBES WITHIN THE FOOD RELATED PROJECT
- CULTURAL PROBES WITHIN THE NIVA TO NENETS PROJECT

7

8

17

24

31

37

**PROBING PROPS**

**PICNIC-QUIZ**

**PROBING AGENCY**