

Communities and arts: food for thought for artists and facilitators

International House Tartu, 2023

In July 2022, International House Tartu invited artists and facilitators from 5 countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden and Denmark)¹ to Estonia¹ to discuss how artists work and co-create with communities. The relevance of the topic arose from International House being involved in Tartu 2024 – European Culture Capital with the 3-years long initiative [Maailma Maaliin - The Route Diverse](#).

The focus of this encounter with the artists and facilitators who work with the communities was on sharing of different insights, concepts and experiences. The following *Food for thought* is written based on both the insights shared in the meeting, and on the following work with the communities.

The material is structured around the skeleton proposed by the artists Barbara Lehtna (EE) and Katrina Duka (LV), who guided us through their own contemplations regarding the work with temporal communities – i.e. communities that arise from a situational agreement, and are bound of a certain time limit. However, this material is not limited to Barbara's and Katrina's perspective, i.e. the responsibility for this material is solely with International House Tartu, we just want to credit Barbara and Katrina for the framework.

We also tried to illustrate the material with the real-life examples, both from the process we experienced together, situations participants shared, and also some examples from organisations, artists and facilitators who were not part of the workshop but whose experience adds to the material.

Some of the considerations are for artists alone to contemplate upon, some considerations are to be answered with the communities. All in all, these are the considerations we feel could be useful for initiators/facilitators of the process (eg artist) of co-creating with the communities before embarking on the journey together with the community.

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¹ The list participating organisations is to be found in the end of this material

1. Agency & Responsibility

The “who is who?” question is one of the base questions to start with. **Who is responsible for what?** What is my role as artist or facilitator? What are the roles I would like the others to have? What do the participants expect and what do they want? What is their motivation to join the process? Some people may just want to give an input, some want to be actively creating.

The process **of decision making** needs to be discussed (and sometimes negotiated) in the group, and it needs to be clear who makes the ultimate decision.

For example, from the perspective of a person who has not participated in the artistic process before, for some it may feel like overriding the person when the ideas are not accepted/integrated into the process, but for some others it may feel liberating that they are not responsible for the final outcome, rather just add the ideas and reflections based on individual perspectives and preferences.

When initiating the process with the community, there are many people getting involved in the process. Some people join the process because they want to make their voice heard, some people join in order not to be bored, some people may join the process because they have to.

In this setting it is good to map who needs what, what are the wants, desires and needs of everyone involved in your artistic process? **What values lie in the center of your process?** What are the values of the people involved? The needs, wants or values may not always match, and then it is important to think **how do you negotiate?** It is clear that it is not always possible to serve the desires of everyone involved but the process should not hurt anyone, that the space the artist creates would give something to each of the participants. That also means one should think how to evaluate during and after the process if the space served everyone how you intended, e.g. if anyone feels overridden or not respected?

When working with the new migrant communities, we made an in-depth interview round by experienced interviewers (anthropologists) to understand how the participants of the project have been feeling about the process, what did they get out of it. One somewhat unexpected finding was that when we decided to celebrate some of the holidays that are important to people with migration background our aim was to provide space for contact between different ethnic groups, hopefully resulting in more understanding of each other. However, from the answers we learned that these celebrations had big value for new migrants who were either just missing this celebration (with all the emotions of safety, home-ness etc that come with them) or even more: their main motivation to co-organize these events was to let their children to experience something that was important for themselves as kids.

2. Working language

While sometimes we do work in settings where people speak different languages such as English, Latvian or Danish, sometimes we need translation even when we all speak the same English. When people of different walks of life meet and work together it is but natural that they have different competencies. We use our professional lingo, we have some implicit knowledge we might even not recognize we have. In that setting, artists and non-artist community members can experience a gap in each other's contextual knowledge and this gap needs to be bridged when we co-create together. It can be about language, but also about the way people see a topic, about their cultural background, it can be the difference in the discourse. It is important to the artist working with the communities to think through how to notice it, how to make sure that everyone involved is speaking about the same topic, that everyone understands, and it is also important to do it in a manner, so no one feels that s/he is stupid, or less than. All in all, the question to consider is how to translate different skills & mindsets of different people in the same process.

Language-wise, the artist may need to take a few steps back in order for the community to actually be able to participate. The community does not necessarily have the competence for, for example, following the references of the artist or the facilitator. For example, for an artist or the facilitator working with the environment, referring to the concept of Umwelten, might feel basic, but it is not so for the community. Similarly, to the organisation working with the Middle East, referring to art sparked by Palestinian intifadas might be just natural, but it is not so for the community involved if this community does not know what it is and even explaining that it is an uprising, does not provide the context,

3. Care

The question of **care** comes with a plethora of sub-questions: what is care? How do we care? Who takes care of who? What are the possible methods of care?

Once the artist initiates a process, it is important that s/he takes care of that none of the people who s/he invited to be part of creation does not get hurt – neither physically nor mentally.

Physically, it may be, for example, professional dance artists choosing the movements that are compatible with the level of physical preparedness of the participating community members.

When working with non-professionals in dance, it is important to remember that you need to take care of things that professional dancers are aware of – for example, warming up, stretching and relaxing the muscles after the work; also asking how the person feels – because people may not think of telling of the sensations that may indicate overworking.

Mentally, it is most often about strong emotions that great for creating an artwork, But that may be hard for the person in question. Sometimes the emotional reaction comes from talking about situations experienced, but sometimes even hearing the question provokes memories that trigger a chain of strong emotional reactions.

The group of people were asked, as a task, to think about something they miss and write a letter about it (or to it). One participant suddenly started crying hard. She did not want to share what she wrote, but it was about a close person whom she had lost. The task was clearly very powerful and opened for very heartfelt and sincere emotions. But while the emotions were artist the care and support was not available, while the aim was to explore how what one misses can be re-established / substituted through group sculptures-, it did not work out for this person because it was too strong and too personal and the person was not ready even to speak about it. So, it is really important when designing this kind of tasks to think about different hard and painful feelings that might be evoked (losing something, having felt very disrespected or ignored, being a target or violence or other situations that include strong fear) and how to support the person and whether the person feels comfortable letting the group experience these emotions.

The rule of thumb should be that if the artist or facilitator has a risk of triggering a difficult or painful emotion (and that is something that needs to be considered before), then it is important to also think how to address it. For example, such artists as Barbara Lehtna (EE) and Katrina Duka (LV) have worked with the community on very intimate and emotional topics have realized that sometimes it is but fair to provide options for qualified therapy in the process, and if there is no one in the team to provide it, then the project needs to have budget for this from the first place. While it is important to consider which emotional wounds may be triggered open by the artist or the facilitator while working with any type of community, with everyone, it is especially crucial when working with children.

A group of refugee children were having the final day of a 3-days camp, making closing remarks, when the facilitator mentioned that one of the countries of the people responsible for the camp is also experiencing the war, adding to it that children know what it means. It created a heavy silence and from one side, the last moments of the camp were impacted by a heavy feeling, rather than feeling of having had several nice days, but more concerningly, it also opened up for children's own memories of and connections to war and losses. Since it was the last moments of the camp, there was no place and time to support kids, neither the knowledge as to how to do it.

4. The larger context of the project

The questions below relate to the aim and the larger context of the project.

Who are you working with? What is the community/group of people involved? Who are the stakeholders in this project? What do you hope to achieve with this project?

Sometimes the community may be perceived only narrowly but working with, eg homeless, it is not only homeless people themselves who are the community, but also, for example, people who are in close contact to them, e.g. social workers. Working with feeling of loneliness one may think not only of elderly people or orphans, but also the people being lonely because of ending a relationship or being rejected by the family. What is the community you are working with – lonely people in Southern Latvian villages? Or just women? Or people living alone? How will you access the community/group of people? Would it be useful to call the municipality and ask, for example, which social institutions deal with lonely elderly, or would it help to observe in the public space, for ex. on the street, in a park and approach people directly? Or make a call to ask people to join with their stories? There are many ways to approach the community, some more useful in one situation, some in other. The general objective is to ask the questions that help to divide the bigger process into bite-sized pieces.

Urgency is about finding the answer to the question why this project is needed. It might be the need of the community, it might be the need of this particular society, it might be just artists' own interest – all of these are fully valid arguments.

I started the literature nights just because I wanted to have the stage for myself as a writer – to share my poetry with the audience. I think it is important to be clear about these things - that I am just doing it because of that. Over the time, my motivation has changed – I do not need this stage anymore, but now the initiative has been around for a while and it has given young poets and writers so much that I feel it is important to continue, to keep creating this space.

However, it is important to be conscious about it, and in some cases, e.g if it deemed to be the need of community, also to validate it: which segment of a perceived community needs it and why exactly? Sometimes, the need might be perceived to be relevant to more or less community member than it is in reality, or it might be perceived need rather than the actual need, for example, because the artist might just have used few people as mediators to communicate with others.

An artist got involved in the project that was about working with the refugee art teacher on art activities for the refugee children, and was puzzled by the hesitant reaction of the art teacher to use art to open up for the issue of war – i.e. the reason why the children were in this particular country. The artists had personally experienced the therapeutic effect of art when expressing difficult topics and did not understand why the teacher did not want to do other than “the beautiful” art. In this situation, there are many questions to be discussed: what is the need for the project, and what is artist’s motivation to enter the process? Who has the need? Who is the community to benefit for the project – teacher? Children? The receiving community? Who does the artist see as the key people / groups to take into account in this process. In this example, there are many questions that relate to different layers of the process, for example, that opening up for difficult emotions that may stay with the child after the artist leaves the room, and that also parents will need to deal with. Are children’s parents part of the process?

5. What are the core values and ethical principles of the project?

The scope of the values of the project has no limits. The value might be artistic freedom, independence and the freedom of expression. The value might be creating safe space for a vulnerable group. The value can be to create inspiration for the community, or it can be the mission that also people who normally are not able to participate in creation of art because they never had chance to develop the skills needed for that, can get this skills. It could be also justice towards or understanding of a particular process, situation or group. When reflecting on the values, it is also useful to think how will you implement the core values in the process.

When working with women in a deprived Palestinian neighborhood that was deeply traumatized by Israeli occupation, we were asked by an Israeli woman if it would be ok if she joined the workshop. We asked the participants and they said they would not feel comfortable with that. And when reflecting upon it, we reached the conclusion that our core value of this art project, where women were to embark on a journey of photography, was for women to be safe and this would not be possible with the Israeli woman present.

When we started to involve women in creating art using photography, the aim was to give the skills that they otherwise would not be able to get. To help them to find their talent. To give them something that will have a concrete impact. It would have been also fine to have the women just to gather and have great time that allows them to get away from their everyday worries, but for us, we wanted to have a bigger impact, not just give them nice memories. And if we want that, then we need to really take time to think through how we do it, how we pass on our knowledge, how we support them – it is kind of responsibility that I feel I have as an artist: am I giving my maximum? There is such a huge potential in that community has trusted you enough to work with you, that I really try to give everything I have.

The ethical principles are closely related to values, and they need to be outlined. It is argued that the idea of ethics separated from the context is empty², in the sense that there are many theories on ethics and they can explain and validate extremely different actions. So, in stead of asking whether it is ethical, it makes ore sense to ask *how* it is ethical – i.e. to fill the term with concrete content before using it. It could, for example, be principles about how the participants are credited for their input, or about who owns the artwork. It is clear that there are very different projects, with different aims and settings, and there is specifics of diverse art fields – so ethical principles that apply to one situation, may not be relevant for another situation does. For example, the possible questions to consider could be whether the community was used in a way that they were not aware of or not fine with or it could be that the dignity of the people participating, or the group that was represented in the artwork, was violated as per participants' perception. Would it be the same situation if the community consists of people in power (eg politicians) vis-a-vis abused women or a stigmatized

² Professionsetiske udfordringer i socialt arbejde, Hans Reitzels Forlag, København 2019

group? Would there be a difference in which way to ask for the consent and how much time and energy to spend on making sure community truly understand what it jumps to?

The situation when the community that worked with an artist refuses to work with the next artist shows that something went very wrong in the process. The there aspects we have repeatedly seen being a problems are (1) the problem of representation – artist working with a community represents the community the way artist sees it but the community gets very hurt; (2) artist did not explain what exactly will the artistic process result in, how the artwork will be used and whether the community is included in final decision about it's use, or explained it in a way that community did not understand; or (3) the artist miscommunicated or did not communicate what is his or her motivation to involve the community. Sometimes it leaves behind people who are broken and it hurts so much to see this.

6. How this material can be used

The pages above reflect on main considerations and takeaways from the International House Tartu project *Creative exchange for community cohesion: the power of arts when co-creating with communities* that took place in the summer 2022. The aim of the project was not to create a thorough manual for artists and facilitators, or to create a nuanced overview of approaches within the field of artists creating with communities . The current *Food for thought* does not claim that we have managed to put down the main principles of work with communities. *Food for thought* is a sum-up of the project, of the ideas exchanged in the project and experiences gained in the project, and they do not claim to be objective truth. However, as the title says, it poses some questions and shares some experiences that an artists or a facilitators who have not worked a lot with communities could potentially benefit from.

The organizations that participated in the project were:

End Ecocide Sweden -organisation focusing on rights on nature, with the mission to criminalize mass destruction of nature, it is part of a bigger End Ecocide network.

Pingvini NGO/Solidarity Network Y?! brings together grassroots activists and groups from across all three Baltic states. Through participatory and emergency funding opportunities, as well as a strong belief in pushing past individual responsibility in addressing systemic societal injustices, an intersectional framework is applied to its activities and initiatives.

Center for Magtanalyse (DK) is working with human rights and migration.

Research Centre of Organic Farming has throughout years been initiating and been part of diverse projects and programmes popularize the topics of organic farming and environmental sustainability.

Baltic Drag King Collective aims at building a more inclusive society in Latvia by increasing the visibility and understanding of LGBT+ community members and gender. It seeks to renegotiate the traditional understanding of masculinity and to expand safe spaces via drag, education and debate. Eventually, the platform seeks to bring together activists and artists from Latvia and the Baltic region to strengthen LGBT+ and feminist activism. Baltic Drag King Collective is a catalyst for the Latvian and Estonian drag king scene, working together with Baltic drag artists and activists to produce drag shows, workshops, lectures, discussions and community events around a fab masculinity and LGBTQ rights. Producer of the first Latvian Drag King festival in 2019, with the subsequent Baltic Drag King online festival in 2020 and Baltic Drag King festival 2022.

Active Rainbow (LT) is a community of youth workers, youth leaders and trainers, activists and volunteers with a multicultural and intersectional background.

Idėju Blokas (LT) is a creative space/platform for creation and development of ideas (eg unite different artists and NGOs, to promote exchange of ideas, knowledge and skills). Idėjų blokas is organising and supporting a variety of cultural expressions, from art exhibitions and residencies, to music, diverse multimedia production, education, talks, workshops, films, publications, and meaningful handmade material goods, while also involving people of different origins and promoting multicultural creative community, and sustainability.

MTÜ Kallid ja Pai (EE) is driven by artist Kalli Pikas and blends dance and visual arts. Kalli Pikas has been working with temporal non-professional communities when creating dance performances.