

## Opening up the Humanities

*Camping Women* as a Humanities exploratorium  
(essay)

**Lone Dirckinck-Holmfeld**

*is a professor of information and communication technology and learning. Her research interest lies in how technologies are used for learning. She is the former Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at Aalborg University.*

### Abstract

Despite humanistic knowledge and methods are vital in many relationships and societal contexts, humanities are struggling to get its messages out. This article addresses the development of new and engaging ways of opening up the humanities by investigating how art can serve as an experiential humanities exploratorium. The article probes how a concrete project, *Camping Women*, becomes a boundary object which bridges across people, art and humanities communities. The findings from the study confirm that this kind of art works well as a boundary object in ways of knowing, sensing, reflecting and doing, and offers new features to serve as a humanities exploratorium and engage volunteers to reach out to the public.

**Keywords** *Camping Women*, boundary objects, humanities exploratorium, the art of driving

### Setting the scene

*On an ordinary Sunday in August 2015, we drove on the major road that connects Århus to Viborg (Denmark). Each time we would pass by a flock of pasturing horses, the horses would stop and then prance after us with*

*great enthusiasm. What was it with our set up – the group of five cars driving at the pace of 30 km per hour – that caused such great eagerness from our mammal spectators? Our convoy was driving the “Camping Women,” which is a series of large scale concrete sculptures of women converted from old discarded camping-caravans – each one with its own specific feature – made by the Norwegian artist Benthe Norheim. But besides the odd aesthetics of five giant women driving in the dull landscape, why would the horses take such interest? I was driving alone with my preferred camping woman, the siren. Normally, we would be two in the car: a driver and a co-driver. However, this time I was alone. It was me and the women. I kept glancing at her in the rear mirror while, at the same time, looking ahead for any obstacles in the road. Every time we went beneath an overpass, I found myself ducking my head as if we would hit it. But it wasn’t only the horses that were welcoming us with great enthusiasm. Pedestrians stopped to look at us as well, many of them grabbing their cell phones and taking photos; they were all smiling and waving. Also, the drivers in the other cars were smiling. Some seemed to be a little worried going 30 km per hour; however, when they passed us, we got an obliging smile. The sun was also with us that day. The sky was blue, and the corn was yellow, ripe and ready for harvesting. The colours reflected in the concrete, which become golden. The convoy was driving slowly. I had driven this road many times as a kid, and memories started to pop up, along with details that I had never been aware of. The landscape held many nuances. Very well off farm houses were mixed in with “sleeping villages.” Some of them looked as if they were dying, while others looked healthy and in vigour.*

The reaction from the audience – the horses, the people and (not least) my co-drivers in the caravan – and the slow pace of our movement caused me to ponder: what does this kind of art do to knowledge creation? How does this art installation afford experiences and reflections, and how does this art practice build new connections and bridges between the university and the public, between art and humanities?

### **The problem to investigate**

In this edition of *Academic Quarter*, the paradox challenging humanities is well described. On one hand, humanities are perceived as useful, concentrating on the study of academic areas connected to

our existence and behaviours as social beings. On the other hand, the legitimacy of the arts and humanities, the value of their contribution to society and their economic impact are questioned (Danmarks Forskningspolitiske Råd 2010). In the latter case, it is not obvious why the arts and humanities should continue to educate so many candidates, nor is it obvious how those candidates and their research contribute to solving global societal problems. I address this paradox in particular by focussing on how humanities can find new ways of reaching out to the public and being part of the public sphere or civil society. As such, I am especially concerned with how interactive art forms can be used to facilitate this process.

This interest was inspired by the discussions brought forward by a humanist think-tank at the Faculty of Humanities at Copenhagen University. One of the issues under discussion was why the humanities are struggling to find sympathy. One argument put forward was that the humanities are suffering from closing in on themselves and focussing too much on heavy philosophical constructs; in other words, the humanities exclude more than include (Hede 2010, 11). Humanities as an institution and the human sciences as a field of research should open up and make itself more visible to the outside world. In particular, the humanities should work to strengthen their popular profile by finding new “languages” for reaching out. One of the suggestions from this think-tank was to make the humanities more visible by developing a kind of humanistic exploratorium – an arts and humanities exhibition centre which presents humanistic knowledge in all variations and nuances for children and adults, and which points at the ludic aspects of humanistic educational programmes and research (Hede 2010, 23).

I will use this article to explore and reflect on a specific case, which may serve as a kind of humanistic exploratorium and a new “language” for reaching out and opening up the humanities to the public and civil society. The method applied is a case study of an interactive art installation titled *Camping Women* (Norheim 2008). Using a combination of autoethnography (Baarts 2010) and qualitative studies (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015), the article provides insight into how this art installation serves as a humanistic exploratorium.

To explore how the art installation functions as an exploratorium, the concept of boundary objects is notably useful. Sociologist Susan Leigh Star and Professor of Philosophy James Griesemer coined the

term “boundary objects” to describe “those scientific objects which both inhabit several intersecting social worlds ... *and* satisfy the informational requirements of each of them” (Star and Griesemer 1989, 393, emphasis in original). The concept of boundary objects was originally developed to understand the coordination of amateurs, professionals and researchers working together on data collection within the discipline of institutional ecology. However, since Star and Griesemer’s (1989) seminal article, among others, Wenger (1998, 106) has used it in a broader sense as a concept to describe the process where an object serves to coordinate the perspectives of various constituencies for some purpose.

### ***Camping Women as a humanistic exploratorium***

*Camping Women* is an interactive, mobile art installation made by Norwegian-born artist Marit Benthe Norheim, situated in Mygdal. It can be driven as a series of regular caravans, however, only at a speed limit of 30 km per hour. In 2013, the Faculty of Humanities at Aalborg University bought the installation with support from the Obel Family Foundation and the Art Foundation, Municipality of Aalborg.

In the following section, I will draw on the art appreciation for *Camping Women* expressed by Adjunct Professor and Rector Emeritus at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, (Bukdahl 2013):

“In connection with the European Capital of Culture, Stavanger in 2008, the artist, Marit Benthe Norheim surprised us once again and drew us into her magic circle. With her “eagle eye,” she found up to five worn caravans. With a sure and sensitive hand, she transformed them into moving sculptures of women of great strength and originality. Their skirts cover the caravan, while they themselves stand out on the roof in both a visible and expression-saturated way. You experience them as monumental women who are headed out into the urban environment and nature. They appear as a rolling installation, full of surprise elements. The female figures are modelled in gleaming white concrete. They show that Marit Benthe Norheim has a rare ability to reshape and transform the concrete so that it can express the humanity and the protection against life-

destructive forces that she is eager to interpret. The Norwegian art historian Trond Borgen has rightly noted that “Norheim uses the body as a symbol and metaphor for universal human emotions, experiences and attitudes.” Inside the carriages, there are sculptures, reliefs and photographs. You also hear music edited and created by composer Geir Johnson, which makes the themes that Camping Women represent stand out in an even more intense way. “Camping Women,” therefore, appeals not only to sight, thought and imagination but also to hearing (...)

The Refugee is a proud and vulnerable female figure who looks into an uncertain future...The Siren features a contemporary sculptural interpretation of the seductive siren from Greek mythology that lures sailors to her and then lets them suffer shipwreck...The Bride has great erotic charisma, but all the wedding pictures that are inside of the caravan show differences in the perceptions of marriage and point to several places indirectly to show the often difficult conditions that a bride comes to live under. Camping Mama is great and caring but also symbolizes the short-sightedness – indeed, the almost suffocating atmosphere – that the petty-bourgeois life can hold.(...) (Bukdahl 2013, 6 translation by author).



Fig 1. Camping Women. Fotograf er Niels Fabæk.

### **Crossing boundaries and bridging new communities**

Since its inauguration in 2013, *Camping Women* has been part of various activities. It has operated as an object for media aesthetics and media criticism courses, for courses in art and technology, in research seminars addressing mobility, diversity, feminism and learning and in design courses using the artwork as a shared point of reflection. These activities have also paved the way for a close collaboration and sharing of perspectives with the artist, Benthe Norheim.

One of the more surprising activities was when *Camping Women* was used as a space and new context for philosophical dialogues and investigations. These activities were organised by Professor Antje Gimmler as part of the applied philosophy programme at Aalborg University. On one hand, she and her students wanted to obtain empirical knowledge about how people experience space – in this case, a very special aesthetic space. On the other hand, they wanted to examine how philosophers could use empirical research to learn more about theoretical concepts. The occasion was the science festival, European Open Science Forum, held in Copenhagen in June 2014. In their artistic appearance, the five *Camping Women* differed quite substantially from the other, more science-oriented exhibits and presentations, but attracted many visitors to interact with the art installation. Antje Gimmler and her students described it as follows:

“That it is an artistic space opens up different experiences at the same time: all the senses are stimulated in experiencing the five *Camping Women*, which represent different life situations. One can almost say that we perceive *Camping Women* as a laboratory where we can control all the sensations and stimuli that the visitors are exposed to. Critically, one can argue that in terms of our research interest in how people concretely experience the space and the role the elements play in the experience of a space, *Camping Women* is not representative of the way to experience a space, because it simply is not an ordinary space. However, as argued by Flyvbjerg (2011), an extreme case can produce more knowledge about a particular context precisely because it offers several variations and allows

for multiple interactions. We therefore assume that with *Camping Women* we can examine which elements are at play when people experience a space.” (Gimmler, Nielsen, and Platon-Rødsgaard Forthcoming, 4)

Furthermore, *Camping Women* has brought about new relationships and interactions between researchers, users of art, artists (not least the artist, Benthe Norheim), volunteers and stakeholders. The installation speaks to many different groups and communities. It has been taken to museums to mark special events and has been part of cultural festivals, such as Images Festival and *Kulturmødet på Mors*. Moreover, it has become an event marker, for instance, at *Kirkedagene* in Aalborg and the inauguration of the artwork *Kildegrotten* in Søndermarken. In between, the art installation has been exhibited on the main campus of Aalborg University and at Aalborg University, Copenhagen, which are their regular home.

Its design for mobility promotes moving the art installation around and reaching out to the public where people congregate. To move *Camping Women*, the organisation borrowing it must provide volunteers and cars to drive the installation. Seen from the artist’s point of view, driving *Camping Women* is an important aesthetic experience of the artwork; however, it also provides a new venue for collaboration and interacting with groups outside the university. In the following, I will look closer at this collaboration and the art of driving *Camping Women*.

The drive took place this past summer (August 2015), when *Camping Women* returned from Rønnesbækholm and the centennial celebration of women’s right to vote. When we drove back to Aalborg University in Aalborg, I asked my co-drivers to help me reflect on their experiences with *Camping Women* and what it meant for them to participate in the journey. Some of the drivers and co-drivers were connected to Rønnesbækholm’s Circle of Friends, a group of art-enthusiast volunteers, while others were not connected to the art world or to the humanities; yet all of them knew each other and had participated in driving *Camping Women* previously, from Aalborg University in Copenhagen to Rønnesbækholm. In addition to serving as a researcher conducting interviews and acting as a kind of representative for the university, my role was to drive. In her article on autoethnography, Baarts (2010) distinguishes between re-

searchers who are full members of the community and “anchored participants” (my translation). She describes “anchored participation” as a process where the researcher increasingly is integrated into the group and identifies her/himself with the community, and thereby becomes a full participant in the phenomenon under study. I find this to be a useful way of describing my role and the process of becoming a member of the drive and co-driver community. It was not my first time driving *Camping Women*; therefore, in a sense, I was not a newcomer, but it was my first time driving with the group from Rønnesbækholm.

To assist in the ethnographic exploration, I asked the drivers and co-drivers to write and reflect on their experiences while driving. I had prepared a written interview guide to prompt their description and reflections on their experiences, which I gave to the participants when we were half-way through our journey (on-board the ferry). At this point, I also explained my interest in doing this research. There were five drivers (men) and five co-drivers (women), including a following car. I got six reports back (two from women and four from men), and all cars were represented. Afterwards, I analysed these written reports following Kvale and Brinkman’s (2015) guidelines for qualitative interviews building on a hermeneutic reading. First, I performed open coding to identify the themes relating to the experiences of driving and a condensation of meaning, followed by a close reading and analysis. In the reporting, I am also inspired by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), who warn against boring reports, characterised by long, heavy and verbatim quotes. Yet I chose to let the participants’ ways of presenting their reflections become the backbone of the story, as the participants’ formulations provide multifaceted insight into the experience and the motivation to drive. I focus on the following themes: the motivations for driving, *Camping Women* as an artwork, opening up the humanities and the social aspects of travelling. In the following, I will present a summary of the analysis. The numbers in the brackets refer to the interviewee and the thematic coding.

### Summary of the analysis

The motivation for driving is integrated with the aesthetics of the art experience and the reception of the art by the bystanders: “It’s so fascinating to see the reactions from the bystanders. First, people



gawk at us. Next, they start smiling. I also observed that we didn't get any negative reactions from the other car drivers whom we bothered with our slow driving. They were all occupied with looking at the 'women'" (4, 2). Moreover, the drivers were fascinated by the artist and her "crazy" artwork, and driving them became a way to form a stronger link to the artist and become a kind of broker: "People we meet are really interested. They wave their hands to ask to know more about the 'ladies' – how they have come into existence and their various 'journeys'" (1, 2). The drivers and co-drivers also expressed their engagement with *Camping Women* as a work of art. They found that the art expressed "strong, beautiful and proud women, each of them carrying a specific message." The camping woman representing the refugee resulted in discussions on the actual and difficult situations of refugees. However, it was not only the messages of the installation that engaged the drivers and co-drivers; it was also the materiality of the art. Some found "the loony idea of reusing camping caravans to get around to be genius." For others, the contrast of using concrete to form archetypical women figures was fascinating. Moreover, that the installations looked like sand figures evoked questions from bystanders "on how to move around with sand sculptures." When people got close and realised that it was concrete, they were even more amazed.

I also took the opportunity to ask the drivers and co-drivers about how they looked at the university and the Faculty of Humanities investing in this kind of artwork. They unreservedly supported the idea and took it as an example of opening up the university and the research to the surrounding society. They acknowledged the mobility of the sculptures allowing the university to get them out to where people are. They expressed this relation in various ways: "It [*Camping Women*] shows that the field of humanities is not afraid of opening up to the surrounding world and engaging in new kinds of projects" (2, 12); "it shows that the faculty is open to the world outside the university" (3, 12); "[the university] wants to provide insight to the citizens about some of the activities within the university" (4, 12); and "break new ground in research" (5, 12). They also provided more ideas on how *Camping Women* could further contribute to the opening up of the humanities. Examples of these ideas are that "the humanities at AAU contribute with their expertise, eventually establishing a brand of the university in South Zealand" (2,

13), “lectures and courses in the smaller towns taking the point of departure in humanities issues related to *Camping Women*” (3, 13), “the use of *Camping Women* to make journeys with the students – short stops, which have been announced beforehand – so that people get a chance to participate and, preferably, more shows per day” (5, 13), “and also bring the students on a tour to observe the reaction from the spectators and bystanders” (6, 13). Thus, the drivers and co-drivers supported continuing to use the installation as a marker of activities and as an exploratorium. Other ideas included getting the installation onto the roads of Europe (2, 14) to bring an international perspective to the questions and dialogues which *Camping Women* provokes (1, 14).

Finally, the social aspect of driving the sculptures was addressed, as was the prompting of memories, which was also addressed in the introduction: “[I enjoy] being together with friends when we are travelling with the ‘ladies’, and have a good laugh when I think back on these journeys” (4, 15). Another driver said that the experience of driving the art installation fills him with good memories of camping and holidays at camping sites (2, 3).

### Discussion

How do we interpret these quotes? One can maintain that the humanities have always dealt with the surrounding world and also empirically investigated it; thus, what does *Camping Women* add to this that is new? Applying the concept of boundary objects provides insight into what it takes to communicate and bridge between communities. Communities engage with *Camping Women* as participants in different ways, and they come together and use this as a starting point for collaboration. The art installation is apparently so “plastic and spacious” that it can combine many different interests and commitments and facilitate a variety of activities. It makes humanities visible and facilitates the communication and coordination work across boundaries.

Thus, driving *Camping Women* becomes an activity, which goes beyond simple transportation. It becomes a means to feel for and engage with the art installation, and an active way of exploring art and creating ownership of the artwork through the experience of meeting spectators and bystanders, through tinkering with the caravans and driving. Moreover, it enables the volunteers to get in

contact with the university and start to build relationships and thereby indirectly contribute to the dialogue about the usefulness of humanities.

What I find especially interesting with regard to *Camping Women* as a humanities exploratorium is that the installation not only speaks to the art and media academic researchers and students but also to the classical humanities. In a time when the focus is on virtuality and new media, it is noteworthy that a robust and concrete artefact can also serve as a context for classical academic reflections. Here, I am pointing to *Camping Women* as an immersed setting for dialogues on philosophical reflections. From an interdisciplinary perspective, *Camping Women* bridges between different humanities disciplines and serves as a boundary object internally at the university. *Camping Women* is a shared object which has been worked *on* and *in* from many different angles, and thereby bridges across the humanities disciplines which often live side by side.

As the drivers and co-drivers also stated, *Camping Women* as a mobile exploratorium has also contributed to opening up the humanities to the public – because of its mobility it has got out in the public space, where people are. However, using art or artistic methods to reach out to new social worlds is not a new phenomenon. Some examples from the literature are where art has been used as a boundary object for communicating indigenous knowledge and values, or in a project where an invited artist and scientist worked together in a performance to popularize scientific knowledge (Halpern 2012). However, *Camping Women* as an exploratorium is different in at least two ways. It is already an installation designed by the artist which is used as a boundary object between researcher(s), students and other participants to enable research into humanities questions. Furthermore, because of its mobility, it can get venture into public or semi-public spaces, where people are. I understand the reflections from the drivers that bringing *Camping Women* out in the public is a sign that the university wants to “give” something back to the community even outside university cities.

The organisation around the art installation itself invites collaboration because of the inter-dependencies at work. It needs people to exhibit it and volunteers to drive it to its destinations. The concept of boundary objects was developed to understand the coordination of amateurs, professionals and researchers working together on

data collection within an institutional ecology. Wenger (1998) makes the important distinction that not all objects are boundary objects, whether by design or in their use. “Nevertheless, to the degree that they belong to multiple practices, they are nexus of perspectives and thus carry the potential of becoming boundary objects if those perspectives need to be coordinated” (Wenger 1998, 107–8).

This raises the question of whether *Camping Women*, by design, is a boundary object or a nexus of perspectives. I will argue that it is both. If the Faculty of Humanities had just bought the exhibit as an artwork, it might have appeared as a “self-contained object,” and the engagement of the students, researchers and visitors would have been the engagement of the spectator. However, the design of *Camping Women* encourages participation, and the manner in which it has been used makes it a boundary object. As an exploratorium, the exhibit invites tinkering, entering and exploring, both for sensation and an aesthetic experience and for dialogue and driving. As a boundary object, it facilitates collaboration and the coordination of knowledge and methods between the artistic community, researchers, teachers, students and volunteers – in the experimentation on humanities issues and in getting *Camping Women* around. Using the formulation of Star and Griesemer (1989, 393), the exhibit is “both plastic enough to adapt to the different purposes, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across social worlds.”

## Conclusion

*Camping Women* has provided a new dimension for getting art to the university. Besides being a “self-contained object” inviting aesthetic experiences, this project on *Camping Women* demonstrates that art can play an active and integrated role in the traditional teaching and learning programmes, and it can be used in research as well as in outreach and knowledge sharing. The *Camping Women* installation embraces core aspects of the humanities, such as being a refugee and a mother, but also aspects of mobility, space, time and learning. Thereby, it serves as a vehicle for exploring human existence and practices in multiple contexts. Furthermore, engaging volunteers in the purposes of the humanities is new, and this makes *Camping Women* special because it invites, and needs, broader participation within and outside the university. As such, the project on

*Camping Women* may serve as a promising and complex prototype for a humanities exploratorium.

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