

Ethnography-based art. Undisciplined dialogues and creative research practices. An Introduction.

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Abstract

This special issue is the result of conversations around ethnography-based artistic practices and art-based research methods, initiated on occasion of a workshop held at the VI Congress of the Portuguese Association of Anthropology (APA) in June 2016. The ambition of the artists, anthropologists, performers, designers and curators gathered there was to explore explicit combinations and convergences between artistic and curatorial practices and ethnographic processes, dissolving boundaries in order to defend a more experimental approach to ethnographic representation, privileging art-based, participatory and collaborative research as methods. This dossier situates itself in the blurred zone between anthropology, visual arts, and the new possibilities for conducting and communicating our research, moving across – and defying – academic borders.

Keywords

Ethnography-based art, methodology, experimentation, collaborative knowledge, representation.

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This special issue is the result of conversations around ethnography-based artistic practices and art-based research methods, initiated on occasion of a workshop held at the VI Congress of the Portuguese Association of Anthropology (APA) at Coimbra University Institute in June 2016 (*Ethnography-Based Art Practices: Changing the Future of work*). As the workshop convener, I had called for critical and creative reflections on art-based fieldwork practices and on ethnography-based artistic experimentations. The tremendous attention this panel gathered clearly attests to the growing interest in combining ethnographic inquiries with artistic practice, as well as on the use of the imaginative, creative and exploratory methods in anthropological research.

The adoption of creative and experimental research methodological tools to revise ethnographic perceptions of the field clearly echoes the recent discussions on the transformation of the *norm* and *form* of fieldwork (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Pink et al. 2004, 2010; Faubion and Marcus 2009; Marcus 2010a, 2010b, 2012; Spencer and Davies 2010; Fabian 1983; Ingold 2013, 2014; Mjaaland 2009; Lamphere 2018) which derive from the critique of textual representations in anthropology conducted by Clifford and Marcus in the highly influential volume *Writing Culture* in 1986.

The crisis of representation, which followed the publication of this groundbreaking book, opened new perspectives for the articulation between art and science. Conventional forms of representing other communities in anthropology - the radical “othering” (Fabian 1983) - have since become subject to deep questioning, which has considerably altered the very practice of ethnography. From being an authoritative and uncritical form of describing and presenting the information collected in the field, it came to be conceived as a mode of presentation in which the perspective of the ethnographic writer is implicated within the observation, and the gaze of those who are the object of ethnography expresses a critique of the power relations implicit in research itself (Krieger 1985; Rabinow 1985).

A growing literature on the potential of intersections between ‘art’ and ‘anthropology’ has been reshaping in recent years the debate on knowledge production and ethnographic methods and practices (Sullivan 2005; Calzadilla and Marcus 2006; Schneider 2008; Downey 2009; Leavy 2009; Schneider and Wright 2006, 2010, 2013; Ingold 2011, 2013; Strohm 2012; Rutten, Van. Dienderen, and Soetaert 2013a; Rutten, Van. Dienderen, and Soetaert 2013b). Much of this literature advocates a stronger engagement with a sensorial, emotional, person-centred and postcolonial representations of the field, instigating discussions about how creative or experimental collaborations between ethnographers, curators and artists can be useful in the research process (Grimshaw 2001; Svasek 2007; Crawford 2008; Kester 2008; Downey 2009; Greverus and Ritschel 2009; Campbell 2011; Brodine et al. 2011; Errington, S. 2012; Rutten 2017; Hamer 2016; Estalella and Sánchez Criado 2018).

The essays contained in this dossier, presenting the concrete practices of fieldwork, expose some of the fundamental themes of this debate and, in particular, the intricate relationship between content and form, claiming the fundamental importance of aesthetic in anthropological enterprise. The researchers that have collaborated in this publication don’t propose their creative practices as (artistic) illustrations (or forms) of their (scientific) ethnographic works (or contents). Rather, they interpret these aesthetic tools as constitutive of the very ethnographic knowledge. The process of understanding puts continuously into play, without being mutually exclusive, observation, impression, interpretation, imagination, emotion and experimentation.

In other articles, I have reflected on the connexion between scientific and artistic production, discussing if and why anthropology seems less scientific when it uses creative research methodologies and aesthetic communication styles (Pussetti 2013a; 2013b; 2015; 2016a; 2016b; 2017). I have dialogued extensively with other scholars about the epistemological distinction between art and science, between fiction and reality, beautiful and true, subjective and objective, speculating about crossing the disciplinary border between art and anthropology (Clarke 2014), arguing that it is no longer necessary for images to respect realistic standards of truthfulness to be “crude testimony of what is

happening” (Barthes 1987: 135), describing the world as it “really is”, or “‘documents’ for ‘capturing’ what is ‘out there’ - proofs of the ‘authentic’ contact with the ‘lived reality’ of the others” (Favero 2014: 86).

Creating images that “seem real, in the model of scientific realism of photography” (Machado 1995: 59) is just an option, a manipulation, a construction of realistic inspiration (Edwards 2011; Hammond 1998). It is a fiction - in its etymological sense of invention, imagination (Clifford 1997: 31), and of creative act (Geertz 1973: 23), which reveals the will and the aesthetic decision of the author. Ethnographic work recognizes its fictional side, as a “system of truth shaped by power and history (...) inherently *partial*-committed and incomplete” (Clifford 1986: 6-7), thus legitimately incorporating artistic practice in the production of knowledge. “Rethinking the articulations between realism and expressionism” (Edwards 1997: 54) and, thus, between anthropology and art, the essays in this dossier rethink fieldwork considering it as, above all, a relational process at the same time emotional, cognitive, sensorial and aesthetic. Following the suggestions of Anna Grimshaw, I advocate for an artful anthropology (Carrithers et al. 1990: 273), inviting anthropologists to combine their ethnographic inquiries with artistic practice, considering art and anthropology as analogous practices (Grimshaw 2001).

The goal during those three days in Coimbra was not, however, merely to discuss the ethnographic turn in contemporary art (Foster 1995; Rutten, Van. Dienderen, and Soetaert 2013a; Rutten, Van. Dienderen, and Soetaert 2013b; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005; Rutten 2016, 2017; Takaragawa & Halloran 2017) and the sensory turn in anthropology (MacDougall 1997; Heller 2005; Edwards 2006; Pink 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2013; Hjorth and Sharp 2014)¹.

The ambition of the artists, anthropologists, performers, designers and curators gathered there was, rather, to explore explicit combinations and convergences between artistic and curatorial practices and ethnographic processes, dissolving boundaries in order to defend a more experimental approach to ethnographic representation, privileging art-based, participatory and collaborative research as methods. This dossier situates itself in the blurred zone between anthropology, visual arts, and the new possibilities for conducting and communicating our research, moving across – and defying - academic borders.

Lydia Nakashima Degarrod - who examines the emergence of different forms of nostalgia during the collaborative production of videos about exile among nine Chilean political refugees living in California; and Zoe Bray - who reflects on conventional representational forms, norms and politics, based on an ethnographic portrait-painting encounter (a curatorial experiment in which the author took part, invited by the collective “Ethnographic Terminalia” at the American Natural History Museum) - are both visual artists and anthropologists. Using innovative methods, these two authors extend the borders of anthropology into the terrain of the arts, occupying a very compelling double role as both anthropologists and artists, and engaging in a debate not only about the

¹ The ethnographic turn and sensory ethnography have become the impetus to re-examine anthropology as a discipline, its boundaries, and its epistemologies. In 2013, a double special issue of *Critical Arts* (issues 27[5] and 27[6]) was themed ‘Revisiting the ethnographic turn in contemporary art’. These special issues reawakened interest in the experimental research practices situated ‘at the intersection’ of art and ethnography.

articulation between art and anthropology in the creation of alternative epistemologies, but also about the outsider-insider status of the ethnographer in the production of investigation-creation projects.

Tomasz Rakowski and Ewa Rossal present in their essay three artistic-ethnographic collaborative research projects - at the intersection between art, ethnography, and social practice - contributing to an on-going theoretical and methodological reformulation of ethnographic practices and devices, which has been defined by Estaella and Sánchez Criado as “experimental collaborations” (2018). Also Catalina Cortes Severino reflects on the articulation between anthropology, the social and the visual having an artistic ethnographic collaborative research project as the starting point, in order to rethink the relationship between domestic spaces and the production of subjectivities.

The essay of the anthropologist and art curator Giuliana Borea highlights the sensorial-material-visual experiences that unfold in the anthropologist’s studio bringing closer the field, the visual and the text, by focusing on the notion of “expanded fieldwork” and illustrating the whole process of “thinking through making” (Ingold 2013) in the production of anthropological knowledge.

Our meeting in Coimbra also included collaborative and participative artistic interventions, exhibitions, performances and installations that dialogued empirically with the conference location, reflecting and adding critical depth to the very materiality of the field. The APA Congress took place both in the Department of Life Sciences and in the evocative Botanical Garden of the University of Coimbra. The conference panels were held in the Department classrooms, whose space is still marked by the courses of colonial ethnography (Ferraz de Matos 2013: 124) and physical and biological anthropology linked to the history of Late Imperial Portugal (Santos 2012): human skeletons hang near the blackboard, the drawers of the school desks are full of human bones, the corridors are occupied by diverse objects, artefacts and anthropological findings collected during colonial expeditions in the Portuguese overseas possessions. The Botanical Garden emerged in the heart of the city in 1772, by the initiative of the Marques de Pombal, as a consequence of the European expansion of the XV century. The contact with exotic plants and animals stimulated interest in its study: the purpose of the Garden was thus to collect medicinal plant and exotic species, brought back from Portuguese colonies in order to supplement the study of medicine and natural history at the University of Coimbra.

This special location allowed us to reflect on how artistic exhibits are at risk of reproducing colonial representations; for instance, by exploiting collaboration without leaving room for other voices, new experiences and interpretations, merely speaking in the name of the others. Organizing collaborative artistic interventions in this very unique venue, using a postcolonial theoretical framework as analytical support, our goal was to invite the conference participants to anthropologically observe the space around them, in order to critically reassess the norms and politics of representation of the colonial period and to rethink epistemologically and ethically the production of a reflexive, sensitive, historical, person-centred, self-conscious, ethical and political postcolonial anthropological gaze. On this occasion, we discussed the ethnography-based art exhibition *Woundscapes*, displayed in 2012 through collaborative processes (see the Photo Essay in this dossier), as an example of a postcolonial aesthetic practice, referring to the collaborative search for a pragmatic approach to expose and overthrow established

racialized social, economic and political hierarchies, offering more than a one-dimensional view.

Woundscapes resulted from a multi-layered and cross-disciplinary collaborative project involving immigrants, artists and anthropologists - and often "*Immigrant AnthroPoArtists*" (Favero 2009) - in which the subjects of research became agents in the production of knowledge and the public was included not as passive viewers but rather as active participants in understanding and interpreting the possible paths that constituted the exhibition. We discussed how the introduction of multiple voices and perspectives and of various formats of collaborative productions - revealing the points-of-view of the people involved and getting an opportunity to all the participants involved to have a voice in the process - can be an effective way to disrupt linear authoritative narratives. The last communication of the Coimbra conference was dedicated to problematizing the post-colonial critique of representation and questioning the promises of decolonization of (aesthetic) narratives, with the presence of the curators and some of the artists/anthropologists/immigrants who had participated in the Woundscapes exhibition.

After this conference, in the same month, I organized a summer school at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon dedicated to *Artistic Practices and Curatorial Experiences in Anthropology*, which further stimulated this debate. During the summer school, we presented and discussed many of the ethnographic, curatorial and artistic experiences gathered in this volume. In particular we reflected critically on participatory public art projects supported by ethnographic research and on curatorial practices at the intersection(s) of art and anthropology.

In the summer school I could count on the collaboration, as teachers, of Professor Lydia Nakashima Degarrod and Professor Giuliana Borea (in this volume) and on the curatorial experiences of the *Ethnographic Terminalia Collective (ETC)*² - represented by the anthropologist and curator Fiona McDonald - and of the *EBANO Collective*³, of which I am a founding member. During the summer school we compared and discussed alternative possibilities for doing fieldwork, by involving different senses and deploying assorted strategies and media and provided a practical learning based on the participation in the organization of an experimental street art project, claiming the place of 'art' with fragments of ethnography, and the place of ethnography with 'artistic' objects.

All the authors invited to participate in this volume had already collaborated with either ETC (Zoe Bray, Lydia Nakashima Degarrod) or EBANO (Ewa Rossal, Tomasz Rakowski, Giuliana Borea, Catalina Cortes Severino) on diverse occasions, exchanging curatorial experiences, delineating a similar vision of ethnography as a possible ground for art inspiration and production (ethnography-based art), and of artistic practices as

² Since 2009, in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), the collective Ethnographic Terminalia has curated annual group shows of the work of anthropologists who make art and of artists who engage with anthropological theories and methods. (www.ethnographicterminalia.org).

³ EBANOCollective (Ethnography-Based Art Nomad Organization) is an artistic and curatorial collective that, since 2013, proposes to carry out site-specific projects and urban interventions through art supported by ethnographic research. Through the collaboration of artists and social scientists, EBANO develops participatory projects of public art tackling local community issues and larger social and urban questions. (www.ebanocollective.org)

involved in both the acquisition and the transmission of ethnographic knowledge (art-based ethnography). Among those many occasions, I would like here to remember in particular the organization of the ethnography-based art exhibition *Woundscapes* in 2013 organized by EBANO at the Museum of Lisbon; the artistic residence “Exhibition as Residency—Art, Anthropology, Collaboration”, organized by ETC at the Arts Incubator in Washington Park, Chicago, held in November 2013 in conjunction with the American Anthropological Association (AAA); and the conference “*Estudios y Encuentros entre Antropología y Arte*” organized by Giuliana Borea in 2014 at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. I would like to remember these events that allowed me to know most of the authors who accepted the invitation to participate in this volume, thanking my colleagues for these wonderful opportunities of collaboration and for their generosity in sharing their reflections and research.

I would like finally to talk about another workshop, which proved to be fundamental not only for the collaborations that it has allowed, but above all for the reflections that have arisen from it and that are reflected in this dossier. In July 2017, as EBANO and as researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, I collaborated on the organization of the first International Workshop of the #Colleex EASA⁴ network, aimed at opening a space for debate and intervention around experimental forms of ethnographic fieldwork. This workshop was dedicated to explore the infrastructures, spaces, forms of relationship, methods, and techniques required to inject an experimental sensibility in fieldwork. During three days, in the evocative setting of the Lisbon Tropical Botanical Garden, anthropologists, curators and artists have discussed and performed their fieldwork practices and their creative experimental methodologies.

Even more so than in the Coimbra venue, the Lisbon Tropical Botanical Garden was a centre for colonial experimentation and study, especially oriented towards the recollection of the botanical and agricultural diversity in the Portuguese Empire. In 1940, the Garden – called at that time the Colonial Garden – played an important role during the Portuguese World Exhibition, a huge propaganda event for the celebration of the Empire, hosting the colonial section and sculpture reproductions of indigenous heads from all the colonial territories. With Portuguese ethnography at its peak as ‘handmaiden of colonialism’, the Colonial Garden⁵ became one of the major sites for Colonial Studies as well as a miniaturised representation of the empire itself. This place – loaded with a heavy story – provided a great venue for sharing our methodological anxieties and creative reflections, being itself a site that triggers all kinds of considerations about artistic experimentations, (post)colonial representations, poetics and politics of ethnographic fieldwork. The intense contact during the #Colleex days with an artistic and cultural heritage site dedicated to the representation of the colonial ‘Other’⁶ stimulated a discussion on nowadays fieldwork processes and on ‘decolonising’ representational practices (Smith 1999).

⁴ European Association of Social Anthropology (EASA).

⁵ The Garden adopted different designations through time: initially *Colonial Garden*, then *Garden and Colonial Agricultural Museum* (1944), *Ultramar Garden* in the 1950s and finally *Tropical Agricultural Museum and Garden*, integrated in the Museum of Natural History and Science (MUHNAC) and the Lisbon Botanic Garden of the University of Lisbon.

⁶ The garden alternates areas of sparse and thick vegetation with structures built in 1940 for the Colonial Section of the Portuguese World Exhibition representing the varying morphological characters of the colonized people of Portuguese colonies in Africa and Asia.

This special issue intended to build on the outcomes of all these meetings, reporting ideas, practices and processes that have proved important to reconsider the production of anthropological knowledge through the use of experimental and creative research methods. The collaborations and conversations carried out during these years among the authors invited to this dossier converged into emphasizing the importance of highlighting the process instead of celebrating the final outcome - the exhibition or the artwork. All the articles here collected put the empirical work we do as anthropologists and/or artists on display, as it is the interactive process of on-going questioning, learning and discussing that leads to the construction of new knowledge and mutual understanding.

Looking at artistic processes as methodological devices, the authors gathered in this dossier analyse their own epistemic practices of fieldwork, exploring when and how artistic or curatorial practices can contribute to the anthropological research, allowing novel forms of ethnographic knowledge. Their contributions illustrate that art practices can be used in fieldwork in order to: 1) access new arenas, challenging topics and complex empirical fields and overpass social barriers, facilitating social interaction and cultural encounter (see Rakowski and Rossal) 2) capture the non-verbal dimensions of being, going beyond the words, exploring the unspoken and grasping emotional, sensorial and internal imaginary worlds (see Lydia Nakashima Degarrod); 3) re-examine anthropology as a discipline, discussing its boundaries and epistemologies and re-think ethnography as an empirical practice and a relational process, challenging and subverting authoritative relationships between 'observer' and 'observed' (see Zoe Bray and Giuliana Borea); and finally 4) to communicate in a more effective way the multisensorial lived experiences of the field, making space for a multiplicity of voices to be heard, transforming informants and spectators into active knowledge producers, altering expectations and experiences, engaging with wider and non-academic audiences, and seeking new forms of political engagement (see Catalina Cortes Severino).

The authors collected here blur the classical division of such epistemological fields - in their materiality and process, experimentation and creativity -, placing themselves at the intersection between "art" and "ethnography" and expanding already existing categorical distinctions. Their multiple placement - integrating different modes of perception, acting and thinking - opens novel possibilities of connection with the informants, of emotional (verbal and non-verbal) exchange, of insights on the social context and its power dynamics, making this issue not only a fruitful example of *interdisciplinarity* but above all, of *indisciplinarity*. Far from representing a methodological deficiency, the concept of *indisciplinarity* expresses the difficulty and the refusal to adhere uncritically and orthodoxly to a single discipline. This is precisely because disciplines - such as identities and paradigms - appear as (historical and political) constructions, edified on differences and protected by the erection of walls, causing a depletion of their epistemological potential and a decrement of their versatility and energy.

Contemporary anthropology, in a "dialectic tension with the contemporary world in which it is embedded, redefines the scale, the conceptual foundations, and the techniques of knowledge production" (Comaroff 2010: 524), is always more characterized by fluid, eclectic and transforming fieldwork practices that expand, transcend, contest and transfigure historical disciplinary and conceptual boundaries, negotiating and creating

new research spaces and opportunities. Advocating indisciplinary not only as an invitation to transgress disciplinary borders, but also as a form to reflect on disciplinary limitations and to rethink the historical and social conditions of their own foundation and consolidation, and the methodological coordinates of anthropology, the essays in this volume open the path for alternative perspectives and for flexible and eclectic methods. Providing avenues for a “new undisciplined anthropology” (Comaroff 2010: 527), or better for a “critical in/discipline” (Comaroff 2010: 533), our aspiration is to open up new horizons for a more collaborative, experimental, explorative and politically engaged anthropology.

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