

# Art and anthropology, work and life.

Visual Ethnography

VOLUME XIII | No 2 | 2024  
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-153

Roger Sansi, *Universitat de Barcelona, Spain*

Matteo Guidi, *ISIA Urbino, Italia*

## Abstract

This special issue is a collection of articles, photo-essays and videos united by a common engagement in art and anthropology that takes multiple forms. Our intention is not to propose one more definition of these relations, but to start by acknowledging that they can take many forms, and these forms often depend upon the intricate trajectories and relations established between practitioners and forms of practice, forms of work and forms of life.

## Roger Sansi

is Professor in Social Anthropology at Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. He has worked on Afro-Brazilian culture and religion, the concept of the fetish, and on contemporary art in Barcelona. His publications include the books *Fetishes and Monuments*, (Berghahn, 2007), *Sorcery in the Black Atlantic* (edited with L. Nicolau, Chicago UP 2011), *Art Anthropology and the Gift* (Bloomsbury 2015) and *The Anthropologist as Curator* (2019 Routledge)

## Matteo Guidi

lives in Barcelona, is visual artist with a background in Anthropology. He teaches social science applied to contemporary art and design in ISIA Urbino, in the Perugia Academy of Fine Arts and in IED Barcelona. His publications include the books *Cucinare in massima sicurezza* (Stampa Alternativa 2013), *Phantom '77. Spanish Iconoclasm* (Gredits 2020), *Italia in miniatura. A journey between reality and fiction* (Corraini 2022), *Positioning Practices | Investigating the Italian Colonial Experience Between Memory and the Present* (Corraini 2024).

**Keywords:** Art, Anthropology, Work, Life.

This special issue is a collection of articles, photo-essays and videos united by a common engagement in art and anthropology that takes multiple forms. Many things have been said about the relations between both disciplines and forms of practice in the last decades by many authors, including the organizers of this special issue (Marcus & Myers 1995, Schneider & Wright 2005, 2010, 2013, Sansi 2014). Our intention here is not to propose one more definition of these relations, but to start by acknowledging that they can take many forms, and these forms often depend upon the intricate trajectories and relations established between practitioners and forms of practice, forms of work and forms of life. Starting with the relation between the editors, us: Roger Sansi is a professor in Anthropology at the University of Barcelona, Matteo Guidi is a visual artist and professor of social science applied to art and design at ISIA Urbino and the Perugia Academy of Fine Arts. Sansi met Guidi in Barcelona, and wrote about his work as an artist, but now we are working together editing a special issue, in what would be a form of academic work closer to Anthropology. But what is the limit, where does “art” end and where does “anthropology” start in our relation? Where does work end and where does friendship start? It is difficult to say, and perhaps less interesting that exploring the multiple forms in which they can be intertwined. In this special issue, we have worked from these loose ideas, precisely by intertwining work and life, art and anthropology, connecting and extending our relations with artists, anthropologists, and all the range of possible in between, approaching this special issue as a curatorial project (Sansi 2019a) that assembles people, images, objects, and concepts in multiple ways.

Starting with the image on the cover, where we see Matteo Guidi taking a photograph in a shop that sells stones in a West Bank refugee camp. In this image, subject and object merge, as do the artist with the anthropologist, because in fact the photograph of the two subjects posing in front of the stone blocks was meant to be documentation material, part of the field research for a new project, but in fact later it was printed and framed in large format and became part of the artistic process *The Artist and the Stone* (<https://theartistandthestone.net/>). The same project that in turn became the detonator of the professional bond and friendship between Guidi and Sansi, who wrote about that project (Sansi 2019b).

Michele Feder-Nadoff's article, “The incommensurability of Making”, discusses the concept of “making” as open process. The author's questioning of the meaning of making accompanied her from her formation as an art student at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1970, to her more recent training as an anthropologist. But in this paper and in her anthropological work it appears mainly as the embodied process of apprenticeship with the master artisan, Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas (1924-2014) in his traditional coppersmith forge of Santa Clara del Cobre, Michoacán, Mexico. Maestro Jesús was not just the informant for the anthropologist, but the master to the apprentice who was rethinking her own practice and concepts through anthropology.

Pamela Cevallos in her paper “Imágenes Maleables” also works with artisans, in this case in Ecuador, who make replicas of pre-Hispanic pottery. Her interest and approach come from her double condition first as an artist and then as an anthropologist, who has done research on this community but has also helped them organize a museum and collaborative exhibitions. In that sense, Cevallos is less interested in making than in the conceptual problem of the replica, that lead Cevallos to develop a third role as a curator, bringing together her work as artist and anthropologist through the process of collaboration with the artisans.

Caterina Borelli as opposed to Feder-Nadoff and Cevallos, does not have a background as an artist, but is trained as an anthropologist. And her focus as

an anthropologist has not been art, or images, but she has worked with several photographers in different occasions the research of Borelli as an anthropologists and different photographers, Camila de Maffei, Felipe Romero Beltrán, and Lorenzo Vetturi, coalesced. This essay written by all four reflects on the relations between anthropology and photography through their common experience and exchange.

Susan Ossman is both an anthropologist as an artist. As a graduate student in anthropology, her artistic practice was not exactly encouraged (Ossman 2021), but as her career and life advanced she conceived a new kind of autoethnography, making art and ethnography equal partners. In this essay “Invitation”: Experimental Encounters in Pandemic Times” she presents the artistic Project she started in Paris after moving from California in a new apartment at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. “Invitation” was an art-exchange project in which she invited her friends scattered around the world to see her new apartment through the artworks she mailed to them. This was the first instance of “scattered subjects” a project that probed encounters, conceptions of the self and of the community in environments reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions.

Lydian Nakashima Degarrod is also an anthropologist and practicing artist. The exhibition *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls*, that she presents here as a photo-essay. Is part of a series of ethnographic art projects during which she conducted research on Japanese migration to Latin America. This exhibition addresses the most personal side of the project. Originally it addressed the forced deportation of Japanese Peruvians from Peru to internment camps in the US during WWII, but the closing of borders of Peru and Chile during the Covid pandemic forced Nakashima to alter the project and focusing on her family, Japanese Peruvians forced to migrate to Chile during WW2. This photo essay diverts from her past writings (Degarrod 2012, 2016a, 2016b, 2021) in that it focuses on the artistic creation, and it is written primarily from her perspective as a visual artist.

Leone Contini’s essay unfolds through the empirical experience of the author, an artist with an anthropological background who has participated in several art residencies. He shows us how these can be re-read as a specific segment of an artist’s journey, in which ethnographic research intersects with artistic practices in the context of the residency itself. *All Roads Lead Elsewhere. Recursive Paths Between Art and Ethnography* aims at a critical and self-reflexive understanding of the anthropological and ethnographic approach to contemporary art. It becomes a reflection that starts from three autobiographical writings flanked by the author’s field experience - that of an artistic residency - or that we could define from a subjective dimension to bring them to a collective reflection within the current theoretical debate on the encounter between anthropology and the visual arts.

Marco Tortoioli Ricci’s contribution is quite different from the previous papers. He is a graphic designer and lecturer in design methodology at ISIA Urbino and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia, who, although starting from a personal and participatory practice, leaves contemporary art to enter the field of design. “Quanti di Identità” presents an innovative approach based on an ethnographic methodology applied to design. It goes beyond traditional models of visual identity projects, introducing a fluid and participatory vision of design. It is from here that the article takes the law of Quantum Mechanics as its starting point, to advocate a plural and relational approach as well as a design method in graphic design based on ethnographic research processes and the elaboration of participatory and malleable narrative devices in relation to the reality of the context.

Alfonso Borragán is a practising artist with no formal training in anthropology. But he has been carrying out a long-term project about the absorption of stones in different cultures and historical periods, and this has taken his research towards anthropological methods but also theories of materiality and the body. In his report he presents for this special issue, he presents *Bucarolito*, a collective action carried out in Little Haiti, Miami, in which a group of ninety people ingested Miamian clay in the form of “Búcaros”, ceramic bases. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the “Búcaros de Indias” were ingested by the royal family and aristocracy of Spain with healing purposes. The performance appears here as an activator that extends and entangles with the documentary and visual research on the búcaros.

Similarly to Borragán, the work of Daniel Steegman departs from art practice, but has encountered anthropology in the process of research. This photo essay, with texts by philosopher Juliana Fausto reflects upon “Feral thought”. The Foresta de Tijuca is a big forest integrated the urban area of Rio de Janeiro, created by design of the Emperor of Brazil through slave work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Feral dogs are one of the most common inhabitants of the Foresta de Tijuca nowadays, they may be wild, but they cannot become wolves. They can go feral, but they can’t undo their relation with humans so easily. “Nature” appears in Tijuca as a return from the margins of civilization, but a return that is related to civilization. Can we think about the transposition of the “savage thought” of Lévi-Strauss to a “feral thought”? The images superpose the forest, with its tall dense trees, with the eyes of the feral dogs, looking back at us.

In her video installation *Eco*; Fiamma Montezemolo, investigates the traces of 9 art works that have been part of the two-decade old public art event called inSite at the US-Mexico border near Tijuana. The conclusions, as the author herself says, are inconclusive; and this led her to present this research in the form of a video rather than as an anthropological monograph. Montezemolo was trained as a professional anthropologist, but has her work evolved, her experimentation with artistic practice took preference over conventional forms of academic production like the research monograph. In her recently published autoantology, “Hidden in Plain Sight” (2024), the chapter corresponding to this research, chapter 4, appears blank.

The project that Mireia Sallarés presents here is part of an ongoing project trilogy that the artist has called the *Trilogy of Trash Concepts*, the result of prolonged research into life lived in relation to concepts such as truth, love and work. *Kao malo vode na dlanu (Like a little water in the palm of my hand)*, a project about love in Serbia, is the second in this ongoing trilogy. The artist carried out four years of fieldwork, moving far and wide across the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Transforming the theme into methodology and form, i.e. investigating love with love in order to produce acts of love, has been the leitmotif that has accompanied the entire work, an openness to what cannot be theorized or organized, but which claims us. The result is a fictional film that stands as a method of speaking with care and respect to people who would not accept an interview in the usual documentary style.

Nuria Guell’s video essay is a clear example of how the documentation collected during the artistic process shapes both the process itself as well as the final result. *Una película de Dios* is the result of months of work in which the artist collaborated with eight underage girls from contexts of abuse and sexual exploitation in Mexico. In their encounters, the artist confronts Catholic education on the one hand and sexual abuse on the other, the subordinate status of women in relation to men, and the sexual roles and identities derived from the family in relation to the Catholic religion. The video essay reflects a structure divided into 5 chapters, one for each theme he touches on during his

encounters with the girls; The artist; The paintings; The girls; The mother, The father and The stepfathers; God.

Asking where does anthropology end and where does art start, is like asking where does truth end, and fiction starts; when does work end and does life start? Are we really looking for the limit or is it more interesting to address the multiple forms in which this relation can be enacted? Can we propose an open curatorial project in which the reader and the viewer itself can trace and add their own networks, their narratives, their lives?



**Figure 1** © Matteo Guidi & Giuliana Racco, 2014, Photo-documentation of The Artist and the Stone ([www.theartistandthestone.net](http://www.theartistandthestone.net)).

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