

***Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice.* Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, eds. New York: Berg, 2010. 224 pp.\***

Reviewed by Matthew D. Thompson

At the 2010 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) participants broke from the usual conference fare of paper panels and workshops via a new “inno-vent” format including: a film screening, a presentation by an anthropologist turned journalist, a theatrical production, a “choose-your-own-adventure sensorial hunt” through the city, a multimedia art installation, a museum exhibit, and a meeting of activist artists. (The inno-vent framework was continued at the 2011 AAA meetings as well.) In creating an open-ended framework for collaboration between anthropologists and creative culture producers, the inno-vent marks an important move by the AAA to legitimize and incorporate the production of unconventional, non-text based works informed by an anthropological sensibility. Such collaborations are the subject of *Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice*, which focuses on anthropologists who use non-documentary creative techniques and on artists who employ ethnographic practices in their art.

The connective tissues between art and anthropology are as varied as the media through which the relationship is being explored. Modes explored in *Between Art and Anthropology* include the visual and sensory in anthropology, relational aesthetics, art as a means of documenting the world, the politics of exhibition, and the prominent role of creativity in ethnography. Several chapters feature dialogue between artists and anthropologists reflecting on their past collaborations. Some others focus on a single artist or anthropologist as a case in point of how fieldwork can be incorporated in art or artistic production deployed as a fieldwork technique. Dispersed throughout this showcase of examples are a few theoretical essays validating this method of encountering the other, critiquing anthropology for its anti-aestheticism, and calling for works that exceed anthropology’s traditional representational and documentary functions.

There is a striking congruence between the act of making art and the role of creativity in the fieldwork process. I identified immediately with the energy artists expressed in reflecting on the creative process as an affective presence in their own experience of fieldwork. However, when art and anthropology combine to produce representations they inevitably lie outside the conventions of ethnographic texts or films because of their evocative or immersive (and decontextualized) qualities. One would expect distinguishing legitimate interpretive acts from questionable ones to be a topic of considerable concern yet it is not rigorously debated here. As a result some of these essays will resonate most with those already sympathetic to, say, Michael Taussig’s (1992) work on shamanism and mimesis or similarly performative authors.

Alternative modes of representation are at their most compelling when they do not supplant but supplement conventional anthropological approaches, especially in non-text based works. As contributor Christopher Wright notes in his essay on the filmmaker Jamie Cameron, “I am

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certainly not making the case against contextual models of understanding, but fully explicating context is perhaps not the best use of visual material and sound” (2010:73). Like Ruth Behar’s (1997) vulnerable observer, the evocative and the immersive in visual/sensual ethnography marks an activist, interventionist, or catalytic approach that stands in opposition to the descriptivist mode prevalent in the discipline dating back to the days of salvage anthropology.

George Marcus, in his contribution to the volume, advocates the conceptualization of fieldwork as a source for artist’s materials. Contemporary fieldwork practices, he argues, diverge sharply from professional lore. Marcus writes that when it comes to training graduate students, “Based on old governing tropes, it is not clear what fieldwork is to be undertaken experientially in these projects and what kinds of data it is supposed to generate” (2010:88). For inspiration Marcus turns to the craft of scenography—staging and design for theater and film. Of his artistic collaborator, Fernando Calzadilla, who carried out fieldwork in a Venezuelan village ahead of a Garcia Lorca production, he writes, “fieldwork produced objects and artifacts with which to design the stage and look of the production. But more subtly it is a certain sensibility derived from fieldwork—and not the ability to represent others—that travels or moves to another location of intellectual work” (2010:92). The field experience washes over you. It changes you. Later you use the memory of that experience and the objects you collected to set the stage for some other project. The field is not what you are representing, you are making a critique—staging a performance really—and the fieldwork experience is the internal narrative animating that.

With all this lauding of “experimentation” very often failure is overlooked. In science to experiment is to guarantee a degree of failure. Is not the same true in artistic experimentation? The artists and anthropologists in this book focus more on what made it to the gallery than on the false steps taken along the way. Much to its credit this volume does contain one essay where the authors’ plans to mix art with anthropology did not meet their expectations.

More could have been said addressing the role of the audience in receiving artworks. Art demands more interpretive work of the audience than a conventional text, where much of the interpretation is done before it reaches the audience. Conclusions can be contested but if one is a good writer there is little fear of outright misinterpretation. In the work of art, by contrast, the artist is making an interpretation that is then left intentionally open to audience re-interpretation. The potential for this to have unanticipated negative consequences for one’s collaborators is not discussed.

Both anthropologists and artists put themselves at professional risk by participating in such projects, although this may be changing. There is a strong impulse towards realist representation in anthropology stemming from the conformity enforced by professional development and the privileged position of prose in the discipline, but issues of appropriation are an ethical concern as well. For some readers a sense that one owes a debt to the host community to represent them well will cast doubt over the conceptualization of those relationships as if they were artist’s material. At what point does this practice amount to taking too great a liberty? Artists, on the other hand, may not be as well established in conversations about exploitative appropriation as anthropologists and perhaps are not used to being held accountable for their actions in the institutionalized ways of social science, with its IRB’s and other ethics protocols. More

frequently, as contributor Lucy Lippard writes, “art is generally perceived as either above it all—out in the ether beyond the comprehension of ordinary people, or below it all—useless and frivolous, merely decorating the world” (2010:24). By engaging with anthropology, artists submit their ethical behavior to the judgment of anthropologists. These are topics the book addresses, but much is left unsaid.

I found the examples of collaboration between artists and anthropologists outlined in this slim volume to be inspirational. As I made my way through the collection of essays I found myself jotting down ideas to bring up with my artists friends. It is heartening to read of this innovative and important work as calls for interdisciplinary practice can seem like lip-service when they not put into practice.

### References Cited

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1997 *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks your Heart*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Taussig, Michael

1992 *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge.

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