

Project Report

Sensefield: An Exhibition of Experimental Ethnography*

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Abstract: This project report describes Sensefield: An Exhibition of Experimental Ethnography, an event showcasing works at the intersection of art and anthropology held in October 2017 in Taipei, Taiwan.

[Keywords: *art; ethnography; film festivals; indigenous peoples; moving image; senses; sound*; Taiwan. Keywords in italics are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

Sensefield: An Exhibition of Experimental Ethnography ran between October 6th and October 15th 2017 in Taipei, Taiwan, across two renovated storefronts within the Bopiliao Historic Block. Accessing the event from the sliding wooden doors of 153 Guangzhou Street, visitors could walk into two rooms of heritage architecture showcasing six multimedia artworks at the intersection of art and anthropology (Schneider and Wright 2013). The *Sensefield* exhibition, directed by P. Kerim Friedman and curated by Gabriele de Seta, was envisioned as a companion event to the ninth edition of the Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival (TIEFF), which ran from October 6th to October 10th in Taipei's Wonderful Theatre, and for which Friedman served as that year's festival programmer. The exhibition's location, in the middle of a busy tourist area with considerable street traffic, also conveniently placed it within walking distance of the festival venue. Funded by both the National Culture and Arts Foundation (NCAF) and the Taiwan Association of Visual Ethnography (TAVE), *Sensefield* showcased six artworks by internationally recognized artists and anthropologists from the United States of America, United Kingdom, France, Australia, Italy, and Taiwan.

The idea for an exhibition dedicated to experimental ethnographic artworks stemmed from the realization that some TIEFF submissions required idiosyncratic audio or video setups (multiple screens, four-channel sound, tactile interaction) that did not lend themselves to the standard projection format of a movie theater. Arguably the first event of its kind in Taiwan, *Sensefield* was inspired by exhibitions in Europe and North America that have an established record of bringing contemporary art and anthropological inquiry together in dialogue, such as documenta 14 (2017) and the various projects produced by the Ethnographic Terminalia collective (2018). The first iteration of *Sensefield* was not centered around a specific topic or theme, but grew organically out of the international works selected for TIEFF. In particular, the selection of Lucien Castaing-Taylor as Featured International

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Director led to a search for a venue where his installation artwork *Ah humanity!* (co-created with Ernst Karel and Véréna Paravel) could be screened. This expanded into a full-fledged exhibition proposal when filmmaker Jennifer Deger, who was invited to show the film *Ringtone* (co-created with Paul Gurumuruwuy and the Miyarrka Media collective) revealed that this piece had started as a video installation artwork and offered to adapt it for the local venue. The exhibition was then rounded out with three additional sonic (Feld, 2010) and multimodal (Collins, Durlington, and Gill, 2017) ethnographic works made by researchers and artists working in Taiwan including Gabriele de Seta, DJ Hatfield, Yannick Dauby and Wan-Shuen Tsai.



Figure 1. The first hall of *Sensefield*, showcasing four mixed-media artworks with headphone-based audio. Photograph by Gabriele de Seta. October 14, 2017.

The title of the exhibition, rendered in Chinese as 感野 (*ganye*, literally ‘field of senses’), was chosen to relate the traditionally fraught anthropological concept of ‘field’ to the experimental epistemological modalities proposed by sensory ethnography (de Seta, 2017), while also hinting at the immersive multimedia experience offered by the works on display. *Sensefield* took advantage of the architectural features of the exhibition space—dark wooden beams, flaking whitewashed walls, dimly lit interiors—to frame the artworks. Four smaller works with headphone-based audio and video screens were installed in the first hall, all visible to passersby from the entrance door and inviting prolonged interactions through the intimate arrangement of benches and stools. Two larger works requiring four-channel audio

and a projection screen were installed in the second hall, completely darkened and accessible through a doorway at the back of the space.



Figure 2. A visitor watching Yannick Dauby and Wan-Shuen Tsai's *The Body of the Mountain*. Photograph by Gabriele de Seta. October 14, 2017.

The six artworks displayed at *Sensefield* consisted of:

Ah humanity! an audiovisual installation by Ernst Karel, Véréna Paravel, and Lucien Castaing-Taylor conjuring apocalyptic and unsettling visions through four-channel audio and footage shot in a post-tsunami Fukushima, Japan.

Meme, Yolngu style, a mixed-media installation by the Miyarrka Media collective examining the playful and intimate use of mobile phones among the Yolngu Aboriginal communities of Arnhem Land, Australia.

O Matpong Ko Fulad Tiraw, a sound art piece by DJ Hatfield (featuring Rahic Talif) evoking the natural and spiritual wonder of the Moon Cave, a traditional Makota'ay 'Amis religious site located on the East Coast of Taiwan.

Listen to the Atayal in Taoshan, an auditory travelogue by Yannick Dauby, Wan-Shuen Tsai, and the Taoshan Elementary School, resulting from a community-based project based in Wufeng Township, Hsinchu County, Taiwan.

The Body of the Mountain, a documentary movie by Yannick Dauby, and Wan-Shuen Tsai narrating the traditional practices, local history, and cultural transmission of the Atayal people of Taiwan.

Nangang, Nangang, a sound art installation by Gabriele de Seta inviting audiences to explore the peculiar sonic textures of Taipei's Nangang district (Taiwan) through on-site recordings played back on locally-sourced consumer devices.



Figure 3. *Ah humanity!* by Ernst Karel, V  rena Paravel, and Lucien Castaing-Taylor playing on a four-channel sound system in the second hall of *Sensefield*. Photograph by Gabriele de Seta. October 14, 2017.

Throughout its nine days of operation, the *Sensefield* exhibition welcomed almost two hundred visitors from a dozen different countries, offering free admission to six artworks that encouraged audience participation through immersive audiovisual experience and sensory interaction. For Mr. Ku, one of the visitors who left a note in the guestbook, this was "A really valuable exhibition—I didn't know it was possible to experience art like this." The exhibition program also included two events open the public: a question and answer (Q&A) session with the director and the curator, and a meet and greet opportunity with two of the

artists involved. On October 13th, P. Kerim Friedman and Gabriele de Seta offered a short talk introducing the exhibition and answered questions raised by the audience. On October 14th, artists Yannick Dauby and Wan-Shuen Tsai spent two hours at the exhibition venue, explaining their artworks to the audience and answering questions related to their own practice.



Figure 4. *Meme, Yolngu style* by the Miyarrka Media collective. Photograph by Gabriele de Seta. October 14, 2017.

The variety of audience members—from young kids running around the exhibition space playing with headphones to local elderly residents wandering into the exhibition and sitting in front of an artwork for a while—testifies to the importance of showcasing experimental ethnographic artworks in a context that is more welcoming and accessible to popular audiences than both university departments and contemporary art museums. As comments made by audience members to exhibition staff highlight, local residents, passersby, and tourists walked into the exhibition attracted by the striking arrangement of the artworks on display, and were surprised by the breadth of the ethnographic material they could experience. Visitors also enjoyed the interpretive challenge posed by the artworks; as one middle-aged man, during the Q&A session, said of DJ Hatfield's work: "because there are some words in Mandarin, some in Atayal language, and the sounds of the cave, and they all repeat, so I could pick up some descriptions of the cave, some legends and stories, but they are all just fragments, they give you an impressionistic picture of it, and I think this fits your idea of 'sensory ethnography' quite well."

Overall, *Sensefield* was an unexpected success. The selection of artworks offered audiences a captivating glimpse into the overlapping aesthetic and epistemological experiments happening in the wake of the ethnographic turn in contemporary art and the sensory turn in ethnographic research (Rutten, van. Dienderen, and Soetaert, 2013). While the proposition to open up the traditional anthropological understanding of 'field' was well-received by audiences, the emphasis on an expanded focus on 'senses' was occasionally put into question and criticized: comments rightfully pointed out that, despite the trumpeted multi-modality of sensory ethnography, most works on display relied primarily on well-established audiovisual formats. With this criticism in mind, we look forward to working on the next iteration of *Sensefield*, hoping to contribute to the increasing number of projects probing the intersection of art and anthropology (Rikou and Yalouri, 2017) and opening up spaces for experimental modes of ethnographic research in Taiwan.

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Gabriele de Seta is a media anthropologist. He holds a PhD in sociology from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan. His research work, grounded on ethnographic engagement across multiple sites, focuses on digital media practices and vernacular creativity in China and Taiwan. He is also interested in experimental music scenes, internet art, and collaborative intersections between anthropology and art practice. More information is available on his website <http://paranom.asia/>

P. Kerim Friedman is an Associate Professor in the Department of Ethnic Relations and Cultures at National Dong Hwa University in Taiwan. His research explores language revitalization efforts among indigenous Taiwanese, looking at the relationship between language ideology, indigeneity, and political economy. An ethnographic filmmaker, he co-produced the Jean Rouch award-winning documentary, Please Don't Beat Me, Sir! about a street theater troupe from one of India's Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs). He currently serves as the programmer for the Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival (TIEFF). Kerim is also a co-founder of the anthropology blog anthro{dendum} (formerly Savage Minds). Learn more about his work at <https://kerim.oxus.net/>

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