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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

EthnoScripts

Towards a New Hermeneutics of Art and Anthropology Collaborations[1]

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I would like to start this brief intervention with a short observation on history. I am not suggesting that in a narrow sense of willful agency we can 'learn' from history or that history 'teaches' us something. But I certainly believe that history can be used to retrieve creative potentials of past human action and interpret them for the present – to some degree this view is inspired by philosophers and historians, such as Ernst Bloch (1986 [1959]) and Reinhart Koselleck (2004 [1979]).

For instance, the 1920s and 30s in France saw an unparalleled period of fertile collaborations between artists and anthropologists, which culminated in the interdisciplinary, surrealist journal *Documents*.[2] Historian James Clifford commented specifically on the collaboration between Georges Bataille (an editor of *Documents*), and anthropologist, Alfred Métraux, and ascertained that "French ethnography [was] on *speaking terms* with the avantgarde" (Clifford 1988:126; my italics).

Whilst 'speaking terms' were applied by Clifford to a historically contingent phenomenon, in my further use of the term I suggest they are a good rhetorical figure, and offer a heuristic potential to think through the possibilities of present and future art and anthropology collaborations.

Hence to speak about the present, or even more ambitiously, the future of art-anthropology collaborations, then seems a great leap forward. The intervening period is rich in aborted, half-way, and, very occasionally, successful attempts to bring disciplines of art practice, art history into dialogue with anthropology.[3]

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[1]   This is an abridged and revised version of a chapter to appear in a future volume *Beyond Text? Critical Practices and Sensory Anthropology*, edited by Rupert Cox, Andrew Irving, and Christopher Wright. Manchester: Manchester University Press (forthcoming). The present short version was first published in *Still in Search of Europe? Art and Research in Collaboration*, edited by Samuli Schielke and Daniela Swarowsky. Heijningen /Netherlands: Jap Sam Books, 2013. It is here reprinted by kind permission of the editors.

[2]   This history is now well researched, see, for example, Clifford (1988), Ades/ Baker (2006), Kelly (2007).

[3]   I have covered these developments elsewhere, see Schneider (2011).

Moreover, since the early 1990s a number of writings and initiatives[4] have tried to gage and critically assess the potentials of art-anthropology collaborations for the present. For some, such collaborations inevitably are fraught with dangers of 'artist envy' by anthropologists, and artists doubling in 'pseudo-ethnographic role[s]' (Foster 1995:306). Others, including myself, have pointed to the critical potential in artistic projects critiquing anthropological methodologies which, nevertheless, are also 'uneasy relationships' between practitioners with different disciplinary backgrounds (Schneider 1993, 1996). Experimental situations which bring together artists and anthropologists, in fact quickly reveal how tenuous and temporary any dialogue between different disciplinary traditions and practices can be.[5]

Yet there is good reason to continue to explore, negotiate and possibly fill, if only temporarily, with contemporary content those *speaking terms* which Clifford found characteristic of French anthropology and the artistic avant-garde in the 1920s and 30s. 'Content' here appears perhaps as too totalitarian or absolute a concept, but it is the dialogical situation itself (the *speaking* in Clifford's terminology) which is worthwhile considering and aiming for, even if it stays inevitably incomplete and imperfect, and 'content' (i.e. what are the *terms* for Clifford) remains temporary and fragmentary, or just a future aspiration. With 'dialogue' I mean the conversational situation of collaborations, conscious of the differences (in terms of economic, educational, and cultural capital) which can and do exist between the participants in such collaborations. 'Dialogue', in the tradition of hermeneutic approaches in philosophy and anthropology (Gadamer 2004 [1960]), Ricoeur 1981; also Geertz 1973, 1983), has been a much discussed term in anthropology (e.g. Tedlock, 1983, Tedlock/Mannheim 1995, Maranhão 1990, Crapanzano 2004, Maranhão/Streck 2003, Verde 2003). However, despite different emphases it is clear that 'dialogue' can never just mean a level position of partners, collaborators, or actors, but has to account for difference.

As regards art-anthropology collaborations, arguably, there is now a current climate of 'convergence', with on the one hand, the so-called 'ethnographic turn' of the arts, and on the other hand, the (post) writing culture critique of fieldwork practices in anthropology, coupled with a renewed emphasis on practice (in addition to, and beyond text). Within this apparent frame of convergence, possibly a 'third' is rising – as yet impure, unnamed and undefined, and with soft edges pushing up to new epistemological hori-

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4   See Schneider (1993, 1996); Foster (1995), Grimshaw/Ravetz (2005), Schneider/Wright (2006); also, the international conferences *Fieldworks: Dialogues between Art and Anthropology at Tate Modern*, London, 2003, *Beyond Text*, Manchester, 2007, and *Art/Anthropology: Practices of Difference and Translation*, Oslo, 2007.

5   For example, the closed experimental workshop *Connecting Art and Anthropology*, Manchester, 2007, which brought together fourteen international artists and anthropologists (Grimshaw/Owen/Ravetz 2010).

zons beyond both fields of art and anthropology. This 'third' seems to revolve around certain tropes or fields, such as relational and dialogical art practices, are renewed interest in the senses in anthropology and the arts, a shared and heterogeneous interest in ethics (in the plural!), as well as strong counter stances to anthropology's almost innate phobias against images and colour.[6]

Any future art-anthropology collaborations will have to deal with certain parameters coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, and certain eruptive fault lines (which for instance deal with the aforementioned arenas of iconophobia, sensory research, ethics, and experimentation) around which productive, but contested and sometimes conflictive dialogues will develop.

Once such collaborations are set up not only in the closed 'laboratory' of a university workshop,[7] but use ethnographic fieldwork situation as their locale (such as some contributions to this volume) they are likely to reveal not only conceptual differences between artists and anthropologists but also differences in the forms of relationality that are at stake. This is especially the case where anthropological research is set in fieldwork situations outside so-called 'First World' countries, where unequal relations of real differences in economic power pertain, as well as differential access to educational and other symbolic capital (such as the hegemonic first world education system and the equally hierarchically structured international art world). For instance, I've been involved in dialogical art projects with artists in North-West Argentina (Corrientes Province). Practiced by somebody educated and based at metropolitan first world institutions this kind of anthropology, inevitably, is a partially hegemonic practice, where artists have substantially different access to economic resources, but also the 'global' circulation of (anthropological) knowledge, and this conditioned the possibilities for finding a common understanding across disciplinary practices. The reflective criticism by participating artists, for example through forms of auto-ethnography, consequently decentres the underlying hegemonic structure of such North–South (or West–Non-West) collaborations. Rather than just appropriating knowledge, forms and methodologies from the North (or West) artists develop genuinely new art forms 'From Here' (Mosquera 2010: 53).[8]

It is clear then that there can be no normative *a priori* demands when anthropologists collaborate with artists. To return to my opening remarks, I contend that 'speaking terms' (which Clifford applied to a specific historical situation), are a fragile construct which cannot be normatively presumed but can only be delicately constructed for each instance and phase of collaborations. It is solely through this procedure of mutual respect and understand-

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6　See for example, Bourriaud (2002), Kester (2004, 2011), Classen, Howes (1991, 1997, 2004), Jones (2003), Stoller (1986), Taylor (1996), Batchelor (2000), Benson/O'Neill (2007).

7　See note 4 on the workshop convened by Amanda Ravetz in 2007.

8　This example is further developed in Schneider (2013). For anthropological research traditions within Argentina, see Guber (2002).

ing that a hermeneutic field, however tenuous and uneven, can be achieved, which might form the basis of fruitful collaborations.

In this context hermeneutic philosopher Ricoeur's insights on appropriation[9] can be equally applied to the appropriation of methodologies across disciplines, in this case art and anthropology.

> *An interpretation is not authentic unless it culminates in some form of appropriation (Aneignung) if by that term we understand the process by which one makes one's own (eigen) what was initially other or alien (fremd). (Ricoeur 1981:178; German terms in original)*

Appropriation is opposed to 'distanciation' by Ricoeur, but its practice does not mean taking simple possession of the other. To the contrary, the term implies in the first instance to dispossess oneself of the narcissistic ego, in order to engender a new self-understanding, not a mere congeniality with the other (Ricoeur 1981:191-193).[10]

> *Relinquishment is a fundamental moment of appropriation and distinguishes it from any form of 'taking possession'. (Ricoeur 1981:191)*

Relinquishment then, the temporary ceding of one's own disciplinary boundaries to promote understanding, could be a key term and strategy to develop collaborative and dialogical projects. Such hybridazation of practices might temporarily imply the giving up of secure boundaries definitions but it could be rewarding, on the other hand, to explore new fields of practice and theory. After all – and no teological or evolutionary agenda is implied here – advances in the sciences and knowledge, more generally, have often been built on transgression (of previous theories) and the opening of new horizons.

Further, in this context of hermeneutics it is useful to think of Kester's discussion of 'dialogical aesthetics' (Kester 2004: 82-123, also 2011). Kester develops the concept in relation to a range of art practices which develop, or are based on, social relations with communities and individuals, even if these relations, established by artists are temporal. Some of these practices can be called community art, others have been signified as 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud 2002), where artists themselves instantiate social relations *as* artworks. Kester offers an interesting discussion of the possibilities of dialogue between artists and 'communities' by thinking of the productive potential in the social relations engendered by the creation and response to artworks. He builds on and at the same time departs from Habermas' notion of the 'ideal speech act', which can only remain a philosophical postulate as

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9   The original context for Ricoeur was textual interpretation (1981).

10   Ricoeur is inspired primarily by Gadamer's Truth and Method, see Gadamer (2004 [1960]).

it presupposes equal and 'ontologically stable' partners – a condition which is not realistic when participants in dialogue have different access to power, educational and cultural capital. Kester (2004: 106) suggests, following philosopher Gemma Fiumara (1999), that any dialogue has to start not from a position of presumed equality, but with an act of self-reflective listening, interrogating the 'ethics of communicative exchange' (2004: 106). This line of thinking comes close to Trinh T. Minh-ha's concept of 'speaking nearby', said otherwise, that in ethnographic representations we cannot speak *about* or *for* the other (and that any attempts to *lend* the other a voice remain illusionary, as early textual critics assumed), but at best can speak nearby (Chen/ T. Minh-ha 1994). The same insight can be applied for appropriations across disciplines. Yet inherent in any discussion of the ethics of such projects must be the recognition and self-reflection upon an unequal relationship, based on difference, between the partners in fieldwork (as recently argued by Benson /O'Neill 2007, taking inspiration from Levinas). I contend that it is this fundamental acknowledgement of dialogical inequality which constitutes an uneven hermeneutic field which can still render a productive collaboration.

Further, what Kester posits for relations between artists and their 'constructed' communities, I suggest, could also be fruitfully applied to collaborative projects between artists and anthropologists, and comes close to the hermeneutic field I have been advocating earlier. Speaking terms, then can only be found in a mutual recognition of difference.

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