

Schneider, A. and C. Wright. 2010. *Between Art and Anthropology*. Berg: Oxford. 192 pages.

Liberating Mimesis: *Between Art and Anthropology*. A Review

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The 26th to the 28th of September, 2003, stands as a seminal date for the dialogue between art and anthropology that has developed since then. At the *Fieldworks* conference, held at the Tate Modern, London, (somewhat) previously disparate voices were brought together in a common space – both physically and epistemologically. Though there had been previous initiatives to unite artists and anthropologists, this event is notable for the extent of the synergies that materialised between like-minded voices, eager to engage in the exploration of the intersection of art and anthropology.

The *Fieldworks* conference has led to several publications. *Between Art and Anthropology*, edited by *Fieldworks* conveners Arnd Schneider and Chris Wright, is one such book. Schneider and Wright have since then assembled a large number of contributions reflecting on the use of anthropology and ethnographic methods by artists, and of artistic practices or investigations by anthropologists. Other important works include the previously published *Contemporary Art and Anthropology* (Schneider & Wright 2006) and more recently, the extensive “Anthropology and Art” chapter in the *Sage Handbook of Social Anthropology* (Schneider 2012). In addition to these publications, *Connecting Art*

and Anthropology, a three-day event organised by Amanda Ravetz, that assembled curators, artists and anthropologists (many of them visual anthropologists) in Manchester, was also an important momentum for Art and Anthropology, especially in its aims to explore and develop the possibilities of visual anthropology. Another example is *Beyond the Text*, a conference held at the University of Manchester in 2006.

Considering the strong presence of visual anthropologists in these fields, it is necessary to emphasise that anthropology has employed photography and film since their inventions. Despite its specific contribution, the final page (161) of *Between Art and Anthropology* discloses a discontent toward visual anthropology as it is today, problematising its obsolescence and inability to properly institutionalise itself as a discipline. Therefore, it is imperative that we continue developing its possibilities and sensory ethnographic qualities, as they offer profound epistemological potentialities for the exploration of the human condition within these disciplines (MacDougall 2006: 3-9).

In *Between Art and Anthropology*, a notable chapter by George Marcus continues to explore the transdisciplinary potentialities of art and anthropology, a common theme he fostered in in previous discussions and publications in this field.¹ *Between Art and Anthropology*, in fact, explores what can be described as the interplay between the ability of artists to produce “an aesthetics of estrangement” from which anthropologists might learn something – if only they could temporarily suspend “their usual practice of domesticating difference” (Taylor, p. 157). Conversely, anthropology’s distinctive preoccupation and ability is to connect any individual practice to a wider social world.

Moreover, the ethical implications that anthropologists defend, and also use to legitimise their work, are not always a *conditio sine qua non* for artists. Art has always pushed the limits of what is acceptable in terms of moral and aesthetic values. I believe that this is terrain that should be extensively explored. However, *Between Art and Anthropology* seems to neglect the topic of equality in terms of researcher-researched relations, although it is a consideration of immense importance in any collaborative process of knowledge production (Lassiter 2005: 46), where the aim should be the decentralisation of the ethnographic authority, toward an anthropology allowing for politics. I thus wonder whether it is an intentional tactic of the editors, as something that they thought could distract from other foci, or if it is because it is a political debate that risks accentuating difference instead of commonalities. This sentiment is echoed in another review of the book (see Strohm 2012: 98-124).² In my view, this could be one of the important criticisms that could be raised about the book.

¹ See Marcus & Myers (1995); Clifford (1997). The work of Clifford, Susan Hiller and especially Georges Marcus can be seen as an important context to *Fieldworks*.

² James Clifford, Alfred Gell, Tim Ingold, Hal Foster, Lucien Taylor, Michael Taussig, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Fred Myers are the most popularly cited authors in the book; the only female name that can compare with in terms of citations is Marilyn Strathern. Mitchell and Latour’s popularity seems to have waned, as is the case with Howes, Stuart Hall, _Spivak, Becker and Roland Barthes. Artists that work ethnographically, like Ai-Wei Wei (Kassel-Dokumenta 2007) and _Villevoye (Detours), for example, aren’t mentioned; Rancière, Donna Haraway, Azoulay, _Berlant, Susan Sontag, Homi Bhabha, _Gumbrecht, Thomas, Miller, _Lassiter and _Pinney aren’t even cited once. This is not a box-ticking exercise to see if names are dropped, because this is not necessarily a valid indicator of the quality of a text, but these few names that come to mind provided above, have been writing/making/acting in ways that are pertinent for the book, when it comes to discussions about materiality and enactment, equality, transnationalism and epistemology, just to mention a few examples.

The fundamental assumption of much anthropological empiricism often clashes with ethnographic art practices. Functionalist empiricism is inherent to much of anthropology, despite purposive and varied attempts to avoid it (REF), and consists of shaping territorialised and temporalised modalities of interaction between subjects and researchers, recreating a denial of what Johannes Fabian has called *coevalness* (REF), and an arbitrary separation of spaces that is not properly negotiated, since it does not feedback in the textual results of research. The subject's confinement to the territory and temporality of this model, often within a sort of fieldwork-graphic *mise-en-scène* reminiscent of Bronisław Malinowsky (as Marcus phrases it here, p. 86), is undermined by more examples provided in *Between Art & Anthropology*. At least partly, it is disrupted by contemporary (mostly conceptual) art practice, which emphasises the processual and the relational in art, as Schneider and Wright discuss in their introduction.

Prior to, or at least in accompaniment with, reading *Between Art and Anthropology*, I would suggest readers consult Schneider's (2012) reviews of some of the key concepts that have become indispensable in the current Art and Anthropology vocabulary. As a summary, it allows for a clearer reading of the book, especially for those who haven't followed the academic discussion from its beginning.

The first concepts are "Agency and Relationality" (Gell 1998). According to Schneider's interpretation of Alfred Gell, culture manifests itself through social interactions, and it is conceived as not preexisting the relations that enact it; art is seen as processual, a "system of action" (Gell 1998: 3; Schneider 2012: 57) and implies that artists work with and through the materialisation of sociality as *materia prima*. This is a point that Nicolas Bourriaud explores even further, naming them "relational art practices" and "relational aesthetics".

The second concept is "Artworlds", which became a crucial way of examining the production, circulation and consumption of art. The key aspect here is the idea that any work of art, from a Beethoven Symphony to the artefact of an anonymous potter, is the result of a collective interplay of social actors, social arenas, materials that have to be instantiated, with fostering institutions, values attached to it by the art market, and so on. Although its sociological imprint can limit such a theory to a kind of tangible concreteness that does not exceed the physical spaces and actors within it, it is nevertheless a useful concept to identify the relational qualities that art endlessly discloses: ideologies, global capitals involved in its consumption and distribution, the status and values of artefacts, the diachronical dimension of art production, the politics of heritage and museology, and so forth.

The third set of concepts are "Mimesis and Appropriation". Michael Taussig (1993), in line with one of the forefathers of critical studies, Walter Benjamin (1933), argues that the "mimetic faculty", which the German philosopher considered somehow innate in humans, considers the dialectical aspects of the interplay between perceiver and perceived, and the empowerment that stems from appropriating alien foreign models into one's cultural expressions. On the one hand, the appropriation needs a mimetic faculty of likeness to operate, on the other, it exalts sensuous connections, including James Frazer's sympathetic and contact magic (1911). Mimesis though, is anchored in materiality and embodiment, working through materials, shaping new bodies. Appropriation, thus, is expanded by Schneider (2003; 2006a, b), starting from the initial negative colonial connotations associated to it: "rather than emphasizing simple taking out of context and

taking from the other, this approach stresses the implicit potential of learning and, in a hermeneutic sense, of understanding the other” (2012: 61). The concept is further elaborated by Roger Sansi (2007) in terms of a reformulation of identity and alterity.

The fourth concept is therefore “Materiality”. By working with particular materials, anthropologists and artists can share the same ground. Studies on material culture (Miller & Tilley 1996) have made it possible to include Gell’s concept of agency of objects as extension of human agency, and Bruno Latour’s concept of the independent agency of objects. As Amiria Henare puts it (Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007: 1-3) “Things have to be considered in their own terms, as constituting meaning, not in need of further interpretive action”.

Instead of a chapter-by-chapter analysis of *Between Art & Anthropology*, I choose instead to cover a variety of examples that I feel are particularly important for the focus of this special issue.

A book of this nature suffers, perhaps, from the conventional format that publishers, even prestigious ones, impose on academic presentations: while the cover is a high quality print reproduction, and most of the pictures at beginning of the book are intriguing in their presentation as singular figures with no caption, the rest of the book features mostly black-and-white pictures that, because they are not afforded greater space and are instead inserted into the text itself, cannot be enjoyed at their expressive best. Moreover, especially – but not limited to – in Susan Ossman’s chapter, where the use of white and red colour is essentially crucial to understanding her pictorial language and gestalt-like reasoning, the greyscale rendering creates a degree of frustration in the reader.³

Steve Feld and Virginia Ryan author a chapter that takes the form of a conversation between themselves that is interesting because it elucidates a process of discovery and mutual interest, becoming inclusive and growing transnationally, with projects that address issues of postcolonial representation, identity and the sensuous materiality of history. One of the projects discussed, *A White Woman in West Africa*, is based on a series of photos exhibited that show Ryan in various post-colonial settings in Ghana. According to the authors, they refer to the points-of-view of the local people, African and non-African together, whose gaze reveals the estranged condition of Ryan as a white, middleclass, female artist, temporarily living in Ghana as part of a diplomatic mission. Feld links that to an idea of “reverse anthropology,” as described by Jean Rouch (2003), that occurs when the subjects of research become agents in articulating how they perceive the researchers studying them. Paradoxically though, Ryan did not really produce the pictures by collaborative procedures, at least, this is not deducible from the dialogue. Collaboration, rather, is more accurately considered in its application with Feld, who assisted in the collection of the pictures. For, if I understand it correctly, this construction of a supposed gaze of the Other is her own projection, not a collaborative enterprise. This is an ambiguous condition that anthropologists might explore further: it also requires a rethinking of certain paradigms of cultural production, of mimesis and alterity, and of collaboration, which Feld and Ryan take seriously. The following dialogue of this chapter describes the evolution of their collaboration, leading to the large installation ‘Castaways’ (Fig. 1), where Ryan involved other Ghanaian artists in making dozens of objects which one could find on Ghanaian shoreline and bleached by resin in Ryan’s atelier.

³ Unfortunately only the referred authors are indexed. An additional index of concepts would have been useful because the tropes of this disciplinary field are many and it is handy to have them listed.



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Figure 1. Virginia Ryan and Steve Feld “Castaways”, Manchester 2007 . Photo: Rossella Ragazzi

The extension of this creative process becomes clearer in the installation *Topographies of the Dark*. Here we are informed about the hermeneutical process of acknowledgment of each positioning, including that of two musicians with whom Feld has had a long association – Nii Otoo Annan and Nii Noi Nortey. These projects have fostered a transnational series of events where music, installations, improvisation, cinema and visual arts intermingle combining art and anthropology in equal measure.

One chapter that is perhaps unexpectedly short, and does not ultimately seem to achieve its goal, is “Fieldwork as Artistic Practice”, by Tatsuo Inagaki. Its brevity might imply that the text has been synthesised to some degree, but it reads more like an extended project description than an article providing analytical insight. The work of the artist is highly relevant, engaging with localities and people of different backgrounds in countries like France, England, Japan and USA, but the problem is that every conceptual choice underlying his art-practice, is “given-for-granted;” there is no explanation of why and how the artist obsessively chooses to transform trivial places and “ordinary” biographies into museal installations. It is a very interesting and methodologically relevant work, but again, the article is merely descriptive, reading like a memo, without expanding aspects of the research on a more theoretical level. In a way, this article could have benefited from a greater dialogue with anthropology, in the manner in which Amanda Ravetz, Anna Grimshaw and Elspeth Owen do in the last chapter of the book.

This final chapter is an original and intimate reflection on the osmosis between art and anthropology: there is a true sense of ‘reflexive fusion’; first through the development of mutual intrigue, then by being invited to explore the physical conditions of embodiment, while art work is produced in site specific frames. This is attempted by conceiving modalities of fieldwork ad hoc. The chapter analyses the: “[generation of] a third space, one in which the identities of artists or anthropologists were less important than the pursuit of a single, expansive approach.” (p. 156)

This is consistent with many of the contributions that Schneider and Wright are stimulating, but in my view, it adds something more in that Ravetz, Owen and Grimshaw are also active promoters of especially designed experiments. They have convened many workshops, and have put together a network of scholars from both disciplines which explore “Ways of Knowing” (see e.g. Harris 2007) in which the phenomenological approach to mimesis leads to cultural production through various media, from video documentary to installation, from performance to poetry, from anthropological or ethnographic texts to drawings and design.

This also seems to occur while we read the chapter, for it renders the proximity of being part of a hermeneutic approach. It is inclusive, and well-thought. There is a feeling of conviviality and equality of speaking. In fact, the design of the text, in which multi-vocality is evocative of some platonic dialogues, serves the purpose of hermeneutical practice, which has been advocated by Schneider for a decade (Schneider 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2010, 2011). The book, therefore, seems to confirm its role of convener, where the embodied practices described and discussed by the authors render the genesis of these texts retraceable.

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